Arik Moran

Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland

Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1   The term 'Pahari' (H. *pahāṛī, pahāḍī,* N. *parbatiya*), meaning 'highlander' (n.) or 'mountain' (adj.) is customarily assigned to Himalayan societies and refers here to the Khas ethnic majority of Himachal Pradesh and its closely related Dogra neighbours in Jammu; the term 'Rajput', a rendition of *rājaputra* (Skr., 'king's son'), is commonly attributed to the landed elite of Rajasthan (West India), but is also assumed by other North Indian groups professing a martial heritage. On Khas' early history, cultural heritage, and position in relation to other Himalayan societies see, respectively, Adhikary (1997), Lecomte-Tilouine (2009), and Pacheco and Zurick (2006, 73-79). For instructive explorations of the term 'Rajput' and its usages, see Chattopadhyaya (1994), Kolff (1990), Talbot (2009), and Teuscher (2003).
2   Ibbetson (2002[1916], 155-166, quotation from p. 155). Renowned as an ardent empiricist (Talbot 2004), Ibbetson was an esteemed civil servant in British India at the high point of empire, rendering his comments representative of the Pahari Rajputs' exalted position in the socio-political hierarchy of the day. Although highly esteemed by coeval scholars, Ibbetson's findings had little impact on British Indian policy (Fuller 2016).

polities of the hills as modern incarnations of pristine Indic Kshatriyas is omnipresent.[3]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kingship and the Himalayan borderland: concepts and sources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The structure of this book

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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