



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

In praise of death : history and poetry in medieval Marwar (South Asia)

Kamphorst, J.

Citation

Kamphorst, J. (2008, June 18). *In praise of death : history and poetry in medieval Marwar (South Asia)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12986>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12986>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

8 Charan Identities

“In these golden times of Rajput life when swords were never allowed to rust nor steeds to rest, and the bard was always wanted at the side of the warrior as a witness of his deeds and a singer of his praises, the lavishness of the chiefs to the bards had known no limits”, wrote Tessitori (1917a: 250) in a style which perhaps knowingly resembled the effusive style of Charan poets, generally described as the “bards” of Rajput rulers in colonial sources. Charan poets are believed to have stood at the cradle of what is generally known as the “Rajput Great Tradition”, the heritage that underpins the worldview and ruling ambitions of noble Rajput lineages. Till date, Marwar’s exceptionally literate Charan community’s self-image centres upon claims to a high-ranking socio-political status which originated with their prominent positions at Rajput courts as poet-kings, poet-historians, ministers, political advisors, warriors and protectors of forts and havelis (*polapaṭ*).⁴⁰⁶ The elite literary and courtly status ascribed to Charan poets can probably be traced to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the “glory days” of Dimgal poetry, when Charan Dimgal poetry came to be seen as a literary court tradition analogous to the gradual increase of Rajput dominance in the region.

Charan men are also known as the sacrosanct guides of camel and pack oxen caravans through the Thar Desert, and as traders in horses, wool and salt, suppliers of food and weaponry to armies, and perhaps most importantly, as the devotees of Shakti and the poets and priests of cults dedicated to Charani Sagatis, living goddesses of Charan origin, thought of as historical women recognized as living goddesses during their lives or deified after their deaths. Such women, born to Charan lineages, are believed to be the multiple manifestations of the “first” or “original” goddess, the Mahashakti Hinglaj. There exists a close political connection between the Charani Sagatis of the western desert regions and the ruling Rajput lineages of medieval Rajasthan, which came to think of Charan goddesses as the guarantors and defenders of their realms. This connection has been hinted at by the poets of the *chamds*, *duha* I and the *parvaro*, in the first place, by evoking Shaktik imagery connoting Puranic tales about Devi and her battle with the buffalo-demon Mahishasur and, secondly, by the portrayal of Deval as a Charani Sagati relating Pabuji’s story to the medieval worship of regional forms of Shakti. To understand better the connection between the Pabuji and Charani Sagati traditions, I shall in the second part of this chapter examine the political, religious and economic links between Rajput and Charan communities and Charani goddesses in Baluchistan,

⁴⁰⁶ Today, the Charans of Rajasthan are listed as “Other Backward Castes” under the Indian Constitution Order, a status which, Charans say, does not refer to their level of economic development or socio-political status but mainly points to the fact that the Charans form a small community.

Sindh, Rajasthan and Kacch (Gujarat). Thus, I intend to document how Charan identities used to resemble Rajputhood in several ways. Finally, I hope to show how the history of the spread of Charan men and women and their story-telling traditions can assist in imagining the ways in which Pabuji's poetry tradition may have been transmitted and by whom.

Inspirational narratives

In medieval times, Charan poets are said to have received rewards from their Rajput patrons in exchange for their poetic services. They were rewarded with cattle, horses, elephants, revenue and land-grants and, according to poetic sources, gold. This relation between the Charan poets and Rajput warriors and rulers, like that of bards and court poets the world over, is of course based on patron-client relations whereby Rajput patrons pay for the poetic services rendered by Charan clients.⁴⁰⁷ This custom, according to Tod, gave rise to flattery and sycophancy since it was nothing more than "the barter of empty phrase against solid pudding" (Tod 1972 I: xvi). Tod's colonial view of nineteenth-century Rajasthan and the Charan Dimgal tradition has been translated into Hindi and, unfortunately, has inspired many scholarly and popular reference books on the subject.⁴⁰⁸ It is Tod's disapproving appraisals of Charan history which seem to be quoted most often and not his more positive remarks, like his observation that Charan poets could be critical of Rajput warriors who did not live up to heroic standards: "[T]hese chroniclers dare utter truths, sometimes most unpalatable to their masters. When offended, or actuated by a virtuous indignation against immorality, they are fearless of consequences; and woe to the individual which provokes them! The *vis*, or poison of the bard, is more dreaded by the Rajpoot than the steel of foe. The despotism of the Rajpoot princes does not extend to the poet's lay, which flows unconfined except by the shackles of the *chund bhojoonga*, or 'serpentine stanza'; no slight restraint, it must be confessed, upon the freedom of the historic muse" (Tod 1972 I: xv-xvi).

Reportedly the reputation of many a Rajput "sunk under the lash of [Charan] satire" and condemned to "eternal ridicule names that might have otherwise escaped notoriety" (Tod 1972 I: xvi). Stigmatizing verses or "poetry of slander" (*visahar*) were reportedly not always inspired by "virtuous indignation" but at times also stemmed from greed. Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 129) notes tales about covetous Charan poets who would take money to spread malicious rumours about a Rajput's opponent to shame him, while other poets are said to have used their way with

⁴⁰⁷ Termed *jajamāni* or *yācak* relations in Marwar, which today include the poetic services rendered to their Charan patrons by their *yācak* communities, the Raval, Motisar, Mir, Udia, Doli and Dhadi poets, who all expect to be rewarded by their Charan patrons for praising their lineages (Samaur 1999: 32, Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 162-163).

⁴⁰⁸ See for instance Anil Chandra Banerjee who, in his *Lectures on Rajput History*, comments that "Tod depended primarily on 'heroic poems' which, to Bannerjee's mind, were no better than 'opium-eaters tales'" (Banerjee 1962: 188).

words to blackmail their patrons into meeting their extravagant demands or else suffer the damaging consequences of poetic libel.⁴⁰⁹ While such an “active exercise of bardic power”, as Snodgrass (2004: 273) defines it, no doubt left much room for slander and blackmail, its primary purpose was to voice heroic ideals by according praise or blame, an exercise which served to establish codes of conduct and define which men would be remembered by future generations as heroes and which men would end up with the label “coward” (cf. Tessitori 1919a: 46). The most accurate definition, to my mind, of Charan poetry is proposed by Ziegler (1976a: 221) who describes it as “inspirational biographical narrative” or the portrayal of episodes from the lives of Rajput rulers and warrior-heroes, including descriptions of battles between different Rajput clans and their martial ideals. The recitation of early-medieval *bāt* (short, orally composed Dimgal poems) by Charan poets is thought to have assisted Rajput boys in preparing for their warlike future. “Recitations of this kind, particularly those done in the homes of Rajputs, served an extremely important function in Rajput society since *batam* were one of the major media through which young Rajputs were traditionally educated. It was through this medium that they were brought into the history of their families, lineages and clans, were schooled in the moral values of their fathers, and were tutored in their future role in society” (Ziegler 1976a: 222).

Charan lineages

Apart from elite poetic and other court-based identities, the Charan community encompassed a variety of social groups with different occupational identities from dissimilar geographical regions, in particular grazier communities who took on various occupations as climatic, economic or socio-political circumstances changed. Thus, Charans of the Kacchela lineage in Gujarat and Marwar, now known as graziers, are believed to have formerly been specialized in pack ox transports and trade and the breeders of oxen and, perhaps, buffaloes (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 101). Sorathia Charan clans are portrayed as medieval and contemporary graziers but some Sorathia poets recount that their forefathers were also poets at Rajput courts. The Rohadia (Roharia) Charan represent yet another case of this Charan lineage. It is said that their ancestor was a Rajput who was forcibly detained (*roharabo*) and compelled to become a poet by twelfth century Rathaur because they had no poet of their own to authenticate their heroic past (Arha 1939: 12, Tambs-Lyche 2004c: 67). Among the different Charan communities of Marwar, Maru Charan have been accorded the highest status as the renowned poets and courtiers of

⁴⁰⁹ Snodgrass’s (2004: 273) observation about past “bardic” practices of Bhat and Charan poets further illustrates this point: “In the past, bards possessed the power to make or break kingly reputations, to guard or besmirch kingly honour, and thus literally to forge royal identity. As curators of collective memories, skilled praise-singers vested kings with noble lineages stretching back to the sun or the moon. If they felt that their services were not adequately valued or rewarded, they had the power to tell the world that their lords were mere pretenders and their titles false or illegitimate”.

the Rathaur Rajput of medieval Marwar, while Kacchela and Sorathia Charan lineages, traditionally engaged in horse breeding and the trade in cattle and horses (like Charani Deval in *duha* I) are now thought to be of “lowly” origins.

Many different listings of Charan lineages (*sākhā*) and their branches (*khāṇṇp*) exist.⁴¹⁰ It appears that Charan lineages went through a similar process as their Rajput patrons, because some of their lineages are also named after their historical places of origin. The five most commonly listed Charan lineages are the Gujar Charan from Gujarat, the Kacch or Kacchela Charan from Kacch and Sindh, the Maru Charan from Marwar, the Tumer or Tumbel Charan from Sindh (now settled in Gujarat), and the Sorathia Charan from Sorath and Kathiawar. According to some traditions, the first Charan clan assembly was called together for the codification of their marriage laws in the early-medieval period, between the eighth and tenth centuries, followed by similar gatherings in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976:107f). If the dates associated with the Charan tradition of goddess worship are anything to go by, and I hope to show below that they are, the beginnings of Charan history in western Marwar can be dated to the ninth century when the Charani goddess Avad is believed to have lived in district Barmer in southwestern Marwar.

The meanings attributed to the name “Charan” also reflect the various identities ascribed to Charan communities since the word has been traced, for instance, to the Rajasthani verb *caranau* (to graze, to wander) and is thought to underline the pastoral-nomadic origin of many Charan lineages (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 94). The word “Charan” has, on the other hand, also been taken to stem from Rajasthani *uccāraṇ* (the art of recitation, verbal expression) and *chahar* (translated as “love, justice”), word-origins which are quoted to highlight the poetic talents of Charan communities and their love for justice as manifested by their poetic praise of honourable battles (Samdu 1993: 17, Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: *ibid.*).⁴¹¹

Myth-history

Various myth-histories relate Charan ancestry to classical traditions, Sanskritic gods and mythical and/or historical abodes in the Himalayas and, perhaps, southern India. The Maru Charan of Marwar, for example, relate their ancestry to semi-divine beings or spirit-beings like the half-divine Siddhas of Vedic lore and Puranic Sutas who used to eulogize the gods and allegedly became demi-gods themselves (Arha

⁴¹⁰ Charan *sākhās* seem to be comparable to Rajput *kūl* and *vamś*, which denote Rajput lineages made up of smaller brotherhoods (*khāṇṇp* and *nāk*). One listing of Charan *sākhās* counts 23 (*bīsottar*) main Charan lineages, including chief lineages that are thought to have been divided into 600 branches over the centuries (Samdu 1993: 19-20). Cf. Tambs-Lyche (1997: 190f) study of Charan kinship in Gujarat.

⁴¹¹ Lalas (1962-1988) does not list *chahar* but he does list the adjective *cahar* (“excellent”, “best”) and the noun *chaharāu*, which is translated as “battle”, “strife”.

1939: 7-8, Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 96f). Maru and other Charan lineages have also been traced to Charan Munis of the *Mahābhārat*, of whom it is said that they looked after Raja Pandu when he stayed in the “Land of Charans” and who, after Pandu’s demise, accompanied his queen and son on their way to Dhritarashtra in Hastinapur. Other comparable tales relate Charan ancestry to the semi-divine Dev-Charan of Mount Sumeru. One such tale records how the Dev-Charan are thought to have left Mount Sumeru due to the increase in members of the divine populace, which caused several groups of divine and semi-divine origin to move elsewhere (Samdu 1993: 17f, Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 96-98). After settling on earth, Dev-Charan lineages became known as Manusha-Charan and made a living as graziers and the poets of kings. Several present-day tales relate how the Manusha-Charan poets lived in the Himalayas until one king Prithu (or Prathu) gave them Telang.⁴¹² King Prithu (during different periods of time) has been identified as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Vedic king Prithu, an eighth-century Ram Parmar Prithu or the twelfth-century Prithu (Prithvi) Raj Chauhan. The different stories centre on the demand of a brazen Brahmin who insisted on marrying Prithu’s daughter and threatened to curse the king if rejected. Prithu turned to Shiva for help, who then sent the king a Charan messenger. “With the blessing of Durga”, this Charan appeared to the presumptuous suitor in the form of the Mother goddess (“from whom all power to curse comes”) and thus scared the Brahmin into withdrawing his improper proposal (Arha 1939: 9).⁴¹³

The above-quoted myth-histories relate Charan ancestry to classical traditions. There exist many other equally divergent tales regarding the origins of Charan lineages and their occupations, especially legends highlighting the pastoral-nomadic and martial occupational identity of Charan communities who trace their geographical origins to Baluchistan, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Sindh. These communities recount how Shiva first created Bhat shepherds to herd the god’s bull Nandi and protect him against lions. But the devout Bhat failed to protect Nandi from the lions and Shiva had to generate new bulls over and over again. He therefore created Charan guards who were as devout as the Bhat but who had a more daring disposition and proved to be valiant enough to protect Nandi from the lions’ attacks (Malcolm 1970 II: 108). In the nineteenth century, the tale about Shiva’s bull reportedly served to cast the Charan poets as the guardians of justice (symbolized by the bull Nandi) against “savage violence” (symbolized by the lions’ attacks) underlining the difference between Bhat and Charan communities (Malcolm 1970 II: 132). The rift between the two communities was inspired by professional rivalry. Both communities served Rajput patrons and both laid claim to the status of elite

⁴¹² Or *Tailaṅg deś*, perhaps a reference to the Telinga region that extended from the south of Orissa up to Madras (McGregor 1993).

⁴¹³ Yet other tales trace the origins of the different Charan lineages to different gods: the Nara Charans regard Shiva as their creator while the Chorada, Brahma and Chumvar Charan communities are believed to have been created by Krishna (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 110) and Charan Banjaras claim descent from Mola, one of the graziers of Krishna’s cows (www.vanjarivishwa.com).

literary and ritual specialist in the nineteenth-century (and perhaps earlier).⁴¹⁴ In Rajasthan, Bhat poets and genealogists have been known to claim descent from Brahmin poets who (“a long time ago”) composed Sanskrit praise-poetry at royal courts, an identity with which Bhat poets, who now serve the low-caste Bhambhi community, closely identify till today (G.N. Sharma 1990 II: 259, Snodgrass 2004: 274f, Tod 1972 II: 135).

In defining the difference between Bhat and Charan, the latter status and identity is usually described as more akin to the rank of warriors than to Brahminical standing.⁴¹⁵ As the tale about Shiva’s bull and the lions illustrates, Charan poets assigned themselves (and were assigned) martial characteristics given that they prided themselves on fighting alongside their Rajput patrons. The Bhat, on the other hand, were not courageous enough to “protect justice from violent assault”, at least according to their Charan peers. By implication, the Bhat poets were also not considered courageous enough to lend voice to Rajput warrior ethos, a task that was constructed as the exclusive domain of Charan poets.

Rajput, Brahmin, Charan

The ascription of a martial background to some Charan communities was not only based on their assumed relation to Rajput lineages but was also related to the deeds of Charan warriors who stood up to “the test of the sword” in battle. Charan myth and history as well as colonial and contemporary sources portray individual Charan men as skilled combatants and horse-riders, like the poets and warriors Goyamd Rao (son of Chango Samdu) and his son Udaikaran, both of whom are thought to have died in battle fighting in the army of the sixteenth-century Rathaur rulers Gamga and Maldev (Samdu 1993: 21).⁴¹⁶ Charan combatants are also mentioned as part of warrior bands, travelling groups of armed men termed “mercenary bands” and “para-military groups” in nineteenth-century colonial sources (cf. *Imperial Gazetteer* 1908: 289). The martial characteristics accorded to some Charan lineages and their Rajput patrons have led colonial administrators like Russell (1916: 252) to

⁴¹⁴ As remarked in chapter 2, it is clear that there existed a social divide and “language-barrier” between Bhat poets, on the one hand, and Charan poets, on the other. Dimgal and Pimgal, Charan and Bhat poets, were regularly portrayed as belonging to different socio-religious spheres (see, for example, Bhatnagar (2004: 46) who describes Charans as “low-caste bards”). Bhat are said to highlight their own ritually elevated, “Brahminical” status by reminding rival Charans time and again of their lowly origins as the poets of “degraded Gujarati potters”. It is said that Charan poets used to extract excessive amounts of money from the potters during weddings and that the potters consequently refrained from arranging matches for their offspring. A Rajput ruler came to the potters’ rescue by ordaining that Charan poets were only permitted to sing for and beg from Rajput patrons (Kaviya 1997: 15).

⁴¹⁵ Snodgrass’s (2004: 274) observation that Rajasthan’s Charans (“the equivalent of wandering minstrels”) do not usually claim a connection to ancient Vedic traditions or priesthood is problematic in the view of the earlier-quoted tales tracing Charan ancestry to Vedic and Puranic lore.

⁴¹⁶ Interestingly, some Charani goddesses have also been portrayed as horse riders, like in murals of Hinglaj’s temple near Jaisalmer.

pronounce that Charan lineages “derive” from Rajput warriors. Several sources do indeed relate Charan to Rajput lineages through marriage, adoption or the ascription of Rajput status after proving their worth in battle (Samdu 1993: 18). The Maru Charan, for example, are said to have Parmar Rajput forebears, and (used to) intermarry with Rathaur families while branches like the Kidiya, Kochar, Detha and Rohadia Charan claim descent from Budh Bhati warriors. The Samdu Charan lineage is said to derive from the ranks of Gohil Rajput lineages (cf. Malcolm 1970 II: 132, Samdu 1993: 18).

Other Charan lineages are equated with Rajput warriors in a symbolic sense. Bhati, Maru and Hujar Charan, for example, are believed to be like Rajput warriors, while predominantly pastoral-nomadic Charan lineages like the Kacchelas, Sorathia, Parajia and Agarvacha are equated with graziers like the Babria, Kathi, Ahir and Bharvad (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 159). And there also exist stories, like the one quoted above, about Rajput warriors who were forced to “become Charan”, i.e. practice the profession of poet, like the Rohadia Charan who commemorate how their Rajput Bhati ancestor was forcibly detained by twelfth century Rathaur warriors until he agreed to become their poet (cf. Tambs-Lyche 2004c: 67). One of the origin legends of the Tumbel Charan further illustrates the mixed Rajput-Charan identity accorded to some lineages since they trace their lineage back to Avar, a ninth-century Charani goddess, who married a Charan on the understanding that he should never speak to her. When Avar was pregnant with their fourth son, her Charan husband broke his promise upon which the half-grown child that fell out of Avar’s body and was put in a dish (*tumbā*, a Sadhu’s begging bowl) and set afloat on the sea. According to most versions of this story, the vessel eventually landed on the Makran coast near Hinglaj’s temple and was found by a Samma Rajput pilgrim on his way to Hinglaj. With the blessings of the goddess, the Samma Rajput brought up the boy as his own. This tale is told to underline that the Tumbel clan, the offspring of the half-grown son of Avar, is considered only “half” a Charan clan (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 149). The Samma fosterage of Tumbel is also cited as the reason why Tumbel Charan are said to be good warriors but less renowned poets.

Other “martial characteristics” that many Charans are said to have had in common with Rajput warriors, are the eating of meat, the use of opium and alcohol, and the worship of warlike goddesses. The Rajput warriors’ non-vegetarian diet, often associated with their alleged lust for blood in battle, continues to be cited as an aspect which is “fundamental to the Rajput character”. Such martial customs, which are thought to have been shared by Charan communities, are believed to have led to a certain coldness between Charan and Rajput communities, on the one hand, and Brahmin priests, on the other. The latter, wrote Tod, were apparently not held in high esteem in nineteenth-century Rajasthan since Rajput warriors and rulers only deferred to Brahmin priests outwardly and “(i)n obedience to prejudice, but unless their fears or wishes interfere, they are less esteemed than the [Charan] bards” (Tod 1972 I: 25).

More than opium and alcohol consumption or goddess worship, it was the eating of meat that appears to have set the Rajput warriors of Rajasthan apart from Brahminical values as suggested by Tod's rather dichotomous perception of "martial Rajpoot" and "meek Hindus". I cite here Tod's quixotic and, I feel, rather admiring depiction of Rajput warriorhood to illustrate the distinction made between Rajput martial culture and Brahminical values: "The religion of the martial Rajpoot, and the rites of Har, the god of battle, are little analogous to those of the meek Hindus, the followers of the pastoral divinity, the worshippers of kine, and feeders on fruits, herbs and water (...) The Rajpoot delights in blood: his offerings to the god of battle are sanguinary, blood and wine (...). With Parbutti on his knee, his eyes rolling from the juice of the p'fool and opium, such is this Bacchanalian divinity of war. Is this Hinduism, acquired on the burning plains of India? (...) The Rajpoot slays buffaloes, hunts and eats boar and deer, and shoots ducks and wild fowl (*cookru*); he worships his horse, his sword, and the sun, and attends more to the martial song of the bard than to the litany of the Brahmin" (Tod 1972 I: 57).

Despite their non-vegetarian diet and the martial characteristics assigned to them, some Charan poets have been portrayed as possessing "Brahminical traits" too, that is to say, traits which they are thought to hold in common with Bhat, Brahmin and other religious specialists who claim a high status for themselves. The chief characteristics to inspire the comparison of Charan roles with Brahminical roles are: first, the semi-divine or magical power of words and curses; second, the sacrosanct and invulnerable status accorded to Charan men that prohibited the shedding of a Charan's blood (cf. Maheswari 1980: 49, 60, Malcolm 1970 II: 133); and third, Charan men were also known as religious specialists since they were not only the fathers, husbands or sons of the Charani goddesses but also their officiating priests and the foremost devotees and proponents of the belief in Charani goddesses, which is expressed through compositions of devotional and martial poetry and prose traditions that centred on the life and miraculous deeds of deified Charan women.

Charan poets, like Brahmin religious specialist, are thought to be blessed with "the power of the 'word', the corpus of sounds by which the moral order of society is maintained and altered" (Ziegler 1976a: 226). To the words uttered by Charan men and women, like those of diviners or seer-poets the world over, have been ascribed magical faculties like the power to predict the future, protect against the evil eye through magical formulas or to cure diseases through spells or the ability of words to bring about physical damage through curses. The power assigned to the Charans' speech seems to mainly derive from their status as priestly poets or *devīputras*, the chosen devotees of the goddess who granted the Charans their poetic talent and Dimgal prosody.⁴¹⁷ As noted in chapter 4, Dimgal poetry, and especially its prosodic structuring, is believed to have had the ability to inspire warriors to heroic war

⁴¹⁷ Though instances of Rajput men with comparable powers are also known, like the supernatural powers and poetic genius ascribed to Rathaur Prithi Raja of Bikaner who, noted Tessitori (1919b: iii), was honoured as a clairvoyant and saint during his lifetime.

deeds, in particular their self-sacrifice on the battlefield, which stands for a sacrifice at the altar of primeval goddesses (Mother Earth, Devi).⁴¹⁸ The force of a Charan's or Charani's word is believed to result in the materialization of the angry aspect of the Goddess, a belief that adds considerably to the effect that curses uttered by Charan men and women are thought to have since "all power to curse comes from the Mother goddess".⁴¹⁹ Especially the words uttered by Charan goddesses were regarded with a mixture of reverence and dread since their powers of speech were believed to be such that their words could kill.⁴²⁰

The second "Brahminical" characteristic of Charan status, their sacrosanct position, is related to the power of speech and the listed religious roles which together bestow a "holy aura" on Charan men and women. Like the killing of a Brahmin, the consequences of shedding a Charan's blood or killing him was believed to lead to spiritual detriment of the wrong-doer.⁴²¹ Accordingly, the threat of a Charan to hurt or kill himself if his patron or other individual did not comply with his demands meant that his patron or other individuals would be held responsible for forcing the Charan to shed his own blood or kill himself (Maheswari 1980: 49, 60).⁴²² Rajasthani Charan traditions list many different forms of self-inflicted wounds and death including *tyāgī*, *dhāge*, *telī*, *samādhi* and *dharanā* (agitation through strikes or fasting) (Samaur 1999c: 72-77).⁴²³ *Tyāgī* connotes ascetic renunciation of worldly life, or a self-chosen death or sacrifice, commonly through a hunger strike till death follows. *Dhāge* encompasses threats to mutilate or

⁴¹⁸ According to Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 127, 167), Charan poets were also present during battles to curse the enemies of their patrons. This custom has not been reported in any of the sources studied by me.

⁴¹⁹ Comparable to Padoux' (1990: 4f, 46) and Samaur's (1999c: 27) identification of the power of the word with divine energy in Tantric Shakta-Shaiva traditions.

⁴²⁰ The magical faculties accorded to Charan women have, at times, been described as side-products of the special powers invested in Charan men (cf. Enthoven 1922: 258). However, as Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 167-168) notes, divinity, and the powers that go with it, was most commonly ascribed to living Charan goddesses and not to Charan men. Though Charan men were assigned sacrosanct status, they were not (as far as I know) usually portrayed as divine beings or reincarnations of gods, apart from Charan Depal, the husband of the Charani Sagati Karni, who is believed to have been a part incarnation of Shiva.

⁴²¹ Tod noted that the murder of a carrier of goods with a "sacred character" like the Bhat was considered even worse than the death of a Brahmin. For "the Rajpoot might repose after the murder of a Brahmin, but that of the prophetic Vates would rise against him here and hereafter" (Tod 1972 II: 555).

⁴²² Such threats are believed to have had an immediate corrective effect on wrong-doers. The sixteenth-century traveller Sidi Ali Reis noted that similar threats made by Bhat caravan guides were only carried out occasionally, "[but] if a caravan is attacked and the suicide of the Bats becomes necessary, this is considered a terrible calamity, and the superstition of the people demands that the offenders be put to death, and not only the offenders themselves but the Rajput chief deems it necessary to kill their sons and daughters also; in fact, to exterminate the whole of their race" (published on www.fordham.edu). To my knowledge, only one Marwari example has been recorded of a king who would not bow to the "insolent threats" of Bhat carriers who refused to pay duties. His refusal reportedly led to the self-inflicted death of 80 Bhat men and "[t]he blood of the victims was on the Rana's head" (Tod 1972 II: 555).

⁴²³ Today, *dharanā* (reportedly a Brahminical custom) is commonly rendered as "civil-disobedience", "strike" or "picketing" to enforce one's demands, obtain a favour or the payment of a debt or a fast to attain favours from gods. In Rajasthan, *dharanā* seems to also connote a fast, sometimes till death.

kill oneself with a knife or dagger, perhaps connoting *dhāge dhāge karaṇau*, “to tear to shreds”. *Telī* and *samādhi* are the forms of self-sacrifice that are most commonly associated with Charan goddesses (Samaur 1999c: 27, 31). *Telī* stands for self-immolation by pouring oil over one’s body and lighting it, while *samādhi* commonly defines any act of self-sacrifice. However, in Marwar, *samādhi* seems to most often refer to self-immolation by entombment, cremation or drowning (Samaur 1999c: 72-77).⁴²⁴ I know only one story that commemorates a Charani’s death as the result of above-mentioned practices, the *samādhi* of a Charani Sagati of village Bobasar (Shekawati), whose name I can no longer recollect. It was described to me as a “burning” to death by water, that is, the Sagati was reduced to ashes by water as if burned by fire (personal communication Bhanvar Singh Samaur, Bobasar 2000). Finally, *dharanā*, a strike or fast initiated by Charan poets and Charani goddesses, constituted a less deadly method to express one’s unhappiness with circumstances, as long as it was not maintained till death.

The inviolable status of Charan men assured them a role as caravan guides and safeguards of travellers whom they protected by threatening robbers with *tyāge-dhāge* (*tyāg-dhāg*) and its power to bring “ruin and destruction” upon anyone who dared stand in their way (Malcolm 1970 II: 135). Their sanctified status also meant that Charan traders paid lighter levies on trade and agricultural produce while, in other instances, they are said to have taken advantage of the fear their sacrosanct status induced to evade the payment of trade duties (Tod 1972 I: 555). Charan homes were also deemed inviolable and frequently offered asylum to Rajput parties on the run or, after a Rajput’s death in battle, to their wives and children (Malcolm 1970 II: 133f). The “holy aura” ascribed to Charan poets inspired Rajput rulers to bestow land and revenue rights upon them, hoping to thus protect lands and revenue against raiders. A Charan’s pledge of honour was held in such esteem that it was given as a bond in lieu of loans taken by their Rajput patrons (N.S. Bhati 1974: 107-115, 322, Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 157).

The third Brahmin-like role accorded to Charan men is that of religious specialists. The special relation Charan poets are thought to have with the Goddess, usually referred to as Shakti or Durga, not only arises from their poetic talents; it is also based on the fact they have been the main devotees, poets, officiating priests and promoters of Charani goddesses in Rajasthan. As will become clear in the second part of this chapter, the religious and socio-political significance attributed to deified Charani women is documented by the close connection between Charani goddesses and the Rajput rulers of Rajasthan, including the Rathaur lineages of Bikaner and Marwar. In describing aspects of the medieval history of Charani goddess worship below, I first aim to answer the questions regarding the intermediate status of Charan men somewhere in between the position of Rajput warriors and Brahmin priests and, second, to clarify Deval’s role in Pabuji’s story (in particular in the

⁴²⁴ The Charani Sagati’s tradition of self-sacrifice apparently links them to the tradition of *satī*, which is said to inspire widows to cremate themselves alongside their dead husbands (see Tambs-Lyche 1997: 61).

chamds, *duha* I and the *parvaro*) and the way in which the Rathaur hero's tradition may be related to medieval Charani Sagati cults.

Charani Sagatis

In the subsequent pages, I will investigate how (and when) the Charani cow herder and horse trader Deval became Sagati Devalde, and whether her deification could be compared with Pabuji's elevation to divine status. Since data about Deval herself are singularly lacking, I will discuss the traditions about other Charani Sagati to answer some of the aforementioned questions, and document the historical and mythical connections between the traditions about Charani Sagatis, on the one hand, and imagery concerning Puranic goddesses as found in the *chamds* and the *parvaro*, on the other. After a brief reiteration of the Shaktik similes that are part of Pabuji's tradition, and the role accorded to Deval and other Charanis in *duha* I, the *parvaro* and *chamd* I, the narrative content and historical context of Charani Sagati miracle stories and praise-songs will be discussed. These traditions consist of numerous collections of poetry, including medieval and contemporary versions of oral and written compositions dedicated to different forms of the goddess, their miracles, life stories and many names.⁴²⁵

Charani Deval, like all other minor and major Charan goddesses, can be linked to Hinglaj, the Mahashakti and "spiritual foremother" of a long line of medieval and contemporary Charani Sagatis, deified women who became recognized as living goddesses during their lives.⁴²⁶ The most important spiritual foremothers of Deval are considered to be the goddesses Avar and Karni, *pūrṇ avatārīs* (full reincarnations) of the "original" goddess Hinglaj. Charani Sagatis of later medieval times and present-day living goddesses are classified as *nimitt avatārī* or part (as opposed to full) incarnations of Hinglaj. In addition, symbolic listings, numbering "900.000 ordinary incarnations" define all Charan women as potential full or part

⁴²⁵ The most important Rajasthani source for this part of my study is *Rājasthānī śaktī kavya*, a compilation of poems dedicated to different goddesses by Samaur (1999c). Also helpful were publications of contemporary Charan devotees of goddesses like (*passim*) Chandra Dan Charan and Muldan Depavat (1987, *Mām Karaṇī śaṭśatī jayantī*), Chandradan Charan (1986, "Karaṇī Mātājī"), Bhanvar Pritviraj Ratnu (1996, *Suvā Uday Saṃsār*), Hanuman Prasad Sharma (no date, *Śrī karaṇī avatār*), Nandakishor Sharma (1999, *Jaisalamer kī lokadeviyāṃ*), Omaprakash Tamvar (no date, *Śrī karaṇī mātā kā camatkār*) and Kailashdan Ujval (1985, *Bhagawatī srī karaṇī mahārāj*).

⁴²⁶ In this study, the name "Shakti" is employed to refer to individual goddesses (Hinglaj, Devi, Chaumunda) as personifications of *śakti*, the female creative principle in Shaktik traditions or the divine energy as embodied by a deity's wife in Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions. "Sagati" is the name I use for regional incarnations of Shakti personified by Charan women. Both forms of the goddess can be related to the Puranic Devi, Shakti or Durga as portrayed in the *Devīmāhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍey Pūraṇ*, which was probably known among the Charan poets of medieval Rajasthan from (at least) the fourteenth century onwards when the Charan poet Shridar Vyas composed the religious and heroic poem *Saptasatī* based on the *Durgā Saptasatī* (cf. Maheshwari 1980: 41-42). Tambs-Lyche (2004: 30 n.7) dates the arrival of ideas from the *Devīmāhātmya* in Rajasthan to approximately the sixth-seventh century.

incarnations of Shakti. Even those Charanis not recognized as a form of Shakti are nevertheless thought to embody latent divine qualities, but only extraordinary or full *avatārīs* are worshipped as goddesses in temples dedicated to them. Till date, the veneration of a contemporary Charan woman as a Sagati depends on the amount of people who recognize her as a full or part *avatārī*, a status determined by the trust people place in a contemporary Sagati's effectiveness or the scope of her miraculous powers.⁴²⁷

The legendary history of the Charani Sagatis' struggle against rapacious Rajput rulers is commonly held to connote Puranic tales about Shakti or Durga as the destroyer of the buffalo-demon Mahishasur. It is to this form of the Purna goddess, known as *Mahishasuramardini*, that Hinglaj and her Charani Sagatis are most commonly related (cf. Tambs-Lyche 2004b: 18f, 2004c: 64). As noted in earlier chapters, the poets of the Pabuji tradition also used this kind of imagery expressive of Puranic tales about Devi and her battle with the buffalo-demon. In the *paravaro*, for example, the poet mostly addresses the goddess with "Devi", but in verse-line 36 he refers to her as Visahathi, the "twenty-armed Goddess", a title that is used to refer to the Puranic goddess Durga and her different aspects (also thought of as Mahamaya or Yogmaya in different traditions). The poet of the *paravaro* employs several names for the goddess and accords to her a prominent role. In addition, the predominantly devotional *paravaro*, which was composed to praise both Pabuji and the Goddess, establishes a connection between their cults (see chapter 5).

In *chamd I*, imagery connoting Puranic tales about Shakti or Durga as the destroyer of the buffalo-demon Mahishasur is contained through the rendition of warfare and battle-death in terms of sacrificial heroism, a warrior's oblation of life to Shakti. In verse-line 18, the goddess Vimala is mentioned, a goddess who is identified by contemporary poets as a "local" form of the goddess Camunda, one of the many names attributed to Durga (cf. Goetz 1950: 30).⁴²⁸ In verse-lines 28-29 and 34, the poet refers to the goddess as Shakti (*sakatīya*), accompanied by "thousands" *khecarīs* or battle loving yoginis, an image that also seems to call to mind Durga if the poet did indeed, as I think he did, meant to evoke the struggle between Durga (*Mahishasurmardini*) and the buffalo-demon. The bloodthirsty portrayal of Shakti in *chamd I* is reminiscent of like portrayals of Durga and blood sacrifice as the "celestial wine" drunk by her (cf. O'Flaherty 1975: 249). Lastly, I feel that the poet, when he described how Shakti's army of *khecarīs* devoured demons (*bhūcara*), perhaps meant his audience to hear in these verse-lines another echo of the battle

⁴²⁷ If a Sagati is thought to have performed supernatural deeds, an oral and/or written tradition may develop to spread her fame, and this may eventually lead to the establishment of a Sagati's own temple and the growth of a cult around one particular living goddess, like around today's Indra Kumari Bai and Sonal Bai in Rajasthan. For a list of Charani Sagatis worshipped in Rajasthan, see Samaur (1999: 503-539).

⁴²⁸ In *chamd II*, in a comparable verse-line (v. 35), the goddess is named "vrimalā": "vadhīyā bhujha(m) vauma lagai vrimalā, krama detai tīkama jhema kalā".

between Durga and the buffalo-demon, even though it is not wholly clear whether the mentioned “demons” are otherworldly creatures or enemy warriors who were rendered demons by the poet. Either way, it is not unthinkable that the poet used the image of yoginis devouring demons to evoke the goddess’s battle with Mahishasur.

The portrayal of Shakti’s army of yoginis (*jogaṇi*) and “incarnations” (*rupaṇi*) in verse-line 43 of *chamd* I can also be interpreted in two ways: first, as an army of unnamed Shakti incarnations; and second, as a reference to Charani *avatārīs*.⁴²⁹ In an unclear verse-line (40) of *chamd* I, one does find an instance suggestive of the inclusion of Charani Sagatis in the battle proceedings, if *lagarī* and *baharī* are goddess-names comparable to Lamgi and Bamvari, the epithets accorded to Charani Sagati Avar and one of her seven sisters, as contemporary Charan poets have suggested (cf. Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 172).⁴³⁰ The appearance of Charani Sagatis in war scenes would accord well, as shall be detailed below, with legends about the active part deified Charan women took in wars in Sindh and Rajasthan by instigating and leading Rajput armies in battle. The goddess of *chamd* II also appears to be Shakti, considering that Vimala (who, as noted just now, represents Caumunda and Durga) is mentioned again in verse-line 18 (like in *chamd* I). In addition, the vulture imagery of *chamd* II further documents the worship of the Goddess, either in her primeval form as mother earth or her warlike aspect represented by Shakti or Durga (cf. chapter 5).

Deval

The poets of the Pabuji tradition also referred to the worship of regional forms of Shakti, in particular in *duha* I, where Deval (referred to as Devalde) is identified as a Charani Sagati or a living goddess of Charan origin. Unlike the poets of the *chamds*, who only mentioned “a woman” when (in all likelihood) referring to Deval, Ladhraj did clearly identify Deval as a goddess. He is also the only poet who described Deval’s role in Pabuji’s story in some detail and recounts how Deval came to grant Pabuji the mare Kalvi (Kalmi Kesar), and subsequently called in his help to retrieve her stolen cattle, after which Pabuji set out to battle the cattle thief Jimda and eventually died at his enemy’s hands.

In the first half of *duha* I, Ladhraj calls Deval by her name and identifies her as a *cāraṇī* (v. 146) and cowherd (*goharī*) (v. 205). After Pabuji battled Jimda and returned the stolen cows to Deval, Ladhraj (for the first time in this poem) identifies her as an *āiha* (woman or goddess) in verse-line 228 and, in verse-lines 289 and 376, as *sakati*, perhaps referring to a classical form of Shakti or to a Charani Sagati. Ladhraj’s use of the name *sakati* could, of course, also refer to the primeval goddess

⁴²⁹ *Chamd* I (v. 43): “tālī mila nārada vīra ṭahā, ḍaba ru(ṇ)paṇi joḡaṇi ḍāka ḍaha”.

⁴³⁰ *Chamd* I (v. 40): “lagarī baharī gaharī laharī, tīra vāṃsuri vāṃ tahim jāya tīrī”. If *vāṃtahim* can be read as *vāṃnahim*, this verse-line could also be interpreted as: “Swiftly the terrifying goddess(es) appeared (and) feeling thirsty, they “went” (and) “arrived” at the “blood vessels””.

Shakti herself. But, in view of the fact that Deval is today worshipped as one of the minor Charani Sagatis of Rajasthan and not as one of the important *pūrṇ avatārīs* (full incarnations of Shakti) points to the fact that Ladhraj, in referring to Deval as a *sakati*, meant to identify her as Charani Sagati and not as Shakti herself. From the assertion that Deval is a goddess in *duha* I, it can be inferred that the medieval process of deification was not limited to Pabuji but included Deval too, and that she has been worshipped from at least the eighteenth century onwards, and probably even earlier, keeping in mind that *duha* I is thought to have been composed in the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁴³¹

Ladhraj's composition also gives a clue regarding Deval's human identity as he referred to her once a *garhavi* (*gadhavi*), a name used for Kaccheli or Kacch Charan communities (*duha* I, v. 205).⁴³² This identification links Deval with the pastoral-nomadic Kaccheli or Kacch Charan communities from Kacch (Kutch) and Saurashtra who were famous horse breeders and (like Deval) traded in horses (Ujval 1985: 28, Westpahl-Hellbusch 1976: 164). Today, Deval is held to be a *nimitt avatārī*, a form of Shakti (Sagati Bhavani) who was born to the Mishran (Misan) Charan lineage in village Bhoganiya near Jaisalmer (Samaur 1999c: 517). The Mishran Charan are known to have migrated from Sindh where some of their lineages are said to have converted to Islam. Though I expected Deval's devotees to have developed their own traditions about her, efforts to trace them proved unsuccessful. Unlike major Sagatis, it appears that Deval does not have many Charan devotees or different temples to her name, apart from a small temple under a Kher tree in her birth-place Bhoganiya where she is worshipped together with her sister Lacha Devi. She is apparently also worshipped in a Jaisalmeri Devi temple, together with Lacha Devi and the Sagati Birvari of the Charan Naraha (Nar) lineage from Saurashtra (Samaur 1999c: 516-17). It seems that Deval is mainly remembered for the role accorded to her in Pabuji's story, in particular for giving him the horse Kalvi who is thought of as an "otherworldly horse" (*alaukik ghorī*) and yet another *avatār* of Shakti in contemporary traditions. Deval probably is, and may have always been, a minor Sagati, worshipped by Mishran Charan and Bhil Bhopas but never given an important place of her own, at least not in the medieval and contemporary Sagati traditions studied by me. In the Pabuji temple at Kolu, the Shakti Devi and Deval are both represented by one hero stone carrying a carving of a trident, the symbol of the Goddess.

⁴³¹ The medieval process of deification may have extended to Pabuji's mare Kalvi if my indefinite reading of verse-line 121 (*duha* I) holds true. In this instance, Buro explains to Jimda why he cannot have the mare, saying that Pabuji never stops thinking about his mare since "(she) was (his) mother" (*duha* I (v. 121): "māḍī mana māṃ thīha, pābū naha bhūlai palaka"). Perhaps Kalvi has also been seen as an incarnation of Shakti (in this instance personified by Pabuji's nymph-mother) like in the extant *par* and *mātā* epic of Bhil Bhopas, who portray both the mare and Pabuji's nymph mother as Shakti incarnate (Samaur 1999c: 516-17).

⁴³² Tambes-Lyche (1997: 27 n.14) describes Gadhavi as synonymous with Charans from Gujarat.

Though Charani Deval's name is not mentioned in either *chamd* under review, even so the poet does seem to refer to her in *chamd* I, where Deval's involvement could be read from verse-line 15 in which, I think, Deval has been evoked by the poet in speaking of a nameless woman who spurred Pabuji on to attack the (cattle) thief Jimda. Indeed, the evocation of the cause of Pabuji and Jimda battle (the horse Kalvi and Jimda's cow theft) in most of the selected poems can be read as a sign of Deval's involvement, even if her name has not been mentioned. It was, after all, the cow herd and horse trader Deval who gained Pabuji's protection by giving him the black mare Kalvi, and the ownership of the horse became one of the main reasons for the trouble between the Dhamdhal and Khici families. Though this part of the story is not directly hinted at in *chamd* II, not even by referring to a nameless woman, it does even so appear that the poet alluded to Deval's role in the proceedings when he ascribed the cause of the battle to theft, probably cow-theft, by referring to Jimda as a robber, "dhārīta" (v. 29, 67) and, in the *kalasa*, by stating that Pabuji "added to the fame of his sword" by coming to the rescue of cows (v. 96-97).

In the *parvaro* (like in the *chamds*) Deval has not been mentioned by name either, though it is possible that it is she who was meant in verse-line 2, where the poet introduces a goddess from Kacch; a woman or goddess from Kacch (*āt kachu*) or Kaccheli, probably a Charani Sagati from Kacch and, most likely, a reference to Deval. Despite the fact that it is not altogether clear to me whether the *parvaro*'s poet really meant to evoke Deval, I do feel that his reference to a Kaccheli offers an indication of the connection between medieval Pabuji, Shakti and Charani Sagati worship. I imagine that a Kacheli Sagati, most probably Deval, was worshipped alongside Pabuji and Devi in the Rathaur hero's medieval temples at Kolu and Sojat. This notion was also inspired by the fact that Deval is now revered by Bhil Bhopas of the *mātā* epic in Kolu, where the Bhopas perform the *devala vālā paravāṛau* as part of their mata epic performance.⁴³³

Other equally slender but, I think, not improbable evidence for the medieval relation between Pabuji's worship and the worship of Deval in Pabuji's Kolu temple may be read from references to the medieval practice of tree protection in the *parvaro*. As shall be described in more detail below, the protection of trees is one of many narrative concerns of poetry dedicated to Sagatis, in particular Charani Sagati Karni. In the *parvaro*, the importance of the protection of trees may be read from Ratna's woeful tale (v. 28-43) about Pabuji's punishment of the Bhati Rajput Jaiti after the latter accidentally cut the Acacia tree (*Khejara*) planted near Pabuji's temple. If the quoted interpretations hold true, it seems clear that not only Ladhraj but also the poets of the *chamds* and *parvaro* described different forms of the

⁴³³ The *devala vālā paravāṛau* (not transcribed for this study) contains elaborate descriptions of Charani Devalde's visit to Pabuji's court. This *paravāṛau* has little narrative content, but is full of embellishments and repetition, dwelling at length on the details of Devalde's dress, the drove of horses and cows she has in tow, and the sweets Pabuji offers to "his honoured guest".

goddess, including Puranic forms (Devi, Durga and Shakti) alongside her “regional forms”, i.e. the Charani Sagatis of Rajasthan.

Hinglaj

Apart from the poetic data contained by the *chamds*, *duha* I and *parvaro*, I have not come across any other poems or stories pertaining to Deval’s deification, and I have had quite some trouble in finding possible answers to the questions posed earlier: how, and when, did the Charani cow herder and horse trader Deval become Shakti Devalde? Can her deification be compared with Pabuji’s elevation to divine status? As I hope to show, a generalized appraisal of the way in which female cattle keepers and horse traders of Charan lineages came to be worshipped in early-medieval times does help in assessing Deval’s role in the Pabuji tradition. For this reason, I include here a discussion of the historical and mythical data that are part of traditions about Deval’s spiritual foremothers and sisters, the myth-histories and temple-histories associated with the primary Sagati Hinglaj and two of her prominent *avatārīs*, the Charani Sagatis Avar and Karni.⁴³⁴ As will become apparent below, a study of Charani Sagati traditions assists in recognizing yet another aspect of medieval kingdom formation and Rajput-Charan relations in Marwar, that is, the religious and political role conferred on Charan women and goddesses as “sisters” of Rajput men and as the divine guardians of Rajput realms (cf. Tambs-Lyche 1997: *passim*, 2004: *passim*). The following examination of the mythical accounts of the travels of Charani Sagatis and their people in Baluchistan, Sindh, Kacch and Rajasthan is also intended to offer insights into the relation between the transmission of narrative poetry and stories by different communities, on the one hand, and pastoral-nomadic life and politics, war, trade and religion in the western and south-western desert regions, on the other.

Charani Deval can be linked to Hinglaj, who is believed to have been an eighth-century Charani, daughter of Charan Haridas of the Gaviya (or Gauravia) lineage of Nagar Tatha in present-day Pakistan (Samaur 1999c: 503). For the Tumbel Charan clans of Sindh and Gujarat, she is a historical Charani who appeared amongst their midst as Kohani-Rani in the Hala (Kohana) Mountains of Sindh when the Tumbel were leaving the mountains for the plains (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 173). Kohani-Rani is remembered as literate Charani, chaste and an accomplished Yogini. She inspired the Tumbel to spread the cult of the goddess and brought them to Las-Bela for this purpose. According to the tradition, Hinglaj settled in a cave in

⁴³⁴ Much of what follows is based upon conversations with the Charan scholars and/or poets Banvar Singh Samaur (Churu), Chandra Prakash Deval (Ajmer), Subh Karan Deval and Sohandan Charan (Jodhpur), and Udaydan Charan (Siwana); upon conversations with the priests of Sagati temples in or near Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Barmer and Churu; upon conversations with devotees present at the 1999 Navratri celebrations at the Karni temple in Deshnok; and upon discussions between the living goddess Deval Baisa Maharaj and Charan poets and politicians who had gathered at the temple.

the Hingula⁴³⁵ mountain range, west of the confluence of the river Hingol and the Arabian Sea. Here, she is now worshipped in the Saran Hinglaj cave temple by Charan and many other communities, including many different classes of graziers, cattle rearers and traders from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sindh and Baluchistan since, at least, the ninth century. From legendary and historical data, it can be concluded that the beginnings of Charani Sagati worship in Rajasthan can be dated to at least the ninth century, when Hinglaj's incarnation Avar is thought to have been born in a village near Jaisalmer. This date accords well with the idea that Shakti worship in Marwar and the advent of Shakta-tantric traditions in Rajasthan can be dated to the early medieval period, from circa the eighth century onwards (S.R. Sharma 1996: 98).⁴³⁶ The "appropriation" or "amalgamation" of regional and local goddesses into the Brahminical Shakti tradition in Rajasthan is a process that has been dated to the period between the fourteenth and fifteenth century (Hooja 2004: 371).

Hinglaj is known by many names to her eighteenth, nineteenth and early-twentieth century devotees, including Charan, Rajput, Marwar's Bania, Kanpathi and Naga Nath Yogi, Gosain, Sufi and Brohi-Charan followers.⁴³⁷ She appears in different sources as Hinglaj Ma, Hingula, Hingulaja, Kottari, Carcika, Lal Devi (the "Red (Fire) Goddess") and the Puranic Devi Hanglaj. Her Sufi devotees think of her as Lal Chole Wale Mai ("Mother (with) the red shawl") and Nani or Nanea ("grandmother") (Samaur 1999a: *passim*). As Tambs-Lyche (2004b: 30 n.7, 2004c: 64) has remarked, Hinglaj may have been part of more ancient goddess cults (perhaps traceable to the fifth century) which may have become part of later Charani Sagati cults. Nowadays she is most commonly described as the first "full" incarnation of Durga embodied by a Charan woman. "Both the Puranic Devi Hanglaj and the Charani Hinglaj are now considered one" (Samaur 1999: 505).

The main idol of Hinglaj stands inside the Saran Hinglaj cave-temple. Pilgrims have reported how an undying flame burns in front of Hinglaj's image and have described the cave-temple itself as a womb or *garvaguphā* (Samaur 1999a: 59). The main ritual at Saran Hinglaj signifies re-birth, both in a rather literal as well as symbolical way. The pilgrims, after undressing, enter and leave the cave-temple through its narrow openings, and are thought to be reborn upon completing this ritual. After paying their respects to Hinglaj, they crawl out of the cave again on hands and knees and thus hope to gain spiritual deliverance. Upon emerging from Hinglaj's cave, the pilgrims become "twice-born", sinless as newborn children, and receive new clothes and consecrated food from the Chamgali Mai, who is thought to be a "virgin priestess" from a Baluchi Brohi Charan lineage and a full incarnation of

⁴³⁵ On modern maps, Hingula is situated near the Talar-i-band (Makran Coast Range).

⁴³⁶ Archaeological evidence apparently suggests that earlier goddess cults in parts of northern and north-eastern Rajasthan should be dated to the period between the third and second century CE, when different groups of people are thought to have migrated to Rajasthan from the northwest (S.R. Sharma 1966: 49, Thapar 1999: 60-114).

⁴³⁷ Brohi-Charans, like some Mishran and Tumbel Charan lineages of Sindh, are Charans who converted to Islam.

Hinglaj.⁴³⁸ In this way all travellers become religious brothers and assume the title Kapadiya.



The Saran Hinglaj temple (Courtesy: Khalid Omar, Karachi).

The oldest temple dedicated to Hinglaj, east of the Indus, appears to be the Ludrova temple near Jaisalmer. All the way through the Thar Desert and in Shekawati, Hinglaj is also worshipped in caves, small temples near watering places, on platforms under trees or next to wells, and in the temples of Rajput forts. In Jaisalmer, for example, she is now worshipped in a small fort temple and is also believed to reside in the “Sal Tree temple” in the middle of the Garisar lake of Jaisalmer. Here, herdersmen till date come to water their cattle if enough water stands in the shallow desert-lake. Near Bikaner, Hinglaj’s Kolajagat temple is found. In Bhanpur (on the road from Rajasthan to Kacch) Hinglaj has been enshrined as *Mahishasuramardini* in the Hinglaj Garh temple situated at the site where Hinglaj is believed to have meditated (Samaur 1999a: 60). And near village Siwana (district Barmer), the Than Mata Hinglaj temple has been established in a cave of the Chappan hills. A small stream of water trickles down from the rocks in which the temple was hewn and is collected in a cave, forming a source of drinkable water in the middle of the rocky desert. The temple’s present-day Gosain Pujaris and her devotees from various caste groups of the surrounding villages credit Hinglaj with this marvel, i.e. making water flow from rocks.

⁴³⁸ The Chamgali Mai is also referred to as Kottari, the naked goddess (Samaur 1999b: 56).

Mahishasuramardini

In our days, Sagatis are commonly presented as manifestations of Durga, Kali and/or “Shaktis of Rigvedic times”, the “natural” or “original” Shaktis who, notes Samaur (1999: 20), manifested themselves as Charani Sagatis in medieval times. Hinglaj is, as a rule, associated with Durga, but also with Kali, Manasa Devi and Asapuri. From at least the nineteenth-century onwards, pilgrims on the way up to Saran Hinglaj halted to sacrifice goats or coconuts at temples dedicated to different Devis. Travelogues of pilgrimages to Saran Hinglaj also document how the Hinglaj cult is associated with many other mythologies, like combined Shakti and Shiva worship and the worship of Ganesh and Bhairu (Bhairav), the temples of whom were situated on the pilgrim trail up the Hingula Mountain (Samaur 1999a: 56-60). And stories about the heroic deeds of medieval and contemporary Charani Sagatis are often taken to be “echoes” of the struggle of Durga with the buffalo-demon Mahishasur as told in the Puranas. Colonial and contemporary sources also associate Saran Hinglaj with Durga’s victory over the buffalo-demon (Eastwick 1973: 217, Samaur 1999a: 5). Thus it is said that Durga tore out the demon’s tongue and flung it upon a rock in front of the cave temple at Saran Hinglaj where it remains till today. Hinglaj’s Pujaris indicate a white streak of stone in the rocks near the temple’s pool as the mark left by the demon’s tongue.

The textual source most often quoted to link Charani Hinglaj to the Puranic Devi Hanglaj is the *Devīmāhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍey Pūraṇ* in which she is said to appear first. I have not yet been able to trace these versions of tales about the “mountain-goddess” Hanglaj. The story apparently centres on the goddess Carcika who was born from the sweat that appeared on Shiva’s brow after defeating the demon Andhaka, as told in the *Śiv Pūraṇ* (O’Flaherty 1975: 169). The newborn goddess licks the blood of the demon and Shiva tells her: “You will always be worshipped with oblations and flowers. You will be smeared with blood therefore your auspicious name will be Carcika.” Thereupon the goddess roamed the earth, wearing a lion skin. She is believed to have eventually settled “in the best of places”, the Hingula mountain range. The twelfth-century *Tantra Chunamani* is also listed as part of the Hinglaj tradition, for it recounts how Shakti’s skull fell at Saran Hinglaj, as the result of which this place became a site of pilgrimage. Depending on which version one reads, it is also believed that the goddess’s navel or the top of her head fell at Saran Hinglaj (O’Flaherty 1975: 250f, Payne 1997: 8, Samaur 1999c: 506).

Samaur (1999a: 56-60, 1999c: 503f) and Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 173) trace the Hinglaj tradition to several sources. First, as her name Kottari (“The naked”) suggests, she is thought to be a form of a South-Indian mother goddess of the same name. Among Muslim devotees, she is popular as Lal Cholewali Mai and Nani or Bibi Hanglaj (Samaur 1999a: 56f). In addition, Pannebakker (1983) suggests a relation between Hinglaj, referred to as Nani or Nanea by Sufis, and a “primeval Babylonian goddess” who came to be represented as Hinglaj under the

name Lal Chole Wale Mai in eighteenth-century Sufi poetry. Perhaps Pannebakker here refers to Anahit-Nanaia, Hinglaj's "Iranian form" (Goetz 1950: 30). Westphal-



*Mahishasuramardini (Rajasthan, ninth century).
Courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University.
Photo by Bruce M. White (2004 Emory Museum).*

Hellbusch (1976: 173) notes that Hinglaj has been worshipped in a Buddhist form in Afghanistan and Punjab as well, while the Minas and Bhil of Rajasthan worshipped her as a fearsome demon. Samaur (1999a: 56) adds "Sumerian" devotees to the list of communities that used to worship Hinglaj. Last of all, Payne (1997: 7) held that Hinglaj represented a form of Parvati. The study of the different mythical, legendary and literary histories of the Saran Hinglaj cult, relating them to many traditions, calls for more expertise than I can lay claim to. What I can do is make apparent how stories related to medieval Charani Sagati cults have been transmitted by different communities from the early medieval period onwards, and how the worship of Charani Sagatis has been connected to Hinglaj.

Avar

Many variant stories commemorate the tale of heroic deeds performed by Charani Sagatis who are believed to have lived after Hinglaj and who are considered her full or part incarnations. First in line is Avar (Awar, Avad), a full incarnation of Hinglaj who is said to have hailed from the Madhu or Sawauni Charan lineage of western Rajasthan. Tradition records that she was born in the year 831 in village Chalakanu (Barmer). As Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 169f) has shown, Gujarati Charan devotees recount many tales about Avar, many of which I have not been able to trace in Rajasthan. These Gujarati versions of Avar's myth-history are nevertheless briefly summarized below, together with Rajasthani versions, to paint a fuller picture of Avar's tradition. In Gujarat, Avar is generally portrayed as a daughter of the Mada Charan sub-clan who lived near Valabhi (Saurashtra). In some versions of her story, Avar is portrayed as an Apsara, a daughter of the Nagas, snake-worshippers who are thought to have been the original inhabitants of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Saurashtra. She has also been identified as Parvati in her role of divine foremother of several Charan clans. In southern Kacch, for example, the Charan Nara clan claims to derive from the offspring of Rishi Shankar (Shiva) and Mother Avar (Parvati) (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 98). Some such myths of origin are also told by the Rebari and cattle keeping Kacchela Charan, whose foremothers were created by Parvati who moulded two Charan men from Shiva's sweat and had them marry two nymphs, Gaveri and Averi, whose offspring became Rebari and Charan. Avar's name is also part of the origin tales told by the Tumbel Charan, highlighting the connection between Hinglaj, Charan communities of Kacch and the Makran coast and Samma rulers (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 148).⁴³⁹

Like Hinglaj, Avar is known by many different names, including Chalakanetji (Chalakarai), Sawauni, Themrarai, Kali Dumgar ki Rai, Tanotrai, Ai-nath, Katiyani, Vijaisen, Naganechi and Bhadriyarai. As the following summary aims to show, the meanings attributed to Avar's different names give an idea of the manner in which her cult spread in the western desert (and beyond) by becoming part of the heritage of different clans, communities and geographical traditions. Thus, Avar is worshipped as Chalakanetji in her village of origin, Chalakanu. She is called Sawauni in reference to one of the Charan lineage names associated with her. She is believed to have earned the epithet Themrarai (Ruler of Themra) by defeating "Hun invaders", killing "fifty-two Hun demons", including Themra and Gantiya. At the present-day Themrarai temple, stone and wooden plaques carved with the image of seven sisters and Bhairav (their brother or uncle) are offered. The stones are piled up on platforms in front of Avar's cave temple (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 171).⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ These legends trace the creation of the Tumbel Charan lineage back to Shiva but also to a legend about Avar's fourth son who was adopted by a Samma Rajput pilgrim (as detailed in the beginning of this chapter under the heading "Rajput, Brahmin and Charan").

⁴⁴⁰ It is not clear to me which seven sisters or goddesses are meant since their names vary according to different listings and tales. Karni's myth-history (see below) indicates that some Sagatis are believed to

Avar's migration to Jaisalmer may be chronicled as follows: during a period of drought, Avar's family moved to Sindh. There, Avar and her six sisters grew up to be so beautiful that Sumra Hamir of Sindh wanted to marry all seven of them and threatened to use force if his marriage proposal was not accepted. As a result, and on instigation of the Goddess, who "spoke through Avar's mouth", the family left Sindh to settle in the Temra hills near Jaisalmer. On the way to Jaisalmer, the family met the buffalo-demon Bakha. Avar killed the buffalo and, upon drinking his blood, started to long for Hamir's blood too. She sent a Bhil grazier to Hamir to tell him what had happened and to presage his death.⁴⁴¹ After settling her family in Temra, Avar returned to Sindh and organized a huge *dharanā* (fast) to compel Hamir to return the Charan lands he annexed. When Hamir refused to give in, the Charani recruited Bhati warriors of Jaisalmer and the Samma of Sammasatta and Punjab. With a huge army of Charan and Rajput warriors led by "hundred thousand" Charani goddesses, Avar defeated Hamir. The Bhati got to rule over Thar Parkar, while the Sammas acquired the rest of Sindh and named Avar, Ashapura.

The rather watered down Rajasthani versions of this story as recorded by Samaur (1999c: 508-514) credits Avar herself with the destruction of the kingdom of the Sumra. Versions of this tale centre upon the attentions of a Sumra ruler, at times identified as "Bangra", who after glimpsing one of the pink fingers of the heavily-veiled Avar extend beyond her burqa, promptly proposed marriage. Avar looked upon his request rather unfavourably, and she is believed to have destroyed the Sumra kingdom in rage. As a result, or so this tale continues, Avar had to move to Jaisalmer where she (conceivably after halting on the way in Kali Dumgar) made her home and granted the erstwhile Sumra lands to Bhati Rajput warriors. The theme of marriage proposals from unacceptable suitors from other religions or classes and their disastrous consequences is very common in Marwar and Gujarat.⁴⁴² Such tales

have been one of seven sisters in a biological as well as spiritual sense. The many varieties of local seven-sister cults may document, suggests Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 171), that these cults were popular before Charani goddesses came to be worshipped in this region and may illustrate how Charani cults took in (or were taken in by) other "much older" cults, perhaps traceable to the worship of "seven little mothers" (Saptamatrika) in Tantric Shaiva-Shaktik traditions (cf. Padoux 1990: 151f, Samaur 1999c: 20).

⁴⁴¹ Yet other tales recount how Avar met a Banjara on the way to Jaisalmer, near the river Sutlej. The Banjara, upon witnessing how Avar made the river passable by scooping up the water with her hands, thus drying it up, asked her to help him resolve tax-issues with Hamir. She advised him to fill the packs of his hundred-thousand oxen with sand and empty them again at the river's source thus changing the course of the Sutlej. As a result, Hamir's land became a desert. A similar story is told about Avar's sister Khodiyar who made the waters of the Rann retreat so that Rajput armies could pass it safely (cf. Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 175).

⁴⁴² For example, the refusal of Susani, a Mahajan Kuladevi, to marry the Nawab of Nagaur (Tessitori 1917a: 211) and the tale about Avar's sister Khodiyar who refused to marry Shiladitya Sattam and destroyed his state upon being proposed to. Khodiyar ("The Cripple") was the chosen goddess of the Rajput of Bhamnagar (Tambs-Lyche 1997: 22-26) and is also worshipped in Jaisalmer (Samaur 1999c: 814). A Rajasthani miracle tale explains her name, The Cripple, by recounting how she became lame when she slipped while on the way to administer nectar to her dead brother to bring him back to life (Samaur 1999c: 815).

invariably end with the destruction of kingdoms or villages, and the migration of entire Charan clans to other parts of the desert. Avar's fight with Umra Sumra, who upon becoming a Muslim called himself Hamir Sumra, is read as symbolic for the fight between Hindu and Muslim forces by Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 111). Though conflicts between Charan communities and early-medieval Sumra rulers often serve to explain why many Charan communities left Sindh and migrated westwards, their migrations were not only instigated by religious motives. As Avar's tale illustrates, famine or tax evasion were other reasons why Charan and Banjara communities are thought to have left Sindh. This point will be further discussed under the heading "mobile peoples".

In the Shekawati village Pabuser stands yet another temple dedicated to Themrarai. Avar's Meha Charan worshippers established the small temple next to an old well. The temple is, to my eyes, a rather unusual building, since I never saw any such temple before or since. I imagine that the round, clay structure built over the main sanctum was perhaps meant to represent a cave, reminiscent of Hinglaj and Avar's cave temples elsewhere.⁴⁴³ By the looks of the building, a rather recent Themrarai temple has been built near Deshnok, the most important contemporary centre of Sagati cults. Avar's epithet Kali Dumgar ki Rai refers to a temple of the same name near Jaisalmer where the Charani is said to have halted *en route* from Sindh. Here, it is said, the Parmar ruler Jasbhan of Ludrova came to pay his respects and had a temple, dedicated to her, built on a hillock formed by black rocks (*kālī dūmgar*). Till date, Parmar Rajput lineages worship Avar in this temple with the sacrifice of goats. Outside the Kali Dumgar temple, like in the Themrarai temple, enormous piles of memorial stones with carvings of the seven sisters offered by devotees attest to the ongoing popularity of this cult.

The name Ai-nath refers to Avar's Kanpathi Nath yogini aspect, representing her as an ascetic, holding a kettledrum and begging bowl, wearing a loincloth and, in her ears, a glass *kuṇḍal* (earring). "Katiyani" evokes Avar's domestic talent; her reputation as a woman so accomplished in spinning wool that she was able to sustain all her people during years of famine by means of wool trade. And the name Bhadariya Rai connects Avar with a temple of the same name situated amid an *aurāṇ* of Jal and Bor trees in Bhadariya on the Jodhpur-Jaisalmer road. Maharaja Gajsingh of Bikaner is credited with the construction of the temple in 1831, and apart from this relation between Avar and her Bikaneri Rathaur devotee, I know no other stories that connect Avar with this temple. Avar is also worshipped in Deshnok in the temple town of her own incarnation Karni. As Nagnechi, the Sagati is credited with giving material support to Rajput warriors. For example, she is believed to have bestowed 500 horses upon the founding fathers of the Kacchawa lineage thus

⁴⁴³ It is also possible that this small temple represents a dome-topped, circular shelter, as Karni is believed to have built in Deshnok (see the description of Karni's temple below). Unfortunately, I was not able to contact anyone who knew stories about this temple.

enabling them to settle their scores with their enemies and establish their rule in Rajwarra (present-day Jaipur).⁴⁴⁴



The Themrurai temple in Pabasar.

As shall be documented below, very similar stories are told about other Sagatis, like Avar's part-incarnation Karni and the Gujarati Charani Baru, who are also credited with granting 500 horses to Rajput princes (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 114). The attribution of one and the same story to different Sagatis or vice versa (the attribution of different versions of one story to one Sagati) occurs quite often.⁴⁴⁵ This is partly due to the fact that so many regional variants exist and were told and retold by various communities in different periods of time. The typified character of the stories, their stock narrative themes and the fact that the same stories are told about more than one Sagati, who may have been known under similar or different names, give further rise to uncertainty, at least in one who finds it important to know exactly which Sagati did what and when. I think it best to keep in mind that the attribution of the same heroic deeds and/or names to different Charani goddesses can be understood as part of a narrative tradition that casts all Sagatis as forms of Hinglaj and/or major or minor incarnations of each other, and this means that, in the end, it is the Mahashakti Hinglaj herself who is credited with the heroic deeds of all her *avatārīs*.

⁴⁴⁴ The Rathaur rulers of Jodhpur are known to worship Avar under the name Nagnechi, apparently connected to an origin myth that relates how the first Charans were divine beings who left Mount Sumeru after the number of the divine populace had increased too much. One of the heavenly Charans married the daughter of Naga, named Avari, who gave birth to Nagnechi (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 97f). The subsequent generations of this lineage are thought to people the southern coast of Kacch.

⁴⁴⁵ See, for example, a Gujarati tale about Pabuji recorded by Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 114), which commemorates that it was the Sagati Karni from Deshnok (and not Deval) who gifted Pabuji his mare.

Karni

Third in line after Hinglaj is Karni Mata; she is worshipped as a part incarnation of Hinglaj and a full incarnation and disciple of Avar in several temples in Deshnok near Bikaner.⁴⁴⁶ After the division of India and Pakistan, Deshnok came to replace Saran Hinglaj as the most important pilgrimage place for Charani Sagati devotees, and Karni is now the most renowned Charani Sagati of the region. When I visited the celebration of Navratri in Deshnok in 1999, thousands of her devotees from different backgrounds had assembled, though Charan worshippers seemed to be in the majority. During my visits, the officiating priests of Deshnok related their history to Bikaneri Rathaur Rajput lineages. Karni's main shrine is situated in a fort-like temple (*koṭ*) built by Maharaja Surat Singh of Bikaner (C. Charan 1987: 21).⁴⁴⁷ In the present-day temple, the main worship ritual consists of the offering of coconuts, sweetmeats, flowers, etc. Karni's devotees come for the darshan of her image and to touch the eternal flame that Karni's Pujari waves over the heads of the assembled crowds.⁴⁴⁸

On the temple's main altar, Karni has been depicted like a Puranic goddess with a trident (*triśūl*) in her left hand and the head of the buffalo-demon Mahishasur in the other and a double garland of skulls around her neck.⁴⁴⁹ She also wears the traditional skirt and headwear of western Rajasthani women, the *ghagarā* and the *orhṇī*, and not the *sārī* generally worn in more classical representations of Puranic and folk-goddesses in Rajasthan. Around her feet, rats (*kabhā*) assemble. The *kabhā* are believed to represent the souls of departed Charan devotees who live in the *kabhā* till it is time to be reborn, thus escaping the clutches of the lord of the dead Yama, with whom Karni is believed to have had an argument that remained unresolved.⁴⁵⁰ At the stalls surrounding the temple, where devotees can buy religious

⁴⁴⁶ Second in line after Hinglaj is Bamkal Devi who is now remembered as the daughter of Mada, a Charan of the Sahuwa lineage and the sister-in-law of Avar Devi. Different traditions cite her birth place as Nano Bariyat Gharware near Siddhapur Patan or Garwhare village near Barmer (Samaur 1999c: 507-08). Little is known to me about this Sagati, apart from the fact that she now has temples dedicated to her in Barmer and Umarkot, and that some tales portray her as the *iṣṭadevi* (chosen deity) of Nanda Vana Brahmin communities and the Kuldevi of Pamvar Rajput lineages.

⁴⁴⁷ Deshnok's other Karni temples include a temple in memory of her death near Lake Dhineru (Deshnok) where Karni is believed to have "left her body" and the Nehri temple, built around a Khejri tree. In this temple's cellar, Karni's *dhūnī* (ascetic fire) can be visited.

⁴⁴⁸ In 1999, the living Goddess Deval Bai Sa of Mewar had also come to take part in the festivities. Though it was difficult for me to have a real conversation with this formidable lady as she was surrounded by Charan dignitaries all the time, it did become apparent that she sees herself as a part incarnation of Karni and counts Devalde of Bhoganiya among her spiritual sisters.

⁴⁴⁹ Goetz (1950: 30) held that the "Charan prophetess Karni" was a historical incarnation of Durga Mahishamardini or Chamunda, and that her cult "superseded" this older Shaktik tradition in Rajasthan.

⁴⁵⁰ In the temple, hundreds of chubby rats are offered sweetmeats and milk by Karni's devotees. The designation "rat-temple" for Karni's temple, as often used in popular media, suggests that it is the Kabhas who are worshipped here. This is not so: it is Karni who is worshipped.



Devotional picture of Karni as a shepherdess
(unknown artist).

souvenirs and offerings to the goddess, are also sold reproductions Karni's portrait showing her in yet another light, i.e. as an old and greying woman with strong features, wearing Rajasthani clothes and jewellery, seated in a cave on a mat in the manner of an ascetic and surrounded by *kabhā*. In one hand she holds a trident and in other a string of beads (*mālā*). Her head and body are half covered with a black, woollen shawl (*oṛhṇī*), resembling those worn by female graziers of different backgrounds who identify themselves as Charani Sagati devotees. In such paintings, Karni commonly sports a grey beard which, I was told, is testimony to her high age and miraculous powers.

Like her spiritual predecessors, Karni is thought of as a historical Charan woman who was born as Ridhubai to the Meha Khiniya Charan clan. She is remembered as the seventh daughter of one Charan named Meha Khidiya, who was born in the second half of the fourteenth century in Suwap and who died at the age of 141 (!) in 1538 (C. Charan 1987: 27, Samaur 1999c: 519).⁴⁵¹ Devotional poetry dedicated to Karni commemorates how her divine nature became evident at a very early age when she started performing miracles, earning herself the name “Do-er” (Karni), by curing cripple people, saving them from snakebites, granting them a son, and so forth (Barath 1987: 32-34). Karni is believed to have married Depal (Depa)

⁴⁵¹ Karni's birth has been dated to circa 1387 or 88 (Cf. Charan 1987: *nivedan*, Tambs-Lyche 2004c: 65).

of the Rohadiya Vithu Charan lineage of village Satika (Samaur 1999c: 519, Ujval n.d.: 35). This marriage brought Karni into a lineage of poets and gate-keepers long associated with Rathaur ruling lineages. Tambs-Lyche (2004c: 68, 78) notes that the fact that Karni is believed to have married, sets her apart from deified women who more commonly represent the literary and religious type of the “sacred virgin” who remains celibate in order to preserve her Shaktik powers.

The unmarried status of deified women may also be due to sociological reasons: a woman possessed with divine power is thought to scare off prospective husbands. Karni apparently did find a man who was not scared easily, a feat which need not surprise us since Depal is believed to have been a partial incarnation of Shiva. It is unclear whether or not one should see Karni and Depal’s alliance as a real, in the sense of worldly marriage since it is believed that their marriage was never consummated and that Karni remained a virgin all her life. But the fact that she considered marriage at all appears to set her apart from other deified women and is the reason why Tambs-Lyche proposes that Karni married Depal for socio-political gain, i.e. to forge an alliance with the lineage of Vithu Charan, the poets of the Rathaur, and thus “further her political designs; sacred femininity allies itself to human chiefs: the Rathod patrons of her husband’s clan” (Tambs-Lyche 2004c: 78).⁴⁵² Karni’s role as Kuladevi or guardian of Rathaur Rajput realms and her “political designs” will be further discussed below.

After her marriage, Karni continued to perform many miracles.⁴⁵³ One miracle-tale recounts how Karni and her community left Satika to go to Deshnok in search of water and grazing grounds (Depavat: 78f). After Karni, her community and their cows arrived in Deshnok, she discovered that there was no proper *nehrī* (twig for churning yoghurt) to be found. The only twig available was a Khejri branch too old for churning. Karni planted the stalk and, in no time, it became a tree, yielding many *nehrīs*. This was the time when Karni is believed to have issued an injunction to prevent cutting Khejri and Jal trees, a ban which seems to be in place till today for the protection of the trees of the *auraṇ* surrounding the Deshnok temples. As discussed in chapter 6, and as the above interpretation of the *paravaro*

⁴⁵² If Charani Sagatis can be thought of as resembling the literary-historical type of the *vīrāṅganā*, a warlike heroine dedicated to righteousness, wisdom and the defence of her people, it may be asked whether the traditional dichotomy between married (and benign and protective) goddesses as different from unmarried (or terrible and fierce) goddesses does indeed apply to Sagatis. Given Hansen’s (2000: 270) description of the *vīrāṅganā* that suggests that these heroines were *not* defined through their relationships with men (framed as the role of mother, wife, etcetera) but just by their martial bravery and deeds, it seems possible that Charan communities accord a similar autonomous socio-political and religious role to Sagatis, independent of conventional male-female relations. Tambs-Lyche (2004c: 64) seems to suggest as much when he remarks that all Sagatis (whether married or not) can be seen as terrible *and* benign goddesses. Their sovereign status could also be read from the idea that her devotees think of Karni’s husband as “strictly subordinate in religious terms, and while he benefits from the contact with the divine, [Karni] does not seem to be affected by her marriage” (Tambs-Lyche 2004c: 68).

⁴⁵³ See Tambs-Lyche (1997: 65-71) for a comprehensive English rendition of her life’s story. Yet other versions of her story can presently also be found via internet, for example via www.karnimata.com.

also indicates, the protection of trees was and is of prime importance for the cattle graziers of the Thar Desert since they provide fodder. The Khejri, Bor, Jharberi, Jhal, Khair and Neem trees, the cutting of which has been banned by the goddesses, provide the best cattle fodder (Samaur 1999c: 25).

Charani Sagatis as Kuladevis

Karni is remembered as a prosperous and influential cattle owner during her days. She is said to have owned large herds of oxen and horses and thus was in a position to bestow 500 pack oxen and horses upon her loyal disciple, the Rathaur prince Bika, when he set out to found a new kingdom (Jayasingh 1987: 47-52, Westphal-Helbusch 1976: 174). And it is believed that she was the Charani who directed him in establishing a new kingdom in the desert at the site of the present-day Bikaner Fort (Jayasingh 1987: 50, Tamvar n.d.: 22-24). In addition, oral and written stories relate how she helped Bika and later Rathaur rulers against powerful enemies by forcefully bending the bows of Bikaner's army with "invisible hands", thus causing arrow volleys to fly with such force that the enemy had to beat the retreat.⁴⁵⁴ The cowherd and goddess Karni eventually became the tutelary deity (Kuladevi) of the Rathaur of Bikaner. She is also worshipped under the name Nagnechi by the Rathaur Rajput rulers of Jodhpur. Similar tales serve to document how other Charani Sagatis came to be worshipped as the guarantors and defenders of Rajput supremacy. Such "foundation tales", at least the ones known to me, commemorate how Charani Sagatis lent the forefathers of different Rajput lineages a hand when they found themselves in need of help and thus became their Kuladevis. As noted above, Hinglaj became the chosen goddess of the Samma Rajput warriors of Sindh in this manner, and Avar is seen as instrumental for the founding of Kacchawa Rajput rule in early-medieval Rajasthan by supplying them with horses. Avar as Themrarai is worshipped by the ruling lineage of Bhati of Jaisalmer, and used to be worshipped by Sindhi Samma lineages. The Sisodia rulers of Mewar chose Charani Ban Mata as their lineage's goddess. In Gujarat, Avar's sister Khodiyar (Khoriyar) is worshipped as the Kuladevi of the erstwhile Gohil Rajput rulers.⁴⁵⁵

The stories that serve to connect Charani Sagatis with the establishment of Rajput supremacy are all highly typified and appear to follow the same pattern in

⁴⁵⁴ Testimony of Karni's continued protection of the Rathaur rulers of Bikaner and their subjects can be read from a tale that connects this Kuladevi to the rule of the twentieth-century Rathaur Maharaja of Bikaner, Gaj Singh. This story, set in the year 1937 when Gaj Singh celebrated 50 years of his rule, recounts how this jubilee concurred with a period of great drought. Crops withered on the fields, cattle died of thirst. Gaj Singh's emaciated subjects started to leave the state. The Rathaur ruler nevertheless commenced the jubilee festivities, dedicating them to the state's Kuladevi Karni. His trust was not betrayed. As legend has it, the moment the festivities began, a small black cloud appeared in the sky, followed by many others; rain started pouring down.

⁴⁵⁵ Khodiyar's myth-history and the part accorded to her in medieval Saurashtra have been studied in great detail by Tambs-Lyche (1997: 22-26, 32-34, 80-84, 182-9).

western Rajasthan, Gujarat and Sindh. Common themes include the prophecies of Charani Sagatis guiding many would-be Rajput rulers in the choice of the location of their desert forts in Janglu Desh ("Jungle Land" or wilderness). Charanis are frequently portrayed as diviners or interpreters of the omens who, meeting wandering warriors in the desert, presaged their rise to eminence or ultimate ruin. Some Charanis are held to have provided warriors with tangible military support to consolidate their new territories. In western India, warring Charani Kuldevi were also represented as female warriors who battle alongside male warriors or at the head of armies, inspiring warriors to fight (cf. Bai n.d.: *passim*, Barath 1987: *passim*, C. Charan 1987: *passim*, Samaur 1999c: *passim*, N. Sharma 1999: *passim*, Tambs-Lyche 1997: 107). Avar, with a huge army of Charan and Rajput warriors and accompanied by (an equally symbolic number of) "hundred thousand" Charani goddesses, defeated Hamir. She is believed to have bestowed Thar Parkar upon the Bhati while the Samma obtained Sindh (Samaur 1999c: 509-510, Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 169). Avar and Karni are believed to have each bestowed the clearly symbolic number of "500" horses and/or pack oxen upon Rajput warriors to enable them to conquer their enemies and establish new territories.⁴⁵⁶

Other legends that connect Charani Kuladevis to the early stages of kingdom-formation in Rajasthan credit Charan women with protecting animals against Rajput and other hunters, taming camels and horses, guiding travellers through the desert and feeding warriors who got lost among the Thar sand dunes (Barath 1987: *passim*, Samaur 199c: 15-17, 503-539). Even vast armies, upon running out of water and food, could hope to be fed by Charanis. Often from rations made up of just one pot of yoghurt (*dahi*) and only one or a few pieces of bread, they managed to share these with all desert wayfarers since their modest supplies proved to be unlimited. Avar's sister Khodiyar, for example, supposedly fed King Chundasama Ra Navaghan's army and herds when he was travelling from Junagadh to Sindh in the eleventh century. Though Khodiyar had just one piece of bread, she managed to break it into enough portions to feed all.⁴⁵⁷

Charani goddesses were not just the Kuladevis of Rajput lineages, but also of Charan clans, either as legendary foremothers who engendered certain lineages or as guides who lead Charan communities from Sindh and Baluchistan to their present homelands, and/or as historical leaders who gave the different Charan clans their names (cf. Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 111, 137, 141, 164). All Charan clans and their sub-divisions have their own Kuladevis, for instance, Ravechi who is believed to be the foremother of the Nara Charans; Avar of the Asania, Bati, Jakhala, Maru and Thakaria Charans; and Rohadiya is the Kuladevi of the Nagnechi Charans.

⁴⁵⁶ The Rajput Hamir Gohil (1326-1364) is also said to have received money and 500 horses from a Sagati named Baru (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 114).

⁴⁵⁷ Like the story of Avar's half-grown child, quoted just now, that was put in a dish and set afloat until it was rescued by adoptive parents or the miraculous drying up of rivers to enable Charanis and their retinue to pass, the story of Khodiyar's distribution of bread of course bring to mind biblical narrative themes.

Versions of tales that relate Charan lineages to certain Kuladevis recount, for example, how Hinglaj led a group of Charans to Las-Bela, while Kodyar brought them to Bhavnagar, and Avad-Mata lead their migration into Rajasthan. The first codification of Charan marriage customs is also ascribed to a Charani Sagati, the thirteenth-century Rajbai Mata, who is credited with establishing the conventions which rule Charan lineage relations till today.

Temple construction

As Tambs-Lyche (1997: 268-271) has argued in depth regarding the function of goddesses in traditional Kathiawar, Charani Kuladevis had a pivotal role in the establishment of political and military Rajput power. It is not all together clear to me to which era the initial stages of the “politicization” of the Sagati cult (the participation of deified Charan women politics and economics) could be dated to in Marwar. Most tales about Charani horse trade, heroism and the help they extended to Rajput warriors seem to be either undated or based on data which are difficult to verify. The different data associated with one and the same goddess in oral and written traditions are rather confusing. Avar, for example, is said to have been born in the ninth century and to have brought the Mada Charan to Jaisalmer in the tenth century, while she fought with Hamir who probably lived in the thirteenth century. As was noted above, the many different data associated with Charani Sagatis are probably the result of oral transmission techniques and the use of many names, at times similar ones, for the goddesses as well as the use of different calendars. Several scholars have put forward that the socio-political and religious process of politicization seems to have been an early-medieval occurrence. In Gujarat, Tambs-Lyche (1997: 61) writes, Charani Sagatis gained a central place as the Kuladevis of Rajput kingdoms in the period between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (S.R. Sharma 1996: 98) dates the connection between Shakti worship and Rajput lineages to eight-century Shakta-tantric traditions in Marwar, but whether this worship includes the worship of Charani Sagatis is unclear.

The fact that Karni is the Kuladevi of the Rathaur of Bikaner suggests that on this goddess was conferred a religious and political importance during her lifetime or immediately after her death, which is dated to the end of the fifteenth century. The myth-history of Avad and Hinglaj Mata, who have also been accorded Kuladevi status, could (but not necessarily does) date the process to earlier centuries. The eighth and ninth century worship of Hinglaj and Avar indicates the early beginnings of Sagatis’ political role in Sindh, Kacch, Saurashtra and western Rajasthan. The history of the different construction phases of some of the Jaisalmer and Deshnok temples dedicated to Avar and Karni, however, offers an indication of the periods in which the politicization of the Charani Sagati cult and their relations with Rajput rulers took on material form. Thus Avar’s Themrarai temple near Jaisalmer has been traced, on the basis of rock edicts kept at the temple, to 1375 by Samaur (1999:

504). Subsequent Bhati rulers of Jaisalmer, like Juhar Singh Bhati, took an interest in the temple and installed a rock edict at the temple premises in 1586. The Bhati Amar Singh is said to have built the temple *burj* (bastion, dome or tower) in the same year. Later, Rathaur rulers have also added to the temple: Jaswant Singh is credited with completing the upper part of a *burj* in 1703 while Raj Singh of Bikaner had a second *burj* erected and donated a bronze temple-bell in 1828. These data suggest that myth-history, temple legend and rock edicts connect Avar with the early beginnings of Bhati territorial expansion in the fourteenth century, but that royal interest in the ornamentation of her sanctuary increased in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that this was also the period when real construction work (as opposed to the establishment of rock-edicts) got underway.

This impression is also documented by the limited but suggestive history of the building of the main Karni temple in Deshnok, which implies that formal relations between Karni and the Bikaneri Rathaur rulers can be dated to the first half of the sixteenth-century when the present-day stone and marble temple, resembling a



small fort (*kot*) with bastions, was erected by Rathaur Jaitasi to celebrate his victory over Kamran (Bhargavan 1987:75f). Legend, on the other hand, dates the initial construction of the temple somewhat earlier since it is believed that the sixteenth-century temple was erected over a clay “ghūmbhar”, a dome-topped, circular shelter that today constitutes the temple’s main sanctum. Karni built the *ghūmbhar*

herself, her devotees believe, and thus date the initial stages of construction to the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century, but this does not mean that the temple already received active Rajput patronage at that time. What is known with some certainty is that later Rathaur benefactors, like the early seventeenth-century Rathaur Sur Singh, added the silver entrance gate to Karni’s sixteenth-century temple (Bhargavan 1987: 76). The eighteenth-century ruler Bhakta Singh is credited with the gift of the gold-plated door that now leads to the inner sanctum. Judging from the construction of (and additions to) the present-day main temple in Deshnok by Bikaner’s rulers, Karni’s importance as a Kuladevi should be dated to the sixteenth century.

Mobile peoples

While the political history of the relations between Rajput ruling lineages and Charani Kuladevis is an important aspect of Charan traditions, the narrative content of most oral and written poetry about Sagatis relates their traditions first and foremost to the concerns of pastoral-nomadic communities. The socio-political role

and divine status ascribed to medieval Charanis is defined in terms of protection and compassion, apparent in their efforts to guard the lives and livelihood of other people, in particular the goddesses' dependants and devotees. As was remarked just now, feats of heroism ascribed to Charani Sagatis include acts of self sacrifice.⁴⁵⁸ Like a Rajput's sacrifice in battle, Charan self-sacrifice can be seen as a form of sacrificial heroism given that Charan women are believed to have given up their lives (or threatened to do so) to prevent cattle-thefts or to reclaim stolen cattle, acts of self-sacrifice which resemble Pabuji's heroism and are at times compared to a Rajput's sacrifice in battle.⁴⁵⁹ Samaur (1999: *passim*) puts great emphasis on the perceived heroic nature of Charani self-sacrifices by favourably contrasting their heroism with the battle death of Rajput warriors, arguing that a Charan's or Charani's self-sacrifice surpasses a warrior's death for, from some Charans' point of view, it takes more courage to inflict death upon oneself than to "merely" have oneself slain by an enemy.⁴⁶⁰

Other narrative themes of the stories about Hinglaj, Avar, Karni, Deval and other goddesses that underline the importance of the pastoral-nomadic context for understanding Charani Sagati cults can be read from tales about Charan guides and Charani women who used to help caravans and armies to survive in the desert and find their way among the sandy dunes, semi-arid planes of Sindh, the Thar Desert and the salt-lakes of Kacch. Charanis are often credited with miracles pertaining to water, obviously a scarce commodity in the desert. They are thought to have filled empty wells with water, turn brackish water into potable water, find new wells, water cattle and cause rain. Charanis, as the presiding goddesses of trees and *orhan*, are believed to ensure the protection of such sources of cattle fodder. Stories about Charanis feeding armies, protecting their devotees' herds, trading in or giving pack oxen and horses to Rajput warriors, and tales about Charan men who safely guided caravans underline how warriors and traders relied on Charan men and women for

⁴⁵⁸ The Charani Sagati's tradition of self-sacrifice apparently links them to the tradition of *satī*, which is said to inspire widows to cremate themselves alongside their dead husbands (cf. Tambs-Lyche 1997: 61, 189). I know of one Marwari tale about a Sagati named Amba Devi of Arasur who is remembered for becoming a *satī* (Samaur 1999c: 515).

⁴⁵⁹ While it is said of Rajput warriors that they practised a form of the Charan custom to inflict wounds upon oneself, they reportedly mutilated themselves or offered parts of their own bodies to the gods by way of sacrifice and to extract a boon (Ziegler 1998: 283, n.83).

⁴⁶⁰ Charani women, like Charan poets, could reportedly also be extravagant in their demands and use the special powers ascribed to them to bully people into parting with goods or money. This has led to the description of *tyāge-dhāge* and such practices in terms of "blackmail" and "female vengefulness" (Munshi Hardy Singh 2000: 117, Tambs-Lyche 1997: 46 (quoting Tod), Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 129). These terms, like the common practice of translating *tyāge-dhāge* with "suicide", do not, I feel, help in rendering the meaning attributed to the ideal of self-sacrifice as voiced by Charans. Considering the negative associations suicide has in contemporary western and Indian academic discourses, "self-sacrifice" or "self-inflicted death" seem better words to convey the heroic connotation that the ideal of self-sacrifice has in Marwar, in particular since the ideal of self-sacrifice includes several customs, not just self-inflicted death, but also fasting, the sacrifice of one's blood by stabbing oneself or the sacrifice of a limb.

their survival in the desert. And vice versa, Pabuji's battle to protect Deval's cattle documents the safeguard Rajput warriors were supposed to extend to Charan cattle, granted that they were not too busy robbing cattle from Charan herders, like Jimda Khici was.

The pastoral-nomadic background of Sagati traditions is also made explicit by the location of Saran Hinglaj and other temples dedicated to Charani goddesses as they are found on intersecting caravan routes and harbours connected by overland and overseas trade between Baluchistan, Sindh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Their temples were situated on desert routes that linked medieval markets like Multan, Kabul and Delhi, via Jaisalmer, Barmer, Rajgarh, Nagor, Pali, Jodhpur, Amber, Bikaner and Shekawati. Saran Hinglaj, for example, situated near the banks of the Hingol river in Samakharata and Khald Pradesh was positioned on trade routes connecting Baluchistan and Sindh with Gujarat, Jaisalmer, Marwar, Bikaner, and Rajput kingdoms further east, north, south and west. In sum, the Sagati temples were situated on caravan routes through the western desert regions that were part of a corridor or "thoroughfare zone", a semi-arid region extending from the middle-eastern countries up to western Rajasthan and the salt lakes and arid planes of the Rann of Kacch in Gujarat (cf. East and Spate 1950: 54, Ludden 1994: 7f). The western desert was a strategic region: it connected the South-Asian peninsula to Iran and Central Asia and, via Baluchistan, to the Middle East. Camel and pack oxen caravans between Sindh, Marwar and further to the Mughal heartlands, Delhi and Agra travelled via Burhanpur, Amber, Ajmer and Pali, carrying wool, milk and butter, salt, grains, cotton, opium, tobacco, indigo, sugarcane and mustard seed.⁴⁶¹ Imports into Rajasthan consisted of goods like dried fish, grains, silk, iron, weapons and spices from Sindh and Multan, horses from Kathiawar and, perhaps, Sindh, and of textile, dates, coconuts, glass, gold, elephants, alcohol, dried fruits and embroidery from all directions.

According to Devra (1978: 582), the medieval desert routes witnessed lively trade between areas north and west of Rajasthan and the desert cities of Jaisalmer, Rajgarh, Bikaner, Nagor, Barmer, Pali and Jodhpur, which were well-connected with Ajmer, Amber (Jaipur), Alwar and Kota in the east. It can be assumed that the Charani Sagati temples owed their geographic position to caravan trade. They were situated on crossroads that connected important cities, towns and ports, like the temples of Hinglaj and Avar situated in and near Jaisalmer described as the biggest western desert market for woollen cloth, blankets and caps in medieval times. Other important wool-centres were located in Bikaner, Jodhpur and Shekhawati, all situated on Charani Sagati pilgrim routes as well as trade routes. The position of Charani Sagati temples dedicated to Hinglaj, Avar and Karni near wool centres and cattle markets like Barmer, Koljagat, Bikaner and Pabuser also indicates their involvement with the medieval

⁴⁶¹ My description of trade in the western desert is based on Bernet Kempers (1941: 39), Devra (1978: *passim*), G.N. Sharma, (1966: 312-21), Maclean (1989: 45), Saxena (1994: *passim*), Tod (1972 I: 171, II: 133, 154-158, 236, 500f, 554) and Rousselet (1983: 151).

trade in cattle, horses, dairy products, wool and leather. The Than Mata Hinglaj temple in district Barmer was built alongside routes connecting Sindh, the western Thar Desert, Rann of Kacch and, via Pali, eastern Rajasthan. Sagati temples were, moreover, situated near horse breeding centres in Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Kacch, Kathiawar, Umarkot, Multan and the banks of the River Luni (Deloche 1980: 237, Maclean 1989: 45, Tod 1972 II: 125, Ziegler 1994: 194).

Tod (1972 II: 125) noted that there were several horse-fairs in nineteenth-century Marwar “where the horses of Cutch and Cattiarwar, the jungle⁴⁶² and Mooltan, were brought in great numbers. Valuable horses were also bred on the western frontier, on the Luni, those of Rardurro being in high estimation”. Similarly, the medieval breeding centres for cows, oxen and camels have been located in areas near Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur, cities which were centres of Sagati worship too. In view of common references to Charanis as Gujarati horse traders, it seems that their trade centred on Kacch and Kathiawar. Thus, as noted just now, Sagatis like Baru from Gujarat are credited with granting horses to Rajput princes (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 114) just like Deval has been credited with granting Pabuji the mare Kalvi. In *duha* I (v. 205), Deval’s identification as a *garhavi* (*gadhavi*) clearly connects her to the Garhavi Charans from Kacch and Saurashtra who were famous horse breeders and (like Deval) traded in horses.⁴⁶³ Other stories, like the one listed above, connect Deval to the Mishran Charan who migrated from Sindh to Jaisalmer. Such tales could be suggestive of links with Sindhi horse breeding centres in Umarkot and, perhaps, the Makran coastal areas *en route* to the Saran Hinglaj temple. An instance that seems to be indicative of horse trade between Gujarati ports and the coast of Makran is the idea that the Kathiawari (or Kutchi) horse breed originated from crossbreeding between Gujarati horses with Arab horses which were shipwrecked off Veraval Port on the west Indian coast (Van der Geer (forthcoming) 2008: 149).⁴⁶⁴

From a geographical view point, the unity of the desert tracts of Baluchistan, Sindh, western Rajasthan, Kacch, Saurashtra and Shekawati is rather obvious. The

⁴⁶² It is unclear whether Tod’s reference to “the jungle” refers to horse breeding centres in “Jangla Desh”, a common name for Bikaner, or in Lakhi Jangal in Punjab or in other “jungle” areas like, perhaps, the salt lakes of Kacch.

⁴⁶³ The idea proposed by Digby (1971: 21f, 28, 49) and propounded for Marwar by Ziegler (1994: 194f) that “local” horse breeds were inferior breeds unfit for warfare is rather problematical considering Hendricks’s (1995: 251-52, 279-281) description of the local Marwari and Kathiawari (Kutchi) horse breeds as good war horses, famed for their speed and hardiness. These breeds, considered a mix of Gujarati breeds with Turkmeni or Arab breeds, did serve as excellent war horses since they were fast, able to withstand extreme temperatures and strong enough to carry a man, his armour, shield, sword and lance for long distances through the most difficult terrain (cf. Van der Geer (forthcoming) 2008: 149, 153). Perhaps the Marwari war horse has been confused with the undersized, mixed breed “village” horses often described as “wretched little ponies” in colonial and Mughal sources and as “country-bred nags or ponies” by Digby (1971: 28).

⁴⁶⁴ An instance which would throw a historical light on Tessitori’s (1916: 111) reading of Nainsi’s *khyāta* in which the chronicler describes Pabuji’s mare, a horse of “superior qualities”, as born to Kacchela Charans from a mare fecundated by a mythical “marine horse”, perhaps a shipwrecked Arab (see footnote 461).

cultural connections between the regions have remained somewhat blurred. The legends and historical data that detail the migrations undertaken by stock-rearing and grazier communities of the western deserts allow us to imagine what the cultural connections may have been like. Most Rajasthani and Gujarati tales about Charani Sagatis locate their parental villages in desert zones west of Jodhpur, towards Jaisalmer, Barmer and Umarkot and, in Hinglaj's case, Nagar Tatha. Legend furthermore commemorates how migrations through the desert were often set in motion by Charani Sagatis. As noted earlier, Hinglaj is thought to have led Charans to Belas. Avad told the Tumbel Charan of Lodrani to go to Sindh under the leadership of the Sumra of Baluchistan. She was also the woman who led her people



Approximate location of Baluchi, Sindhi, Rajput and Gujarati communities c.1300-1400 (Courtesy: University of Texas Libraries).

to Jaisalmer to escape from Sumra Hamir's attentions. And Karni is believed to have guided her clan from Suwap to Deshnok to escape a drought. Other legendary data tell of the migration of the Tumbel Charan of Bhada from Sindh to Gujarat. The Tumbel say they used to live like Sindhi communities until the fourteenth-century when they helped Dodha Sumra in his fight against Khilji. This narrative theme is also common among Rebari and Jat. In the ninth century, the Jareja-Samma warriors are thought to have migrated from Sindh into Kacch bringing along yet another Charan group, probably Tumbel sub-clans.

Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 104-105) traces seasonal and more lasting migrations, leading to semi-permanent settlements to the ninth and later centuries when Charan, Jat, Gujar, Rebari, Rajput and other pastoral-nomadic communities travelled to and from Baluchistan, Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan and, probably, onwards in all directions of the wind. She notes a marked increase of Charan migrations to Kacch, Saurashtra and western Rajasthan as a result of tenth-century invasions into Sindh by Ghaznavides, eleventh-century Ghorid invasions, and

thirteenth-century battles with Khilji armies. Warlike periods apparently set long-term migration in motion and, at the same time, a “Verschmelzungsprozess” through which different pastoral-nomadic communities came to share similar names and myth-histories. Stories about conflicts between Sumra rulers and Charani Sagatis can probably be dated to these periods. Other reasons for travelling through the western desert regions, as the traditions about Hinglaj, Avad and Karni also document, were caravan trade, cattle trade, seasonal migrations in search of grazing grounds, famines, and oppressive tax regimes.

The migrations undertaken by grazier and cattle rearing communities of the western desert are thought to have led to an “ethnogenesis” of the title Charan and other occupational titles. Designations like Ahir, Charan, Bharvad, Maldhari or Gavachi were most often used to define graziers and cattle breeders according to their animals and were primarily occupational (as opposed to ethnic or caste) titles, which could be accorded to or taken on by different pastoral-nomadic groups. In other words, such titles were achieved and not ascribed titles and are comparable to the early-medieval status of Rajput that could be achieved by warriors from different communities. Thus Gavachi, the name accorded to Kacchela Charan in *duha* I, is an occupational title that was also used for Charan, Ahir and Bharvad graziers and keepers of oxen. Moreover, the keepers of buffaloes, camels and oxen could (and did) also unite as one tribe with farming communities (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 218). Similarities between some sub-clans of Charan, Jat-Baluch, Rebari and Bharvad further highlight the variegated history of these communities. The Agarvacha Charan clan from Kacch, for example, is said to have more in common with Jat-Baluch and other buffalo-rearers of the South-Iranian marshes than with other Kacchi Charan (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 142f, 180).

In the same way, Charan can also be looked upon as an occupational title meaning “poet” and “grazier”. The Bharot Charan, for instance, used to think of themselves as Bhati warriors until they took up the profession of poet and the title Charan (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 138). The name “Charan” was taken on by many other medieval lineages from different social groups and regions like Baluchistan, Sindh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Malwa and South India. And even those Charan groups who pride themselves on being different from grazier Charan communities, like the courtly Maru Charan, also count among their ranks graziers of all kinds of animals.⁴⁶⁵ Though the literate Maru Charan of Marwar were the most renowned clan of poets (in their own and other Charan’s eyes) who prided themselves on their positions at Marwar’s courts and stressed the difference between themselves and grazier clans, other Charan lineages counted known poets among their ranks too. A case in point is the Tumbel Charans who were known as a martial community and as

⁴⁶⁵ Enthoven (1922: 274-75) noted that among the courtly reciters met by him, many belonged to the four main divisions of village Charans, suggesting that low as well as high castes had become part of courtly Charan lineages in his time (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 102).

the poets and genealogists of the Sumra rulers of Sindh (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 149).⁴⁶⁶

Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 95) has suggested that the sharing of the title Charan by different groups “[i]st meistens das Symbol eines langwierigen ethnogenetischen Verschmelzungsprozess, wird hier für die Charan angenommen, dass sie aus Elementen verschiedener Einwanderungswellen und einheimischer Bevölkerungsgruppen, die mit ihnen in Kontakt gerieten, zusammengewachsen sind”. Along these lines, it is possible to think of Charan as an “open identity” which (comparable to early medieval Rajputhood) used to be open to individuals and communities who took up as their profession the rearing or grazing of livestock and horses or the composition of poetry, the guidance of caravans, or livelihoods as traders or warriors. This is also recorded, in a way, by the many different myths of origin connected with Charani Sagatis, by their relationship with different communities, and by the variety of trades practised by them. Charani Sagati worship used to bind together different stock-rearing groups. The Rebari, for instance, feel connected with Charan communities through Sagati worship; Rebari priests at present serve at Sagati temples in Kacch and Saurashtra. Common origin myths render Rebari mythical “blood relations” of Kacchela Charan who rear cattle, for both groups claim to be the offspring of the two Charan men created by Parvati.⁴⁶⁷ Other Charan clans have mythical kinship relations with the pastoral-nomadic Ahir and Kathi. The first mentioned are commonly considered the most ancient of graziers, the offspring of Avar’s father or brother, which earns them the title “Mama” (Mother’s brother) of the Charan. Likewise, Charan also address the Kathi of Saurashtra with “Mama” (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 161).

The geographical, socio-economic and cultural relations that bound the medieval inhabitants of the western desert can also be read from similar occupational identities like those of the blacksmiths, goldsmiths or hunters of the western desert tracts. The Lohari blacksmiths and Sonar goldsmiths both travelled between Sindh and Rajasthan and still form largely nomadic communities in Rajasthan and, perhaps, Sindh. The hunter, tanner and leatherworker communities like the Khosas, Shikari, Chamar, Koli, Bhil, Dhed and Meghwal also used to live in the deserts of Sindh and western Rajasthan in medieval times, and were (and in Rajasthan often continue to be) itinerant people. The “bardic” occupation of different pastoral-nomadic peoples represents further links between the various desert regions. Charan, Bhat and Langha poets, as well as Mirasi, Manghaniyar and Jat “minstrels”, all one way or another served the Baluch, Sumra and Jareja-Samma Rajput of Baluchistan

⁴⁶⁶ The Tumbel Charans in Saurashtra have been described as the reciters of panegyrics and genealogies who declaim heroic poetry about deeds of valour in battle to inspire warriors. Some Tumbel were thought to be able to reveal future events (see Blochmann 1927: 251).

⁴⁶⁷ The two Charans married two nymphs, the sisters Gaveri and Averi, and their offspring are known as the Rebari and Charan. Similar stories are told about Ahir, Bharvad and Kathi graziers and define Charan cattle keepers in Kacch and Saurashtra as the “brothers” of Rebari and Bharvad (Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 160).

and Sindh, and the Rajput warriors of Gujarat and Rajasthan (cf. Burton 1851: 69f). And Deloche (1980: 257) notes a likeness between pack-oxen owners like the Banjara, Charan and Bhat groups, adding that they shared cultural traits with semi-nomadic camel keepers who travelled from the Indus to the north-western frontier. As a final point, I would like to note that there appears to have existed the same kind of likeness between the Sumra of Sindh (who are traced to Rajput “extraction” by Westphal-Hellbusch 1976: 239-240), Baluchi hill tribes and Rajput warriors of Marwar, Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Gujarat. All these communities seem to have had rather a lot in common as is suggested by their portrayal as medieval warriors and rulers, patrons of pastoral-nomadic poets and singers and worshippers of Charani Sagatis.

“Charanization”

Charan history does not document that Charan communities “took on” Rajput and/or Brahmin “caste” characteristics. And I do not feel that it is helpful to explain the assorted priestly and martial status of some Charan as the result of past marriages between Charan, Rajput and/or Brahmin men and women. It seems more probable that Charan identity, like early-medieval Rajput and Bhil identities, was ascribed according to different occupational characteristics which included dual identities like those of priestly warriors and warlike priests. This is also suggested by Palriwala (1993: 47), who notes that Charan men did not try to pass themselves off as Rajput warriors but thought themselves “as good as Rajput warriors if not ritually superior”. The same can be said of the comparison between Charan and Brahmin religious specialist. During my fieldwork, I heard tales which underlined the distinction between Charan and Brahmin status and which, when told by a Charan respondent, often documented that Charan see themselves as superior beings. This vision harks back to the martial characteristics ascribed to Charan men, rendering them more courageous than Bhat poets who claim Brahminical status and who, Charan poets say, lack qualities indispensable to poets who serve martial patrons. Claims to a status superior to the rank of Rajput follow a similar line of reasoning: Charans are as brave warriors as Rajput men but wiser and blessed with real authority since they are poets and thus wield the power of both the word and the sword. Perhaps this means that Charan poets thought of themselves as a different class of beings altogether, an “additional social category”, which is comparable to the self-image of contemporary Bhat performers who, as Snodgrass (2004: 266-67) observes, define bards and poets as yet another class of persons, a class which functioned on the same elevated level as kings and priests.⁴⁶⁸ This class of persons

⁴⁶⁸ The mutability of martial and other occupational identities in the desert kingdoms of western Rajasthan does not, I think, give reason to understand Charan-Rajput relations in terms of a “irreversible dichotomy” between worldly power and transcendent authority or a “bipolar pattern” of priestly and royal authority in terms of kingly and Brahminical roles as described by Heesterman (1985: 141, 157). See,

can, according to the Bhat's view of social hierarchy, be seen as superior to kings and priests since bards and poets wield the power of language and are thus able to decide whether kings or priests will indeed be placed at the centre of society or whether their authority will be called into question.⁴⁶⁹

The many different tales of geographical and mythical origins, myth-histories and readings of the name Charan further suggest that many different communities took on the name Charan, and that not all groups who today call themselves Charan necessarily had a common origin. Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 199-201) proposes on the basis of her study among Gujarati graziers that "[W]hat bound all Charans was the name Charan". Charan grazier communities from different backgrounds and their sub-clans not only had their names in common with each other but also with grazier communities like Jat-Baluch, Rebari, Banjara and Bharvad. Thus, I would like to propose, "Charan" can best be thought of, like the title Rajput or Bhil, as a name that included and united communities with different backgrounds, including different religious background (Hindu and Muslim Charan clans) and occupational identities: genealogists, poet-historians, visionaries, religious functionaries, cattle rearers and graziers, traders, caravan guides, messengers, warriors, bankers and money-lenders.

The different communities who ascribed themselves (or were ascribed) the title Charan came from various regions, ranging from Baluchistan, Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan to Malva and South-India, and connected these regions with each other through trade in cattle, camels and horses, and as traders and transporters of desert produce and imports from surrounding regions. The history of trade in western desert regions makes it easier to imagine how the deification of Charan women, including Deval, may have come about. Though the above resume offers no definitive answer to the question when the Charani cow herder and horse trader Deval became Shakti Devalde in Marwar, it does allow us to imagine that like other Charani Sagatis, Deval became part of Rajput history and poetry dedicated to Pabuji because of the historical and/or narrative importance accorded to her gift of a horse that enabled Pabuji to go to war in order to protect cows. Her deification is a process which started later, as could also be read from the fact that she is not (like in the seventeenth century *duha* I) portrayed as a goddess in the *chamds*. Thus, I would suggest, her deification can probably best be dated to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. Had the Dhamdhal Rathaur become a ruling lineage (that is to say: had they not been defeated by Jimda) Deval could have become a regionally recognized Sagati (like Karni), and a cult could have developed around a temple

however, Tambs-Lyche (1997: 260, 270f) who does define the relations between Rajput King, Brahmin and Charan in Kathiawar in terms of a binary opposition between "worldly" and "religious" power represented by the "king-Brahmin formula" of classical studies.

⁴⁶⁹ By putting stress on poet's ability to construct and legitimize royal authority (or undermine it) through words, Bhat performers aim to question conventional (and certainly more dominant) interpretations of the primacy of either priestly or royal authority at the centre of popular and scholarly evaluations of the relationship between kings and Brahmin priests (Snodgrass 2004: 266).

dedicated to her under the royal patronage of the Dhamdhal Rajput warriors. But as it is, Deval's cult seems to have never developed much further than her village Bhoganiya and nearby Jaisalmer.

Though one should be careful in reading historical processes and events from geographical distribution, the position of medieval temples and trade centres along caravan routes that interconnected Baluchistan, Sindh, and the former Rajput desert realms in Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Marwar do appear to add meaning to the narrative content of Sagati traditions. The geographical unity and former cultural and pastoral-nomadic resemblances between the western desert areas and its peoples allow us to see the "immigration" of pastoral-nomadic peoples into Rajasthan as part of age-old peregrinations of cattle rearers, graziers, (horse) traders, caravan guides and warriors in search of livelihood and pastures from perhaps the ninth century onwards, or even earlier. The pastoral-nomadic context of Sagati traditions also makes it easier to explain why Deval, like many other Charanis, was in the first place portrayed as a horse-trader and cattle keeper. In the Pabuji tradition, the account of the Dhamdhal-Khici dowry negotiations, especially the conflict over Pabuji's black mare Kalvi, further highlights Deval's importance as a horse trader. Likewise, the above-quoted stories about a number of Sagatis who gifted the symbolic number of 500 horses to different Rajput rulers are also illustrative of the fact that horses and, as a consequence, Charani horse traders were important to the establishment of Rajput rule. In Marwar, the value of horses for fifteenth century Rajput rulers to demarcate and patrol their realms, protecting them against other Rajput claimants has been well-documented. The importance of (horse) traders, caravan trade and the martial and religious role ascribed to Charani women helps us appraise why Charan communities were accorded such an eminent role in early and late medieval processes of Rajput kingdom formation.

For Charan and Rajput warriors, Sagati worship clearly was an effective way to express their status and ambitions. Common Rajput men were supposed to look upon Charanis as sisters (Tambs-Lyche 2004c: 64). Dominant Rajput lineages adopted Charani Devis as the guarantors and defenders of their supremacy, seemingly documenting up a process of "Charanization" since it appears that apart from (and perhaps more than) the importance attributed to the Agnikul myth and Brahman Purohits for raising Rajput warriors to the status of rulers, Charani goddesses were accorded prominent roles in medieval Rajput politics. The dependency between Rajput and Charan communities was couched in terms of religious kinship as well as through Charani Sagati worship. The Charan were not only the poet-historians of Rajput rulers, but also the religious "guardians-in-law" of the Rajput brother of their women in their roles as the fathers, uncles, brothers, husbands and sons of living goddesses.

The question asked earlier, i.e. whether legends that hint at eighth and ninth century worship of Hinglaj and Avar indicate the early beginnings of the Sagatis' political role remains difficult to answer. It is clear that Hinglaj and Avar or, more

precisely, their religious cults have done quite a bit of travelling in the western desert regions.⁴⁷⁰ Their temples were built in the Hingula mountain ranges, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Deshnok, Gujarat and Shekawati. These names may be read as evidence of the geographical reach of this particular Charani Sagati cult from the ninth-century in medieval Sindh. Perhaps Charani Sagati worship spread from Hinglaj Saran to the desert of Jaisalmer (where Avar's earliest temples are said to have been established) and from there on to Bikaner and north-eastern districts like Shekawati. Not enough is known about Sagati history, however, to support such a reading. It is, at present, also possible to imagine that the worship of Hinglaj, Avar and their sisters of later periods developed from Shekawati, and from there on spread to temples of goddess worship in the Thar Desert and further to the west by claiming Hinglaj or other Charani Sagatis as their "foremother". Or should the legends be traced to the Rann of Kacch and Sindh, the "geographical centre of Hindu cattle breeders", as Westphal-Hellbusch (1976: 239) said, and to Gujarati Charani Devi myths? Finally, one could also think of Jaisalmer and Umarkot in the heart of the desert between Sindh and Marwar as the primary centre of Charani worship.



Sagati on horse back (Hinglaj temple, Jaisalmer).

⁴⁷⁰ Possible relations between South-Indian war goddesses like Korravai and Avar's sister, the Gujarati Charani Sagati Khodiyar, remain unresolved. If these myths can be thought of as part of southern, northern and western traditions of similar narrative themes and sculptured iconography, it seems that this theme travelled from Uttar Pradesh to South India in the period between the first three centuries to the fifth century (cf. Van der Geer (forthcoming) 2008).



Contemporary portrayal of Pabuji accompanied by Dhembo, Camda, Deval and Pemal. In the background, various episodes from Pabuji's story have been depicted including the watering of Deval's cows at a well near the Kolu temple and Rupnath meditating under a tree (unknown artist).