

Jayasinji Jhala

7 Village Archives: Reinventing Fifteenth Century Memories in Twenty-first Century Jhalavad

In May of 2016 a movement began in the village of Kankavati in Jhalavad. Several centuries earlier, in 1486, the royal women of ruler Raj Vaghoji's *zenana*, including his eight queens, the wives of his sons, kinsmen and fellow noblemen and their companions and maids, drowned themselves in an act of mass sacrifice (*johar*). Many, whose names are still known in the genealogical record, were connected to other leading royal and aristocratic families across the region.¹

The deaths were an unfortunate result of miscommunication during wartime. The eight queens were informed by the palace guards that their husband's royal standard was lowered; a sign that he was slain in battle. To prevent the humiliation of capture and enslavement by the Muslims soldiers of the Sultan of Gujarat, Muhammad Begada, they leapt into a well in the palace compound and drowned. In local memory, the event was called *Kuva-no-Ker*, the 'Calamity of Kuva.' In total some 750 women died that day.

At the time of the battle, Kankavati was the Jhala capital. When Raj Vagoji returned from the battle unscathed, he learned of these mass deaths. In grief, he and his sons re-entered the fray and died in pursuit of the Sultan's forces. Thereafter, the village was destroyed and abandoned. Within nineteen years, however, the kingdom was regained on 6 July 1515, as noted in the inscriptions of Jhala king Ranoji², and the village of Kankavati once again subsumed within the Jhala polity, in which it remained until the mid-twentieth century. On February 15 1948, the kingdom, now reclassified a princely state under the British Raj, merged with the newly independent republic of India. Today Kankavati is a small village in the modern district of Surendranagar in Gujarat, where the remains of the fort and the 'Well of Sorrow' still stand to remind residents of the fateful events, which occurred 530 years ago. Its residents are now eager to build a shrine in memory of these women. Possible names for the intended site, such as *Jal Johar* ('Sacrifice by Water'), *Kshatriyani Dhwaaj* ('The Flag of the Kshatriyani ladies') and *Matao ni Dhaja*, ('The Flag of the Mothers'), reflect the reverence still felt by local people for these medieval martyrs.

1 These women included 1) Vansda Solanki Mansinhji's son Bhavsinhji's daughter, Rani VijaykunvarBa; 2) Thar Parkar Sodha Jetsinhji's son Kalyansinhji's daughter Rani DevkunvarBa; 3) Dungarpur Sesodia Ajaysinhji's son Jaswantsinhji's daughter ChaturkunvarBa; 4) Mansa Chavda Lakhdhirji or Lakhaji's son Tejsinhji's daughter Rani IndrakunvarBa; 5) Merta Rathod Amarsinhji's son Jayasinhji Amarsinhji's daughter Rani RajkunvarBa; 6) Mogar Solanki Mahida Sangoji or Sangamsinhji's Rayasinhji's daughter Rani VadankunvarBa; 7) Pethapur Vaghela Rupsinhji's son Vijaysinhji's daughter, Rani DevkunvarBa; and 8) Rajpipla Gohil Surajmalji's son Raysinhji's daughter Rani KanakkunvarBa.

2 These inscriptions are mentioned in Diskalkar (1939, 25-41).



Figure 7.1: Remains of the Fort of Kuva, 1486-2016.

The sandstone arches of the gates to Kankavati citadel are visible from the road approaching the village, though the main building is ruined and reduced to its foundations. It is overgrown with scrub and thorny vegetation. A rusty sign from the Indian Archaeological Survey informs visitors that the state and national governments recognize the cultural value and historicity of the site. As is often the case with such official designations, the sign provides only minimal information: the existence of the building and its original founder. But there is no hint to the fuller story and history of what occurred in this location. On first appearance, it would seem that a long past event is being forgotten with the passage of time and its material remains eroded into oblivion. But closer scrutiny reveals that this is far from the reality. Hidden from view, in a niche of the gateway, lies an image of the goddess Saktima, her trident glittering in gold paper. Everyday a sadhu, who lives in a modest, crumbling hut nearby, lights an oil wick in a clay vessel (*diya*) before her image.

Beyond such quiet and personal remembrances, there are also more vocal, public commemorators of this event within the larger village community. The Tragada Bhavaiyas³ are professional performers of traditional theater known as *bhavai* and longtime residents of Kankavati village (J. Jhala, 2009). They received land grants in

³ The Tragada bhavai are performers from the Rudatala clan.

the late sixteenth century from the then Jhala rulers and have performed religious and historical plays during all night performances in the villages of Jhalavad, including a retelling of the events at Kankavati. The Turi and Raval communities, wandering minstrels who sing valorous tales of gods, kings and saints to all castes of Jhalavadi village society, also reside in villages near Kankavati. They, along with the Muslim Langha, Mir and Siddi musicians, re-remember the tragedy of the *Kuva-no-Ker* as do the as Bhavard, Rabari (Enthoven, 1920) and Ahir communities. It is far from a forgotten tale, but one still deeply celebrated in the popular imagination and local oral tradition.



Figure 7.2: Bhavai performance *Drums of Dharma*, 2016, Halvad.

In addition to oral literature, the villages of Jhalavad also have ancient literary traditions where this story is recorded. *Charans* and *Bhatts*, bardic peoples who served Jhala royal families and lineages, and the *Vahivancha* genealogists recorded their genealogies through such stories (Shah and Shroff, 1972, 40-70; Desai, 1991, 381-191). These bardic narratives, that is *charani sahitya*, consist of various literary forms: *khyatas* (chronicles), *vartas* and *vatas* (stories), *raso* (martial epics) and *Veli Krishan Rukman ri*, Doha-Chhand (verses) (Meghani, 1943).



Figure 7.3: Jayasinhji Jhala at the 'Well of Sorrow,' May 2016.

There are also the chroniclers of the king's court, clan and lineage. These appointed historians recorded the lived events of their patrons and recounted the deeds of their ancestors. Court painters also depicted such histories through visual form, in paintings on canvas, paper and murals on palace and fort walls, while sculptors and architects built memorial stones and cenotaphs. Beyond indigenous authorship and its representations in several genres, I also investigate the history of dominant powers, from the Delhi and Gujarat Sultanate, Mughal Empire, Maratha confederacy, British Raj and the postcolonial nation state, which have all recorded this major event and interpreted its significance through varied perspectives.

In particular, I focus on three largely neglected or forgotten indigenous texts of Jhalavad's villages to understand how peripheral regions and marginalized groups, namely the poor and the less educated, retain memory. Through reading the 'village archive,' we can better understand how village societies perceived their kings historically as well as why, after 530 years of near dormancy, this tale dramatically resurfaced in the twenty first century.

Many of the sources in this paper are translated here into English and shared in a scholarly context for the first time. For this reason, I have reprinted several long sections of particular village chronicles without too much commentary. This paper is less an

analysis and critique of particular tales, then an exhuming of lost materials to be shared with a new audience. My hope is that these sources will inspire other scholars to study village archives and reconsider their significance in the making of history and culture.

7.1 The Sensitivities of the Archive

Archives are inherently fraught repositories of knowledge making and controlled by systems of power, as formulated by the seminal theories of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.⁴ What materials make up an archive and what is excluded? Should archives be preserved over time or adapt? Who are the makers, custodians and audiences for archives and why should certain groups or individuals have authority over the construction and preservation of memory?

Indeed, not only the makers, but also the audiences for archives, including scholars, can be “extractive” rather than (objectively?) “ethnographic” as Ann Stoler warns, particularly during the colonial period, when “documents are. . . invoked piecemeal and selectively to confirm the colonial invention of traditional practices or to underscore cultural claims” (Stoler, 2002, 87-109). Nicholas Dirks argues that archives thus reveal the limits of knowledge and single disciplinary perspectives. He encourages scholars to apply multiple approaches in their research and build a more global and ethical archive, which is one of the intents of this essay (Dirks, 2015). Similarly, Jean and John Comaroff challenge us to “create new. . . archives of our own” which not only brings attention to new kinds of sources, as they rightly urge, but also different ways of interpreting and reading these materials (J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, 1992).

In particular, the village archive reveals the elasticity of tradition as reinvented and reshaped over time, as argued in Eric Hobsbawm’s and Terrence Ranger’s seminal *Invention of Tradition*.⁵ This living, mutating archive includes texts, inscriptions, monuments, visual materials, oral histories and theatrical performances. As a native of Jhalavad, born and bred, these stories of my birthplace have informed my identity over the past sixty-seven years. As a western-trained ethnographer, who analytically examines my own culture from a distance, I am aware that these tales invoke particular kinds of memory, history and genealogy while fostering agency on the part of their composers and listeners.

⁴ Refer to Derrida (1996) and Foucault (1972). Foucault generally uses this term to indicate the various institutional, physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures, which enhanced and maintained the exercise of power within the social body. Genealogy, itself, dealt with knowledge and culture, in designating how information on a given historical period and culture was collected and preserved (O’Farrell, 2005).

⁵ Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) in particular refer to Bernard Cohn’s essay “Representing authority in Victorian India” and David Cannadine’s “The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition, c. 1820-1977.’”

7.2 The Sources

There are six primary published historical sources and one unpublished doctoral dissertation, which form the textual base for this historical event. They include Mughal court chronicles⁶, British colonial records⁷ and medieval Gujarati works.⁸ In addition, there are various unpublished vernacular sources⁹ as well as contemporary video footage, which document the founding of the Halvad citadel following the tragedy at Kuva Kankavati (Rudatala and Jhala, 2015).



Figure 7.4: 8 Rajput queens sacrifice themselves at Kuva no Ker, the Well of Sorrow in 1486 to avoid the dishonor of enslavement and forced conversion by Muhamad Begada, Sultan of Gujarat.

⁶ From 1487 onwards and in the ensuing centuries-long period of Muslim dominance, it is largely the *Tawariks* or Muslim court chronicles, notably the *Mirât-i-Sikandari*, *Mirât-i-Ahmadi*, *Tabakât-i-Akbari*, and that of Abu'l Faz'l which have informed the history of the region.

⁷ These British accounts include: Watson (1876, 44-45); Watson (1878/84, 21-22); Mayne (1921).

⁸ These Gujarati records include Desai's 1967 *Saurâshtra-no Itihâsa* and 1977 *Gujarât-no Rajakîya ane Sânskrtika Itihâsa* and Acharya's 1974 Doctoral Thesis (unpublished) "Mahanibandh", Saurashtra University, Gujarat.

⁹ For unpublished vernacular materials in Gujarati, see *Kankavatidhar Jhallesvar Mahipati Ran Vaghoji na Parivarnu Patrak*; *Ran Vaghoji Akhyani*; *Kondh Bhayati Puransangrah*; *BadavaPantalji ni Khayat*; *Madavdanji ni Khayat* and others.

Most medieval and colonial historians relied upon Muslim court chronicles, the *Tawarik*; a stance which was perpetuated by postcolonial Indian scholars as well. However, these records often emphasize the perspectives of conquerors and empire builders over the local citizenry. Wars of resistance against the occupying power are ordinarily described as unlawful revolts and rebellions against established authority, and regional rulers, such as the Rajputs, perceived as uncouth mischief mongers or dangerous outlaws, rather than valiant, legitimate defenders of local liberty as often perceived in vernacular, indigenous sources.¹⁰

7.3 History as Story: Comparative Interpretations of Kuva-no-Ker

As mentioned above, there are many competing readings of the *Kuva-no-Ker* events. Let us begin with a more familiar one from the colonial period, which is informed both by the medieval Indo-Persian records and British imperial attitudes towards indigenous subjectivity and agency. This particular retelling emerges from Mayne's *History of Dhrangadhra State*, an official history of the premier Jhala lineage and kingdom, Halvad-Dhrangadhra, commissioned by the reformist, westward-leaning Maharaja Ghanshyamsinhji, and published in 1921.

Waghoji being rebellious, the Prince marched against him and was worsted in a sharp encounter with the Jhalas at Saidpur, a place about six miles north of Dhrangadhra. Accordingly Sultan Mahomed Begada himself marched with a large force upon Kuwa and laid siege to the place. Waghoji, with all his vassals, made a resistance from the fort, but failure of provisions caused him to make use of offensive rather than defensive measures. He determined to try the effect of a sally; but before taking this desperate measure he ordered the guards of the Zenana to keep their attention upon his banner, upon which a representation of the Shakti Mata was emblazoned; for he had given instructions to his Ranis to commit the rite of Sati in case his standard should be seen to fall. During the sally, the standard-bearer, we are told grew weary and set down the banner for a moment. The Zenana guards, thinking that Waghoji had fallen, informed the Ranis, who with their Wadarans, *i.e.* maidservants, threw themselves into a well and were drowned. The opening of the well can still be seen in the centre of the ruined Rajghadi at Kuwa. In the meantime, Waghoji, by a desperate effort, drove off his enemies and re-entered the fortress only to hear that his Ranis had taken their lives. In his distress, therefore, he determined to die on the field of battle. Rushing out of the fortress he and the chief of his Sardars, after destroying many of the enemy, were at length themselves laid low. Kuwa was then sacked and from that day ceased to be the Jhala capital. . . The sack of Kuwa was up to this time the greatest disaster which had ever happened to the Jhalas; so deep an impression did it make upon them that the expression, *Kuva-no-Ker*, viz the destruction of Kuwa, has become proverbial for any great calamity. (Mayne, 1921, 58-59).

¹⁰ Such conflicting descriptions are not new in recorded history, and corollaries can be made with the history of the German (Nazi) occupation of France and French resistance during World War II. Refer to Jackson (2003).



Figure 7.5: Rajodharji encounters the Valiant Hare at Halvad, 1487.

Mayne extends this account of the sacking of Kuva with a description a few pages later on the founding of the new Jhala capital at Halvad. He continues:

At the time Rajodharji reached this place during his flight from Kuva only a village marked the spot. The following is related to have been the manner of his selection of Halwad as his new capital. One day when he was hunting at this place a hare came out of the grass, and instead of fleeing faced his horse. Rajodharji, therefore, astonished at the courage of the hare, naturally so timorous an animal attributed it to some excellent quality in the soil and resolved to make his capital there. (Ibid., 67-68).

This British interpretation of the battle and fall of Kankavati emphasizes Jhala desperation, rashness and lack of preparedness through the choice of specific words and sentiments. Mayne portrays the event as a rebellion, not justified defensive action by patriotic citizens with legitimate grievances, but rather a conflict between two kings. The dominant conqueror is portrayed as the rightful authority, instrument of law and guarantor of security in the realm, while the ancient custodian and protector of the land appears a rebellious outlaw, seeking to destabilize order and disrupt peace through unjust means. Furthermore, the Rajput women are described, as is often the case in colonial accounts of *sati*, as pathetic victims without agency, who

blindly accept death over dishonor in the mass rite of *johar*.¹¹ The writer does not mention that *johar* is an act practiced only by Hindu Rajput forces when they are losing to Muslim enemies, conventionally perceived as cruel and merciless in their enslavement of captives and forced conversion to Islam. There is no such incident of mass *johar* in accounts of Rajput armies defeating fellow Rajputs or Hindus, or, indeed, Muslim forces, as they do not compel the defeated to convert to their faith.

The depiction of Halvad's founding in the later episode with the divine hare highlights ideas of myth and legend, the magical and fantastic, the odd and unusual. King Rajodharji is overawed by wonder and takes this miracle as evidence of an auspicious future for his kingdom. Based on such prophetic signs, he decides to build his capital and new fortress at Halvad. However, such an encounter might also suggest that he was a man easily governed by superstition, being an unlettered adventurer, perhaps?



Figure 7.6: Goddesses SaktiMa and Lakshmi Ganga promise prosperity, 1487.

¹¹ There is a wide literature addressing colonial perceptions of *sati*. For some seminal works, refer to Mani, 1998, and Spivak, 1988, 271–313.

7.4 Vernacular Readings: A Miraculous Encounter

Ojasviba: The pride of being a Jhala
 Allows me to contemplate my history
 Who am I
 These two words behind my name pulls me
 to witness my history
 This royal palace of Halvad
 The stories of the Jhala Kings
 Is witness of life
 Every pillar, stone and balconies
 Is a fortunate witness of history
 This history I can experience even today
 Oh! 'Well of Hope'
 Is witness of the valour of Raj Rajodharji.
 After the Tragedy at Kuva -1486
 Raj Rajodharji set out to find a new capital for his kingdom

Chorus: This land's grasses, its forests, its yellow flowers, its red flame of the forest flowers, its shiny thorns, the Koyal bird calls, the peacock trumpets, the white perfumed Champa flower spreads fragrance, the black buck antelope leaps, the lion roars. When thunder and lightening herald the furious rain to the fiery land, all rejoice in dance and song.

Ojasviba: A brave Hare stood before his horse
 Hare confronted the horse
 Seeing the bravery of the hare, Rajodharji understood:
 'This earth has the power to raise heroes'.
 King: What's this?!
 Noble: War drums sound. In front is this hare!

Voice from off stage: "King!
 Understand this is a fiery furious land,
 This Hare is a Celestial Being, O King.
 An Avatar Force."

King: Did you hear?

Noble: Sir, The monkey says, this is a Celestial Being.

Priest: This earth, this ground is valorous. Correct.

Noble: Cradle of Heroes. Yes.

King: Therefore, my new Capitol.
I will establish here.

Noble: Of course!
Land of heroes!

King: Minister, I will establish my Capitol here!

Minister: As you wish, O King
All, Hail SaktiMa.

Ojasviba: With his spear point he brought forth water.
And he established himself.

King: We have come upon this hare, but he does not run.

Noble: Heroic quality of the soil.

King: At this place I will place my royal seat.
Though I have lost, from here I will regain my power.

Noble: Yes of course you will.

King: Here I will set my foundations

Chorus: Hail Saktima.
Goddess SaktiMa: 'O, King!
I, Sakti have appeared today and tell you
You have come to this spot.
It is the place for heroes
The sacred heart of Jhalavad,
Therefore,
Set up your beautiful city
For Ganga water and prosperity
I leave my sister Ganga – Lakshmi, here with you

All performers: Hail Saktima!

Ganga: Lakshmi, O King.
Build your fine city.
Never will there be drought
In your kingdom, there will never be lack of water.

SaktiMa: O King, whenever you request us, we will come to your aid.

All performers: Hail to SaktiMa.' (Rudatala and Jhala, 2015).

In this 2015 video version of the Halvad founding, the narrator Ojasviba Jhala, a local schoolteacher, emphasizes the role of divine intervention in aiding the valiant king to regain the necessary strength, courage and endurance to reconquer his lost lands and kingdom. In this passage, she expresses awe and pride as a Jhala descendent, standing at the *Svasti Kuva*, 'Well of Hope,' in Halvad citadel, where her ancestor king encountered the mythic hare some 530 years earlier. According to legend, he pierced the earth with his sword and a spring bubbled forth. Its sweet waters form the 'Well of Hope' today.

Bhavai actors, who reside in the village of Kuva, reenact this ancient and familiar story. In their play version, the king is tutored by the hare, who far from being ordinary, has divine attributes, neither expressing fear, confusion or surprise by the sudden arrival of the unknown horseman. Rather, the hare emanates a supreme calm, reflective of its divinity, as *avatar* of a god come to aid the brave warrior in bringing peace and prosperity to the ravaged land of Jhalavad. To reinforce this point, two goddesses appear in the play at the very moment that the hero decides to make Halvad his capital and the home of his family, lineage and clan. These goddesses include the clan mother Saktima and Ganga, goddess of the river.

Saktima is the mother deity or *kuldevi/kulmata* of the Jhalas, who formed Jhalavad with her Shiva incarnate husband Harpaldev in 1093. Later in her marriage, she rescued her three infant sons from a maddened royal elephant, and in the process created the first Jhalas. Her appearance at this time of personal trial assures the beleaguered king that he is not alone during his darkest hour. In addition, she brings her sister goddess, Ganga Laxmi. Ganga is the divine image of water, a resource particularly sacred in the desert regions of Jhalavad, and symbolizes success and longevity for the future inhabitants of this newly consecrated ground.

For Amrit Kalu, the leader of the *Bhavai* troupe, the Halvad founding tale is not a distant narrative of a far removed land at the other end of the Indian subcontinent. Rather, it is a tale with resonate and intimate power, as his players live in the very same village and are familiar with the principal locations, including the 'Well of Sorrow' and the 'Well Auspicious' of the narrative. Nonetheless, the Halvad citadel for all its geographical proximity is largely inaccessible, being a private, royal property, which only the family of the Jhallesvar and newly married Jhala couples visit to receive blessing from the gods and ancestors, who reside in its shrines.¹² Visiting it for the purposes of a performance is a rare and celebrated occasion.

In summary, this encounter at the 'Well of Hope' is one between a local king, the native son of the soil, and a divine entity who legitimates and consecrates his status as rightful sovereign and resident. He is no longer a lost wanderer in an alien land. Through his *kuldevi* Saktima and the very living forces of grass, water and air

¹² Though, still a largely private property, it is visited for the purposes of pilgrimage and performance, unlike the abandoned ruin of Kankavati Kuva.

manifest in the valiant hare, Rajodharji becomes one with the land. Unlike the British accounts, where the forces of man and nature are aligned against him, this vernacular narrative emphasizes how he is aided and empowered to rebuild and recover a new Jhalavad.

7.5 Village Voices: Local Mythologies

In addition to these older textual and oral records on *Kuva-no-ker*, perhaps the least studied or understood interpretations are those from local village storytellers, poets and songsters. The following account emerges from the repositories of Khondh village.¹³ This lengthy excerpt is a retelling of Halvad's founding and is taken from a conglomeration of these local records.

'As prince his name was Rayoji but after becoming king he is known as Rajodharji. In Halvad, at his formal investiture he was acclaimed as Ran Rajdhar. In his grandson Raj Mansinhji's time, a stone inscription will carry the name of Ran Rajdhra. After founding Halvad, he conquered the lost lands of Jhalavad and those of the neighboring subbah of Jambu Siani. During this time he is known as Rajudharak and, in history, as Rajodhar.'

'Rajodharji was born in 1460. He was 27 years old at the time of the battle of Kuva-no-Ker in 1486. He was born in the year his grandfather Raj Bhimdevji became king. He was a five-year old toddler when his beautiful and favorite aunt PhaiBa Somde was married in a great ceremony to the Great Ra Mandalik of Sorath, who came to marry her with a grand entourage from Junagadh. Many famous kings and personalities were present, including the famous poet Narsi Mehta who took Rajodharji's father Vahoji as pupil and gave him instruction.

'At this time there was no ozhal or purdah (female seclusion) in Kankavati and he, his brothers and sisters rode in the countryside, learned to hunt and shoot and visited their mothers' homes and famous temples of the region.

'Like his father, Raj Vaghoji, Rajodharji was tall and strong. A brave warrior, he participated in his father's campaigns against the rapacious Sultan of Gujarat's men.'

Battles of Kankavati

There were three battles associated with the fall of Kuva Kankavati. In the first, the Sanjay Battle, which occurred near the village of Saidpur, the Sultan's son and heir,

¹³ These materials include excerpts of Jhallesvara Raj Rajdharji's life from *Kondh Bhayati Puransangrah*, *Shiva Darshan Katha*, *Vahivancha Barot Jhallmakhwan Adikul Vanshagan Vahi*, *Kankavatidhar Jhallesvar Mahipati Ran Vaghoji na Parivarnu Patrak*, *Ran Vaghoji Akhyan*, *Badava Pantalji ni Khayat*, and *Madavdanji ni Khayat*. These are local texts written in Gujarati.

Khalil Khan, was captured and released. Raj Vaghoji's sons, his heir Nayoji and Ramsinhji, were killed while fighting on the banks of the Falku river at Dhrangadhra. Mahipaldevji and Ajoji, two other sons were killed shortly after in the second battle of Chatra outside the fort of Kuva. Rajodharji, who later became the Jhallesvar, and his brother Lakhoji were wounded during this battle and carried from the field.

In the first two battles, the Jhalas are victorious. However, on their return to the Kankavati citadel after the second skirmish, they discover an egregious miscommunication has occurred. The rulers' wives, believing their lord king has died in battle, took their own lives by leaping into a well and drowning to escape the ignominy of capture, rape and enslavement by the Muslim army. The Khondh village records say some 750 women in the fort killed themselves on that day. Learning of this disaster, a crazed Raj Vaghoji returns to the battle. In this third attack, while chasing the retreating army of the Sultan, he is mortally wounded and his sons Sangoji and Ramsinhji killed beside him.

The surviving Jhala warriors abandon the fort and melt into the jungle scrub after cremating their dead. When the Muslim forces finally arrive they find an abandoned fort and a greatly reduced town population. They destroy the fort and set up a command post at Kuva Kankavati. The Kondh archive describes these events in the following passages.

Kankavati in the Sultan's control

'The next day the Sultan's army arrived. The leading Patels said to the Commander, "There is no one left here. You can see the funeral pyres." The Sultan responded: "Capture the princes and bring them before me. I want to make them Mussalmans." The Commander established a military camp and inspected every village, but the villagers protected their own. They said: "[The princes] have become invisible through the forces of Barbara and cannot be found." In anger, the Commander destroyed the Kankavati fort and the town hall, decreeing that "No Jhala will ever be able to establish their power again!" But without a fort, he could not retain power in Kankavati. A short time later Jhalavad was re-established.'

Vaghoji on his death bed

'On his deathbed, Vaghoji called for both his wounded sons, Rajodharji and Lakhoji. He said to Rajodharji, "Son, now Jhalavad is yours, and will remain yours. But how can you stay here? The Sultan will return for revenge. Take the people and move to another brave region." He then said with quiet resignation, "I did my dharma." Afterwards Vaghoji mediated on Damodarrai [Krishna], and during the night, while listening to the verses of the Gita, went to Gouluk – died.'

Rajodharji ascends the gadi (the throne)

‘In the morning they removed Rajodharji’s bandages and sprinkled him with sacred *Ganga jal* (Ganga water). Then they applied the *ujjal tilak* on his forehead. (According to the custom of the Jhallesvaras, the king is anointed is by marking the forehead with the thumb dipped in red and then the same done with the remaining fingers). The new king, with the elders, went to the battleground and acknowledged the earth. Then Lakhoji laid their father and their mothers on their pyres with all the slain and lit the flames on the riverbank. The pyres burnt all night.’

Rajodharji’s Oath

‘Rajodharji then asked the elders, “Now what?” They all replied, “We should not stay here. The Sultan will return for revenge, for he who has not tasted defeat, is fearless. Go to the far bank of the Macchu, where he will not follow you. There your paternal uncle will keep you as you convalesce.” Rajodharji replied: “But what after that?” At that moment, no one spoke. So he repeated, “What after that?” The elders looked at each other and said, “Son, don’t worry about that now. Time will give you strength. We won, but whom did we defeat? All is by the Gods’ will, rising or falling in fortune. What is gone is gone.”

‘Rayoji sat up from his bed, where he lay ill, and asked for *Ganga jal*. “We have neither lost nor won over another,” he told the elders. “*Dharma* and the future lies in our hands. It is in your hands and in mine. I take a vow that I will regain sovereignty over this land. Grandfather Harpal bears witness (from heaven) and Grandfather Jetaji (Rajodharji’s ancestor four generations prior).” The elders all rose and applauded the king: “Let it be so! Long live the King! Long live the king! May Barbaro come to your aid (from heaven), and make you victorious. Get well and undertake this task soon.” All the nobles spoke such words.’

Rajodharji’s speech

‘That evening Rajodharji sent for his generals and spoke to them calmly, “Warriors, what has happened is in the past. The ‘ancestors’ presence’ is real. The Sultan will return with a large army. We must not fight on a wide *maidan* (open space) for we cannot engage such a large force. So we will fight through small skirmishes, tirelessly. We shall not rest nor give them rest. We will badger and harass them from this beloved land and drive them out. Now, take the wounded to their homes. Let the boys and girls return with their maidservants to their mothers’ home and the zenana ladies to their fathers’ homes. Tomorrow we will scatter. Make haste and prepare all hidden sanctuaries. Grass, scrubland and dense forest are ours. Wherever you see the enemy, cut him down and drive him out.”

Then he called the wealthy (merchants) and proclaimed, “We do not wish to remain here any longer, but will return and reestablish our rule. Without us, your safety cannot be protected, so leave with us and find safety on the bank of the Macchusuri River.” Then he turned to the Patels (village headmen), *pasayatas* (servants) and the general populace: “Do not despair and cease crying.” The leading Patels responded, “Bap (father) without you, what will happen to us?” Rajodharji replied, “No one will reach you. Wait patiently on your land. Should the Sultan’s men come, obey their orders. No trouble will follow. If they harass you excessively, come to us. We will give you land.’

Kankavati, the capital, ceases to be

‘As morning dawns, many loaded their bullock carts and moved away. The rich listened to the king’s decree and traveled to the west bank of the Macchusuri River, seeking the protection of Jhala land. Rajodharji embraced all his clansmen, sons and brethren and sent them onwards to their respective villages. Then he, with his brothers, nobles and bodyguards rode into the forestlands. Kankavati grew quiet and silent then.’¹⁴

‘Rajodharji’s younger brothers were still children. His officers arranged for each boy to be sent to their individual mothers’ home for caretaking. But where could Rajodharji hide? He was well known and like his father four hands tall and very strong. Rajodharji had been grievously wounded in the second battle. Now he could not go to the east or the south. In the west, Macchu Kantha, Thaleca, Bhimoria and Babariya lands around Chotila were not under Jhala suzerainty. Rajodharji’s paternal uncle, the lord of Ajmera, and son of Sodhaji had died in the battles of Kankavati. His son and successor was in Ajmera. So Rajodharji was taken in covered carriage, *a sigram*, to Ajmera by his nobles.

When Rajodharji regained consciousness, he asked, “Where do we go now?” Having heard the reply he said, “Before taking shelter, we must perform the last *shraddh* rites for my *satimatas*, my dead mothers as is only proper. Let us go to Siddhpur. Then we can decide what must be done next.” At this time, Rajodharji had only six personal attendants. They dressed in the clothes of merchants and took the road for Patadi.

¹⁴ In Megharpar village on the far bank of the Macchusuri river, Rajodharji’s uncle had established a power hold. So we can understand that at this time the extent of Jhalavad was far to the west.

From village to village he saw men had shaven their heads in respect for the late King Vaghoji's death.¹⁵ (The ritual is to shave a man in mourning's head ten days after the death of his father). Seeing the women crying, the prince's heart grew heavy with grief. All were speaking of the 'Tragedy of the Well Kuva' as they passed through Mandal and Bahucharaji to Modhera. Throughout, Rajodharji felt the pain of his wounds most intensely. In Modhera, the *ved* doctors told him he must rest. So to treat his wounds, he stayed.

Here he learned how the Sultan's men had destroyed Kankavati, looted Ajmera, and were searching for Vaghoji's young sons and brothers from village to village, with drums sounded to spread this news.

In Modhera there was a very rich merchant by the name of Kuber Bhandari, an associate of Rajodharji's grandfather Ran Bhimdevji. When he heard of the tragedy at Kuva, his heart filled with immense sorrow. His grief was one of many such expressions of affection and loyalty for our kings in history. Seeing prince Rajodharji, his eyes flowed with tears. He invited Rajodharji to stay as his guest in his haveli mansion, and Kuberji employed many reputed *ved* doctors to treat the princes' wounds. The leaders of Modhera soon learned that Raj Vaghoji's heir was in town and arrived in secret to meet him and offer allegiance.

But Kuberji worried for his royal guest. He cautioned Rajodharji, "Prabhu, this secret will come out." Rajodharji agreed that the Sultan would soon send his soldiers and threaten the people. The merchant replied, "You must proceed with the *shradh* rites at Siddhpur. By the gods' blessing you are alive, and your body has endured what is unspeakable. Our conversations are not yet over, so please return later." The king and his companions this time donned the clothes of Brahmins and made for Siddhpur.

The earliest ancestor of the Jhalas, divine Harpaldev, had built the Markandeya ashram on the banks of the Saraswati river in Siddhpur. There, its priest, Purshotam Dasji, performed the last rites (the *Gor*) for Rajodharji. Choosing an auspicious time with appropriate astrological signs in place, he guided Rajodharji in the *shraddh* rites for his *sati* mothers. Then peace descended on the mind and heart of the prince. Afterwards, village elders and learned wise men came every evening to visit Rajodharji, and hear what happened at Kankavati.'

15 A Hindu man traditionally shaves his head in mourning 10 days after the death of his father.

The following passage emerges from the *Badava Pantalji ni Khayat*.¹⁶

‘Sitting on the banks of the Sarasvati river, Rajodharji said to himself, “Except for my name and fame, nothing else remains. How will I lead the rest of my life? What is my *dharma*?” On Shivratri, Rajodharji bathed in the river. In its flowing waters, he discovered a beautiful *shivling* stone.¹⁷ Carrying it with both hands, he brought it to the riverbank. Many Brahmans gathered around him astonished by the *shivling*. After performing the proper rituals, he worshipped and sanctified the image and placed it in his puja. He then invoked God Mahadevji (another name for Shiva).

Next day, after bathing he worshipped the *shivling* once again. Sitting in *padmasana*, a crossed legged posture, he entered into deep meditation. In that state, Shiva appeared before him in the form of his great ancestor, the divine Harpaldev. That divine person said:

“You are a protector and shelter for the homeless. When anyone comes for protection, you as a Rajput cannot abandon them.”

Rajodharji replied: “True, but what do I have? I have a name and perhaps fame. I have confidence. But I have nothing else. I have no parents, family, court, land, wealth, or army. I am alone.”

At that moment the bells and drums of the *aarti* sounded. Rajodharji opened his eyes and saw in front of him the bold *Trishul dand*, a trident staff. He raised the trident staff to his head, and carried it to his puja.’

The next excerpt is taken from *Madavdanji ni Khayat*.¹⁸

‘Mahadev, pleased by Rajodharji’s devotion, replied, “Go forth and rule.” Rajodharji then prepared to return to his homeland, not discriminating between the high and low among his people. Young people of many castes and communities came to him and he treated all alike. They said, “We will return with you.” But Sarangji (another name for Rajodharji) replied, “No.” Believing there

¹⁶ This is an account written by Charan Badava Pantalji that is now in the Jhallesvar archive.

¹⁷ A *shivling* stone or *shivalingam* is a water shaped stone that is taken from rivers and placed in Shiva temples and private places of worship. It represents the Hindu god Shiva and stands in place of a sculpture of the god.

¹⁸ This is an account by Charan Madavdanji that is now in the Jhallesvar archive.

was no need to hurry, Rajodharji decided he would travel slowly by night to reach his homeland.

'He passed two or three days in Modhera. There, the Siddhpur youth also began gathering to see him and Rajodharji was very pleased. They said quietly, "Sarangji, we want to join the army of the king." Sarangji replied: "This is not your work. In matters of fighting, it is the work of Kshastriyas." They replied, "We are Kshatriyas, do not stop us." Then Sarangji explained, "You must seek and receive your parents' permission. Without their permission, we cannot take you with us." Many however had already been granted their parents' consent, and were allowed to accompany the king until the temple of Bahucharaji in Bahucharaji town. Rajodharji advised the very young, "When you are older, come."

'Afterwards, the youth of Modhera also gathered around him. Sarandevji told them the same thing: "If you have your parents' permission, come to Bahucharaji temple. But don't come as a large group, come in small groups separately."

'At the time of his departure from Modhera, the loyal and loving Kuber Bhandari came before Rajodharji. "Prabhu Lord," he said, "Now you are trapped by my 'net of devotion.' So if you do not agree with me, I will not let you go."

'Rajodharji, was moved, and replied: "You have done much for us all, so speak. I will accept whatever you say." Then the Seth gave a fine mukat crown and, folding his hands together, made the following request: "Whatever I have, I wish to offer to you." Rajodharji accepted the mukat crown.'

Within a year, the new capital of Halvad was established, only thirty miles away from Kuva Kankavati. In the remaining thirteen years of his reign, Jhallesvara Rajodharji, with the aid of his wife Asha De, his brothers, clansmen and the village folk recovered most of the lost territories of his kingdom through skirmishes and raids on the Sultan's forces.

7.6 Jhalavad's Guerilla War (Nanu Khet Yudhha)

'In one year, he so ravaged the forces of the Sultan, from his lands to Sianni, that only the town of Kankavati remained in the Sultan's control. His power wobbled. Jhala warriors attacked wherever they could. In Rajodharji's own words, this period was named the *Nanu Khet Yudhha* or the Guerilla War. During this conflict, his four brothers fought beside him as his equals, along with Muli's brave and strong Parmar Thakor Lakdhirji and Than's Babariya warriors. The king gave fiefs of seven villages each to his brothers.

‘His Brother Lakhoji accompanied Manguji’s descendant Khetaji’s son Sangaji to Sianni and restored it to him. In that district, near the town of Dandhoka, lies the village of Rangpur, which has remained in the hands of Lakhaji’s descendants, the jagirdars of the village Kidi, for several generations. This reflects the power and extent of the kingdom of Rajodharji.’

‘In the oral tradition there is a *tuchka* or short saying that “the great sultan cast a net in Jhalavad and was himself caught in its net.” In the end, the Sultan was forced to concede a truce with Rajodharji. He admitted to Rajodharji, “What happened in Kuva was done by me. Since you attacked us, we came, but otherwise what is there (that I could desire) in your country? All of Gujarat is mine. So take the road to peace. Sign a truce, and acknowledge me as Sultan. Otherwise I will destroy you.” So then, on Lakhdirji’s (Parmar Thakor of Muli’s) advice, Rajodharji made peace.’

This long narrative is interwoven with accounts from various sources and authors in the Kondh village archive. From the early sixteenth century onwards, Kondh was an important village where several Jhala notables maintained their estates, and its leadership would play an important role in the kingdom’s administration up until the mid-twentieth century in 1948.

7.7 Interpretations of the Village Archive

This village archive reads very differently from the British accounts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In those narratives, Rajodharji is depicted as a solitary figure, stateless, landless and friendless, who must fend for himself and regain his kingdom through his wits and muscle alone. There are no kinsmen, loyal subjects, advisors, allies or gods who assist him in winning back his kingdom as collaborators. In the video depiction of the tale, Rajodharji is shown receiving the support and blessing of the divine, including ancestor deities and the gods of the elements – earth, air, wind and water.

In the Kondh records, we experience an entirely different world in which the king is embedded in a dense tapestry of social relationships. This is a world saturated by networks, political, economic and sacred. We see the king given sanctuary and monies by the merchant, the Seth, healed by the village *veds* (traditional doctors), cleansed and guided by the priest, *purohit*, engaged in conversation and intellectual stimulation by the village elders and wise men, and showered with devotion and loyalty by the village youth, who follow him like an exiled Rama to the village’s outer boundaries. In the moments of deepest loss, when he is bereft of kingdom, parents and possessions, the king remains beholden to many who expect him to act and

sacrifice on their behalf, and in exchange assist him in remaking his kingdom. As the gods remind him, that is his *dharma*, his purpose, regardless of his many losses.

Through such acts, the tale emphasizes that the state is not his kingdom alone, but a land over whom the gods preside, where all caste communities have place, voice and agency. It is this land of interdependent unity which the poets want their king to acknowledge, consecrate and protect, not only in the historical past, but also in the contemporary present, in preserving these values of traditional social harmony. Priests, merchants, doctors, generals, soldiers, farmers, nobles and the idealistic young people all play specific roles essential in the recovery of lost land and identity.

The village archive also illuminates a personality who is an emotional being with particular character traits. Through these descriptions, Raj Rajodharji emerges as a private individual rather than representative symbol of kingship. In the process, such accounts reveal the everyday relationships between a Hindu Rajput Jhala king and his people during times of crisis. While the hierarchical relationship between sovereign and subjects are maintained, nonetheless, the most modest lives are celebrated and given attention by the ruler. It is through such relationships that the Jhala dynasty was able to survive the oppression of various imperial overlords, from the Rajput Solankis of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, the Muslim regnums of the Delhi and Gujarat sultanates and the Mughal Empire until the mid-eighteenth century, the Marathas in the eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, and finally the British until Independence in 1947. These passages suggest both veneration and familiarity between the common people and monarch. The king is a blessed person of divine attributes, but also accessible as concerned mother-father ('Ma-Bap') of his people and indeed all life in Jhalavad. From desert to jungle, farm to market, temple to fortress, all locations make up the complex world of Jhalavad. The king travels comfortably through these varying landscapes. He is not an aloof and distant sovereign, encased in the high towers of power, insulated and removed from his people by circles of administrators, advisors, priests, staff or bodyguards. Rather, these records suggest a certain porosity of access between the king and ordinary people. He can know their hardships and they can see his constraints as he devotes his energies to the dual tasks of working for their betterment as well as protecting them from invaders, drought, disease and the aggressive proselytism of competing religions. All these forces impinge upon the Jhala king and the task of governance.

These passages by three kinds of authors, British historians, the Bhavai theater players and the village archive of Kondh, enable us to participate in the lives of Jhallesvars Raj Vaghoji and his son Raj Rajodharji through multiple perspectives over time. The sentiments expressed in the village archives of Kondh, in particular, suggest a counter narrative to a historiography from the 'top,' composed by social elites. Rather they reveal a strong village agency, what we might call a 'history from below,' in populist support of the king which remains to this day.

Furthermore, the descendants of these village communities continue to preserve these narratives, suggesting that village voices are as relevant today as in

the past. In 2016, it is largely a village driven agenda that has paved the way for the revitalization and revival of the Kankavati fort ruin and its 'Well of Sorrow' as well as the resurrection of a memorial to goddess Saktima and the *satimatas* of Kuva. Why do these communities wish to remember this period when monarchy is long gone? Today there are no kings ruling in Jhalavad nor a Jhala kingdom. India is a democracy. For two centuries, since 1805, no army has marched to war in Jhalavad, which has seen relative peace. Rather, Jhalavad enjoys unprecedented prosperity, greater than at any period in its 900 years. The desert land now has water, that maker of life and good fortune, since the opening of the Narbada canal by the Gujarat state government. Water and modern technology is transforming badlands and scrub into agricultural land, up to the very lip of the floating salt desert in the Rann of Kutch. In this time of stability, wealth and republican politics, what purpose does it serve the village society of Kankavati and the Jhala Rajput inhabited villages and towns of Jhalavad to revitalize the desolate and abandoned site of a long ruined castle and its tragic well?

During the month of May 2016, I attended six meetings during which this nascent project was discussed. At the village of Dhama, where the goddess Saktima departed into the earth after revealing her divine nature in 1105, thousands of Jhala men and women as well as other Jhalavadis, who are devotees of the goddess, gathered and proposed that Kankavati should be remembered not only for its sacredness to Jhala Rajput women, but for all Rajput women generally. It was proposed that a temple for Saktima should be built and the 'Well of Sorrow' beautified through erecting a protective, outer circular wall in whose niches stone sculptures of the dead queens or their hands could be displayed. At the base of the sculptures, a stone water trough would be built for cattle and other animals to drink. In addition, they argued for the construction of a tall tower similar to those used for cellular phone signals to fly a 52 yard long banner. The flag would be emblazoned with the lion vehicle of the goddess Saktima, the same symbol imprinted on Raj Vaghoji's standard on that fateful day in 1486.

The topic of *Kuva-no-ker* was again informally discussed at the mourning ceremony of a member of the royal family of Wadhvan, one of the seven Jhala kingdoms that collectively compose Jhalavad, and by a group of young people during the opening of a new cinema hall in the district capital of Surendranagar. Around the same time, *Bhavaiya* actors from Kankavati village performed at the Halvad citadel and reiterated the village's interest in building a temple to SaktiMa. At a separate meeting, also at the Halvad citadel, senior Rajput women who held elected political office in municipalities and village councils discussed the need for women's participation in politics and their potential as fundraisers. Finally at Kankavati itself, the village headman, a Bharvard pastoralist, called a meeting in which several bards, caste leaders and Jhala leaders from neighboring villages conferred on how best to gain permission for the historic site from various government authorities and a government grant as Gujarat state promotes religious tourism.

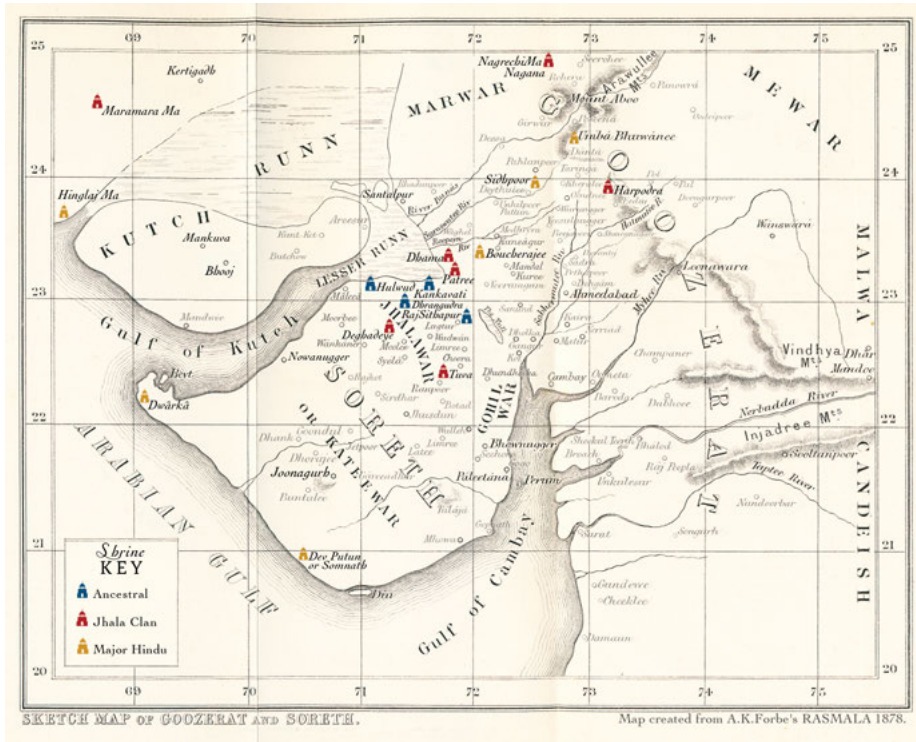


Figure 7.7: Jhala Pilgrimage Shrine towns.

This energy from the village periphery to the towns and cities of Jhalavad reflects a new kind of optimism, fostered by new avenues towards wealth growth and a positive vision for the future. It builds upon resurgent activity by Jhallesvara Maharaja Meghrajji III who during the late 1960s began to unite the populations of the seven distinct Jhala kingdoms into a single Jhalavad. To do so, he encouraged the forming of an annual pilgrimage to the four sacred shrines of Patadi, Tuva, Deghadiya and Patadi where the divine progenitors, Saktima and Harpal Dev, travelled during the course of their night journey which birthed Jhalavad in 1093 (J. Jhala, 1991, Chapter I, Part I, pp. 19-22). These shrines are located in different parts of Jhalavad and were not exclusive to any single former Jhala kingdom. Since the 1960s, with the growing participation of all Jhala families and other Jhalavadis, three of the four shrines have new temples, and presently the fourth is being constructed.

Having identified the sacred shrines of the divine ancestors, this new project at Kuva Kankavati is one example of the growing energy of the Jhalavadi peoples, who wish to celebrate the woman as goddess and sacrificing mother. It is also an attempt to reclaim their past as they assert themselves in a new political system within modern, democratic India.



Figure 7.8: Power of Devotion. Maharani Brijrajkunvarba invites the divine couple Ishanaavatar Harpaldev and SaktiMa to Patadi at the ground breaking ceremony at Patadi, February 27 2014.



Figure 7.9: Rajputani Mother as nurturing Tigress.

In this manner, this essay is a recording of the events of spring 2016, and presents these stories in detail so readers can encounter this little known archive for the first time and better understand it. Perhaps, more importantly, it signals the existence of a vast hoard of such similar village records all across India, which invite new perspectives and interpretations in the larger anthropology of exploration and the inquiry of discovery.

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