

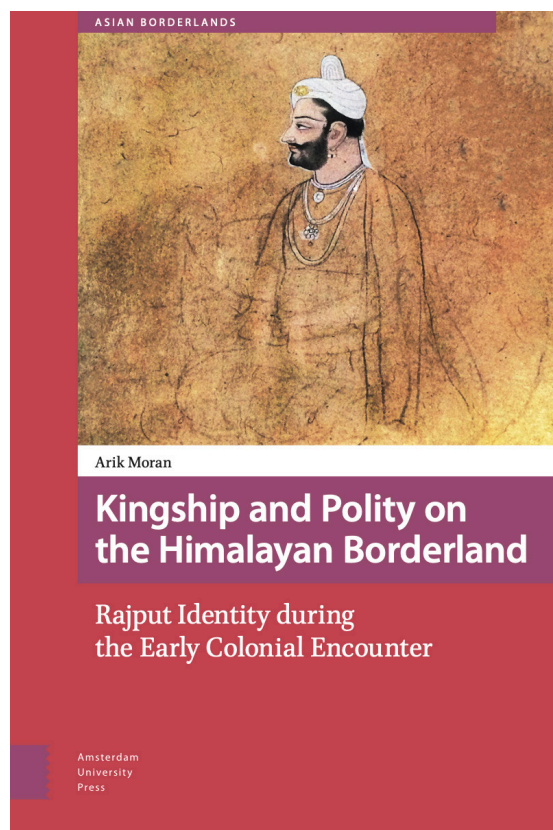
Book Review

Review of *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland: Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter* by Arik Moran

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In his new book, historian Arik Moran takes the reader to the dynamic political world of kings and queens in the Himachal region of the Indian Himalayas. The political events studied in this book are set during the early colonial period (1790s-1840s), when the territorial frontiers of the British East India Company (EIC) first expanded into the Western Himalayas. Resonating with recent writings on adaptation strategies adopted by communities along Himalayan frontiers, this book outlines how ideas of kingship and sovereignty were transformed and adapted as political elites interacted with the new political regime of the EIC.

Connected both by kinship ties and ancient rivalries, the three hill kingdoms discussed in the book—Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur—were situated at the shifting geo-political frontiers of large empires: the Sikh, the Gorkha, and the EIC. Against this backdrop, the book sheds light on the consolidation of a West Himalayan Rajput ethos which continues to animate contemporary socio-political realities in the hill state of Himachal Pradesh. *What were the historical processes and events that led to the formulation of a Pahari Rajput identity?* This question is addressed through the book's five chapters in which we traverse a landscape shaped by several regional and imperial battles. Moran convincingly shows that interactions of Pahari Rajput elites with the new political regime of the EIC produced important reconfigurations in their identity.

The rich historical analysis offered by the author is best exhibited in the first chapter, which offers a critical study of a vernacular Pahari oral narrative of the martial-historic genre, the *Jhera* of Chinjhiar. The *Jhera* recounts events during the battle of Chinjhiar (1795) fought between traditional rivals—Kangra and Bilaspur—who claimed descent from the Chandella Rajputs. Through a close reading of the *Jhera*'s language and the context of its production, Moran is able to highlight the inventiveness of later 20th century accounts in which Pahari Rajputs are recast as “modern versions of the Kshatriya sovereigns of

antiquity” (p. 54). The author also carefully notes significant omissions in the *Jhera*. For instance, the oral narrative subordinates the power and agency of Bilaspur's regent queen, Nagardevi Katochi, who was at the helm of political affairs, to that of her son, the young prince Maha Chand, who is refashioned as a powerful Rajput king.

An extended discussion on gender and kingship follows in chapters 3 and 5. Based on the premise that it was the family rather than the person of the male king who was the locus of political power, Moran demonstrates that the marginality assigned to royal hill women (Pahari Rajputnis) was more prescriptive than real. In fact, regent and widowed queens played a vital role in political and military matters of the state. His study of their correspondence with EIC officials reveals that Rajputnis such as Bilaspur's Nagardevi Katochi and Simaur's Guleri Rani were far from being politically insignificant. The centrality of Rajput women to politics is remarkably demonstrated in the last chapter that reconstructs an episode involving Guleri Rani's female descendants, the two widowed Ranis of Bilaspur, who orchestrated an armed rebellion to establish their short-lived reign in Bilaspur. Yet, in regional accounts as well as colonial narratives, this phenomenal moment is reduced to an aberrative episode in history.

The dominant narrative of Pahari Rajput kingship was constructed largely around the figure of Kangra's Sansar Chand Katoch II alias Pahari Padshah, the “Mountain Emperor,” whose portrait adorns the book's cover page. With Kangra as the main geographical focus, chapter 2 discusses how the Pahari Rajput ideal sought to distinguish itself from the Gorkhas who held sway over the region for a brief period. Dominant imperial British and Kangra-centric regional histories converged in the vilification of the Gorkha regime but Moran's study shows that responses to Gorkha rule were, in fact, differentiated. Faced with their own Raja's failure in governance, Sirmauri subjects showed a preference for Gorkha rulers.

Events in belligerent Bilaspur are analyzed in chapter 4 in the context of new political shifts following the Treaty of Amritsar (1809) that was signed between the Sikhs and the EIC. The Treaty recognized the Sutlej River as the imperial boundary demarcating Sikh territories north of the river from EIC territories to its south. As Bilaspuri kings were uniquely affected by the Treaty – their territories lay both north and south of the river – they handled this precarious position by drawing on highly adaptive strategies. To retain their power in a politically unstable climate, they not only mobilized warrior groups of the precolonial Hindustani military market, such as Chandela warrior-peasants and Afghan Rohilla cavalymen, but also quickly exploited new advantages arising from their proximity to rising commercial centers such as Ambala and Patiala.

The range of archival sources consulted by Arik Moran is vast and diverse, including EIC correspondence, official publications, regional court narratives, European travel accounts, vernacular oral narratives, and even a contemporary Hindi historical novel. This diversity enables the author to take a nuanced approach to kingship in the Western Himalayas. For example, he observes that chroniclers of the Pahari Padshah deployed coeval and overlapping models

of sovereignty borrowing from Indo-Persian, north Indian Rajput, and local Himalayan contexts.

Additionally, the study is illustrated with visual sources such as maps, photographs, and

Pahari paintings associated with the three regional kingdoms of Bilaspur, Kangra, and Sirmaur. The book has a particular appeal for scholars of Himalayan regions, yet its accessibility for lay readers may be limited through its rich scholarly description of kingship and gender. Given that much academic focus on Rajputs and the process

of Rajputization has been on Western India and the Indo-Gangetic plains, the book offers new insights from the Himalayan context for historians of medieval and early modern South Asia.

Moran skillfully illustrates the vast potential of regional histories in the Himalayas but the reason for choosing the three hill kingdoms of Kangra, Sirmaur, and Bilaspur would deserve a more focused discussion so as to guide the reader through the dramatic trajectory of courtly and kinship politics in these kingdoms. Pahari Rajputs, as the author notes, belong to the Khas ethnic group which currently comprises one-third of the population in Himachal Pradesh. The primary narrative in the book revolves around politically dominant royal elites, though Moran shows that Chandella peasant-warriors and non-Rajput groups, such as Brahmins, ascetics, monastic advisors, Sikh Sodhis, and Afghan Rohillas, played a significant role in regional politics as well. Given the multitude of trans-regional historical networks of military labor, trade and pilgrimage spanning through the Himalayas, I wonder how the Pahari Rajput identity interacted with that of mobile groups and communities who also made claims to a Rajput status, as in the case of the Shauka people in the neighboring Kumaon Himalayas.

“Arik Moran’s monograph is successful in demonstrating that the interactions of regional political elites with the British in the Himalayan borderlands of present-day Himachal were marked by adaptive vitality.”

- Himani Upadhyaya on *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland*

That aside, Arik Moran’s monograph is successful in demonstrating that the interactions of regional political elites with the British in the Himalayan borderlands of present-day Himachal were marked by adaptive vitality. His study is particularly commendable for steering clear of simplistic binaries, such as indigenous/

colonial, community/state and oral/written. It is a valuable contribution to academic scholarship on the history of state and identity formation in the Western Himalayas.

Himani Upadhyaya is pursuing her doctoral research in History at Ashoka University, India. Her thesis explores the situated history of mapping and surveying practices in 19th century Kumaon, with a focus on local and Indigenous communities in the region.