The Cult of Pābūjī

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By

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With a Foreword by John D. Smith

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For my sons, Simone and Alberto

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PREFACE

In the following pages I have gathered together the notes from lessons I gave during the Tribal Religions of India course held at the Oriental Studies Faculty of the Sapienza University of Rome from academic years 2009/2010 to 2013/2014 and from lessons I gave with Prof. John D. Smith[1], at the Sapienza University of Rome, on the invitation of Professor Bruno Lo Turco, and at the University of Milan on the invitation of Prof. Maria Angelillo, in addition to notes from seminars held in Larnaca (Cyprus) at Alexander College - University of the West of England, during the Academic Year 2014-2015. Professor Sandrine Prévot of the University of Paris X also participated in some of these seminars.

This volume presents an analysis of the mythic tale, interspersed with stanzas from the epic poem, some of which I recorded myself during field research conducted from 2012 to 2015 in Pushkar, Rajasthan, and some collected by John Smith during the 1970s and published in *The Epic of Pābūjī* in 1991.

In the second part of this volume, descriptions of the nuptial rites present in the Epic of Pābūjī are analysed. Subsequently an examination is undertaken of the transformation of said rites through the centuries up to the present day. This study has revealed that the rites have, for the most part, preserved the same format.

The history of the 'mythical hero' Pābūjī must be examined in context with the history of Rajasthan and, more precisely, with that of Marwar and Mewar, where historical figures are so exalted by court poets and singing bards that a mythopoetic phenomenon is born which transforms these figures into divinities[2].

With regard to mythology[3], it should from the start be pointed out that there is a semantic difference between myth, legend, and history: myth,

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[1] John D. Smith was professor of Sanskrit at the University of Cambridge.

[2] John D. Smith, Heroes, Victims and role models: the inhabitants of the Rajasthani epic world, in *Tessitori and Rajasthan: Proceedings of the International Conference,* ed. Donatella Dolcini. (Bikaner, 1996), 114.

[3] Mythopoesis: [from the Greek μυθοποιέω «invent tales», a combination of μῦθος «fable, myth» and ποιέω «make»]; generally, the activity, art or tendency to invent fables, to create myths. In particular, from a cultural anthropology viewpoint, the

from the Greek "mythos" ("word, story") is a narration of particular acts of deities, superhuman beings or extra-human beings. A myth can offer explanations for natural phenomena, legitimise ritual practices or social institutions and, more generally, answer the burning questions asked by human kind. An essential characteristic of myth is that it has first been spread orally before being written down and that the myth is perpetuated in the traditions of a population. According to Brelich: "for the believer, in our civilisation, biblical stories are both true and sacred and must be believed. Non doctrinal religions also have sacred stories and, with no other alternatives, these also come to be considered myths. The Greek term *mythos* simply meant 'discussion' or 'narrative'. It was then used by Greek philosophers to indicate a fantastic or false tale, in contrast to the term *logos*. Indeed, while the myth is undeniable evidence for the society from which the religion stems, it appears absurd to anyone else since it narrates impossible events about characters which differ from those we know."[4] Legend, like myth, is born and develops within the oral tradition of a populace; the written and cultured form is only the final phase. Legend owes its principle characteristics to its working class origins: firstly, it has a simplicity which, with respect to the historical facts from which it derives, is also simplification in order to better adapt to the culture concerned. Also typical of a legend is the lack of scruples with regard to chronological or topographical accuracy. Legend differs both from other historical narratives, even though these narratives may alter reality for artistic purposes, and from fairy tales, which do not contain any historical elements and do not necessarily contain religious references. By 'history' one intends the entirety of human actions through time, in the sense of both political events and of the traditions and the institutions in which they take place. History, therefore, is an ordered presentation of human endeavours and events of the past which is the result of critical investigation aimed at determining both the truth and the reciprocal connections which warrant the acknowledgement of a unity of development (thus defined, *history* differs from *chronicle*, which is primarily a straightforward presentation of the facts in chronological order). The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BCE), was the first to use the term in its etymological sense in the expression ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις, 'presentation of research'.

The History of Religions, as summarised so brilliantly by Filoramo, "develops on two levels: historical research with respect to the various

process of education through ideologies wherein actual events or the narration of them is given a fantastical value in terms of both the culture and society.

[4] A. Brelich, *Introduzione alla Storia delle Religioni* (Rome 1964), 7.

actual religions, and theoretical research in relation to the subject which connotes the discipline: religion, to be precise. The two levels complement each other in so far as both types of research pre-suppose and condition each other".[5] Contemporary thought has nonetheless felt the need to redefine the concept of religion in order to relocate it in western culture through anthropological and ethnological studies that have, quite rightly, become a part of the History of Religions. The confrontation between western and 'other' cultures initially generated real conflict owing to the fact that Western thinkers presumed that other religions, and myths in particular, could be understood independently from the cultural context to which they belong. Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown were the first to clearly identify the fact that, in order to correctly understand religions, it is "indispensable to know precise details of the institutions, traditions and, in general, the culture of individual populations".[6] It is for this reason that the second part of this volume gives space to an analysis of certain institutions and traditions characteristic of Indian culture.

[5] G. Filoramo, M. Massenzio, M. Raveri, P. Scarpi, *Manuale di Storia delle Religioni* (Rome, 1998), VII.
[6] Brelich, *Introduzione alla Storia delle Religioni*, 8.

FOREWORD

BY JOHN D. SMITH

When we describe a certain story as a *myth*, what are we saying about it? Clearly, 'myth' is not a rigidly defined category: different people may have different opinions as to whether a particular story does or does not qualify for the term, and one may also speak of stories being 'almost mythical' or 'having something of myth about them'. Rather than a category, 'myth' denotes a set of typical properties some of which at least must be found in a particular narrative if we are to apply the word to it. Let us examine some of the more important of these properties.

In the first place, myths are almost always traditional, that is to say, they circulate in primarily oral form in the societies that own them, rather than being the work of a specific author. Naturally, they do sometimes come to be written down (which is how we can know the mythologies of ancient peoples). But it is important to remember that any given written version of a mythical story is just one version: the fact that it has achieved written form does not privilege it over other versions. It can be difficult to keep this in mind when we know only a single account of a given myth from long ago, but the truth is that that account will almost certainly have been only one of numberless versions that circulated when the myth was current. Sometimes more than one version of a myth has survived from antiquity, and we can see that there are significant differences between different versions.

However, a myth is not simply any traditional story: 'Little Red Riding Hood' is a traditional story, but it is certainly not a myth. An important characteristic of myths is that they use the narrative form to deal with questions of great profundity.

Where did we come from? Why is the world the way it is? Are our actions our own, or is everything we do ordained by powers beyond our control? What happens to us when we die? These concerns are typical of those found in myths, and it is evident that humans have always found it natural to talk about them by telling stories. Various reasons can be adduced for this. For one thing, the abstract language of philosophy and theology,

though useful for addressing such topics, is unavailable (or unappealing) to a majority of people.

For another, terrifying subjects such as fate and death are more comfortable to approach indirectly through the medium of narrative than to face head-on. A third reason is that one of the subjects a myth may deal with is the gods and our relationship with them, and it may be possible to express ideas about these things in story form that would be dangerous to state outright. In other words, myths can be seditious.

This last point deserves exemplification, since this aspect of mythology may be unfamiliar to some: we all know stories of divine power and benevolence, but in fact stories putting forward rather different ideas have been told from ancient times. The following is a free translation of sections 1.97–8 of the *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa*, a text dating back to perhaps the seventh century BC.

The gods and the demons were fighting for supremacy, but neither side could gain the upper hand. So the gods fashioned a new weapon with a razor-sharp blade, and they called it Man. They consecrated this weapon, and then they hurled it at the demons. It scattered the demons, which fled in panic; but then it turned round and began to threaten the gods themselves. The gods were afraid, but they managed to catch hold of their weapon, which they broke into three pieces. But even when it had been broken it stood up again. The gods now realised that when they had consecrated Man they had inadvertently introduced divinity into him, and they were worried. They said, "If he lives a virtuous life in this world, performing sacrifices or living as a holy man or doing good works, he will follow us into Heaven! We must act to stop him. Let us put evil into him." So they put evil into him: sleep, laziness, hunger, love of gambling, lust for women. Then they stationed the god Fire on earth, and told him, "If Man manages to overcome this evil and tries to behave well, then you do your best to ruin him!" And they stationed the god Wind in the air, and the god Sun in the sky, with the same instructions.

No doubt it would have been just as unacceptable in the India of two-and-a-half millennia ago as it would be today to stand up in public and say, "The gods you worship are your enemies. They created you for their own ends, and once you are of no further use to them they harm you in whatever way they think necessary in order to avoid having to share heaven with you." A man might not be able to say this, but a story can say it with impunity.

Not merely that, but that story can then be incorporated into one of the holiest of texts, a *brāhmaṇa* forming part of the sacred Vedas.

As well as indicating just how seditious a myth can be, this little tale conveniently illustrates several features typical of myths in general. The whole narrative is set in a remote past, a time before things came to be the way they are now. Gods, men and demons interact.

There is a use of symbolism: the gods break Man into three pieces, clearly representing the three 'twice-born' classes of early Indian society (Brahmin priest, Kṣatriya warrior and Vaiśya merchant). Various aspects of human life are provided with a narrative explanation that serves as a charter for their existence: there is a reason for the presence of fire on earth, wind in the air, and the sun in the sky, and there is a reason why people are lazy, lustful and so forth. In a word, myths like this one seek to explain our Now through stories about a far-off Then.

All of these features are found in the oral traditional epic of Pābūjī too. The narrative is set in early mediaeval India, in a world very different from that of today. It is primarily about human beings (and one human in particular), but gods and especially goddesses figure prominently in it; demons too play an important role. Symbolic acts take place, as when Deval, at Pābūjī's request, breaks the low bank she had made and allows the blood of different castes to mingle on the battlefield (line 3564)[7]. 'Charters' are provided for various aspects of present-day Rajasthani life: the presence of camels, fetched from Laṅkā by Pābūjī; the funeral treatment of the Ḍholī caste as a result of Deval's curse (lines 3118–24).

Of course, there is nothing unusual about an epic narrative being permeated by mythology: in the archetypal epic of the western world, the *Iliad*, the gods intervene constantly in the story. In India's two great epic tales, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, they go further and become incarnate as the narratives' central figures. The action is played out on two levels: as the development of human conflict, and as the unfolding of a divine plan. Thus the central event of the *Mahābhārata*, the eighteen-day war between the Pāṇḍavas and their cousins the Kauravas, occurs because of years of mistrust and hostility between the two sides, but it also occurs in order for the gods, incarnated as the Pāṇḍavas, to destroy their eternal enemies the demons, incarnated as the Kauravas.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the epic of Pābūjī has a similar divine underpinning. Pābūjī is an incarnation of Lakṣmaṇa, younger brother of Rāma, the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; according to the bards who perform the epic, Lakṣmaṇa himself was an incarnation of the cosmic snake Śeṣa. And as in the two classical Indian epics, the story operates on two levels, its

[7] John D. Smith, *The Epic of Pābūjī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 451.

events resulting simultaneously from human motives and divine requirements. Pābūjī the hero has to act to maintain his and his family's honour, to keep his oaths, and so on; Pābūjī the incarnation of Lakṣmaṇa has unfinished heavenly business to conduct.

It is in Pābūjī's handling of that unfinished business that the epic shows its own seditious aspects. The story's general attitude towards women, for instance, appears on the surface to be a conventional one: when young, a woman should be married to a suitable husband; once married, she should be self-effacing and loyal to that husband. (The narrative also indicates that this loyalty extends beyond death, in that a newly widowed woman should become a *satī* by burning herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre; this, however, is generally regarded as a custom of ancient times, rather than something to be emulated today.) It is in the hero's own attitudes to women that we see something rather different from the conventional norm, for Pābūjī, though a Rajpūt prince, a fighter and a rustler of livestock, is also a celibate ascetic who declares (line 464)[8] that he "cannot look at the face of an advancing woman nor at the back of a retreating woman". However, he is fated to marry the princess Phulvantī; this is one item of his unfinished business. He first attempts to delay the wedding by going on a quest to fetch saffron; finally, in the wedding pavilion itself, he "cuts the bridal knot with the sharp point of his sword" (line 2985)[9] and rides away, thus contriving to marry his appointed bride whilst evading the consummation of the marriage.

Women, the epic seems to suggest through its hero's behaviour, are dangerous to men. If women are objects of fear, goddesses are objects of veneration, awe and terror. A living goddess (the Cāraṇ lady Deval) plays a prominent role in the story of Pābūjī; indeed, it could be said that she is the prime mover of the events of that story, making her presence felt whenever Pābūjī faces one of the crises that make up his story. But she is simply a manifestation of the great Goddess, and a song sung in the course of the epic's two wedding sequences gives us a clear idea of the Goddess's nature: "you drink blood," it exults, "you eat men." More specifically, this song makes it plain that Deval is only one of the goddess's many manifestations, and that all of them have shared a similar purpose: in the *Mahābhārata* narrative, we learn, the Goddess became incarnate as Draupadī in order to destroy the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, and in the *Rāmāyaṇa* story she became Sītā to destroy Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Once again we see here that myth in performance is licensed to say things that differ

[8] Smith, *The Epic of Pābūjī,* 295.
[9] Smith, 423.

sharply from conventional beliefs, according to which both these heroines are devoted wives who have to endure terrible suffering.

The mythological background to the epic story is crucial to it: it is what shapes the narrative, what gives rise to its high points, even what structures it into episodes. And yet in the course of their performance the bards give no hint of its existence. There are no verses telling how and why Lakṣmaṇa was reborn as Pābūjī, and when events occur that particularly clearly reflect the tension between human and divine causation, such as Pābūjī's abruptly terminated wedding ceremony, they are simply described as events, without commentary.

During breaks in the performance the bard may converse with members of the audience, and then, if asked, he may explain the background to the story, including the mythological background. But, beyond the frequently-occurring epithet that refers to Pābūjī as "Lakṣmaṇa, the ascetic deity of the sand-desert", the epic itself is silent on the matter.

In the case of Pābūjī, there are living bards to consult. When we deal with epics (such as the *Iliad*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*) that were committed to written form many centuries ago, the situation is quite different, and one has to wonder what chance we really have of understanding them as they were once understood by the audiences who heard them performed — and, perhaps, expounded — by their own living bards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY KALAYAN JOSHI

Born in 1969, Kalayan Joshi comes from a family of painters who have been dedicated to the art of traditional painting since the 18th century. He began painting at the age of eight, under the guidance of his father, Shri Shri Lal Joshi, a renowned artist who has received both the Padma Shri and the Shilp Guru awards from the President of the Republic of India. As well as the traditional style, Kalayan Joshi has developed new experimental designs and also illustrates contemporary books and poems.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THE REGION

The epic poem of Pābūjī is in the Marwari language, a variety of Rajasthani spoken by approximately 20 million people, mainly in Rajasthan but also in Gujarat, Haryana and Eastern Pakistan. A written version of the poem exists, the Pabuprakash (the manifestation of Pābūjī) which was kept in the Pābūjī temple of Kolu, a tiny, isolated village in the Marwar desert, but the poem was meant to be passed on orally by singers of the Bhil tribe: the Nayak Bopha.

The Marwar is a region of Rajasthan which is today known as the Jodhpur Region, after the name of its capital. It is located in the southwest of the state and covers an area of 90,500 square kilometres. Marwar is a sandy plain lying northwest of the Arvalli mountains, the oldest mountain range in India, which was formed before the Indian subcontinent collided with the mainland Eurasian plate during the Precambrian time which began 4.6 billion years ago, up to the Cambrian period, which began 540 million years ago. Its highest peak is Guru Shikhar which reaches 1,722 metres towards the border with the state of Gujarat. As with all ancient mountain ranges, the Arvalli do not reach great heights because upward thrust was lost due to the cessation of movement in the tectonic plates below them in the earth's crust. Although it seems initially they were quite high, they have been reshaped by millions of years of erosion. Rich in copper and other metals, there is evidence of mining from at least the 5th century BC, but the Regional Government prohibited mining in 1993 and since 2003 the Central Government of India has designated these areas as 'Ecologically Sensitive', protecting them from all industrial exploitation. Numerous rivers flow from the slopes of this mountain range, among which the Banas, the Sahibi, the Sakhi, the Sabarmati and the Luni. The latter rises in the Pushkar Lake and flows for 495 kilometres, terminating in the marshy land of Rann of Kutch, in Gujarat, joined by the numerous tributaries which descend from the Arvalli mountains. The waters of this river and its tributaries are vital in this mainly desert region for the irrigation of the wheat and barley fields which are the staple crops for the population of this area. Eastern Marwar, or Maru Pradesh is distinguished by its vast sand desert, the Thar; battered by very strong winds which form

undulating sand dunes, with its lack of water and mainly dry thorny vegetation, it is one of the most inhospitable places on earth. The few villages are located at a considerable distance from each other and suffer periods of extreme drought which force the villagers to make exhausting journeys in search of water, in a landscape which is continually changing due to the movement of the dunes caused by the wind. These are the areas frequented by the Raika, the camel farmers of Rajasthan, who are protected by the deity Pābūjī.

As J. D. Smith maintains: "Extremes of contrast in Rajasthan are not restricted to geography. Here, in a single state, terrible poverty and vast wealth coexist; tiny villages and lavish courts; illiterate epic-singers and virtuoso classical poets ..."[1]

The Marwar region includes the districts of Barmer, Jalore, Lakshman, Nagar, Jodhpur, Nagaur and Pali. To the north it borders the region of Jangladesh, to the northeast is Dhundhar, Ajmer to the east, Mewar to the southeast, it borders Godwar in the south and Sindh in the southwest and to the west is the region of Jaiselmer.

[1] John D. Smith, *The Epic of Pābūjī* , 2.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY

Rajasthan

Rajasthan, the land of kings, which spreads across the hot and arid expanse of north-west India; it evokes a vision of deserts of golden sand, resplendent in the inexorable burning sun. Its inhabitants with their different coloured turbans, white tunics and elegant *dhoti*, their faces furrowed with deep lines and sporting dashing handlebar moustaches, aquiline noses which recall a regal and magnificent past. Not to mention the wonderful women of this region, tall and elegant in their *ghagra choli*, the traditional garments of this land, consisting of the richly embroidered long skirt, the skin-tight *choli* and the *dupatta*, the highly coloured long shawls, used to cover their heads. They look like queens as they walk erect, their anklets tinkling as they carry water jugs on their heads. These are the Rajputs, children of kings, of whom bards have written for centuries about their exploits, their battles and loves, mythologizing their past. From a historical point of view, however, the Rajput clan has exerted its power over northern India from the 7th century CE onwards, but has been at the centre of attention for historians mainly due to the question of origin. According to James Tod, they are descendants of the Scythians, and as such originate from the steppes of central Asia, an opinion which is shared by D. R. Bhandarkar[2]. Manoshi Bhattacharya maintains that some Rajputs belonged to the nomadic groups from the inhospitable lands of central Asia, such as the Huns and Gujars who in the 5th century CE were searching for more hospitable places to establish themselves and stopped at the threshold of India[3]. Vincent Smith is of a different opinion, and believes that they are in part autochthonous and in part from elsewhere[4]. Indeed V.A. Smith maintains that the term Rajput: "... essentially denotes

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[2] D. R. Bhandarkar, *The Archaeological Remains and Excavations at Nagari*. *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, *No. 4* (Calcutta, 1920).
[3] M. Bhattacharya, *The Royal Rajputs* (New Delhi, 2008), XX.
[4] V.A. Smith, *Early History of India* (Oxford, 1904).

a tribe, a clan, a group or a caste of warlike habits, the members of which claimed aristocratic rank and were treated by the Brahmans as representing the Kshatriyas of the old books. The huge group of Rajput clan-castes includes people of the most diverse descent. Many of the clans are descended from the foreigners who entered India ... while many others are descended from indigenous tribes ... the upper ranks of the invading hordes of Hunas, Gurjaras, Maitrakas, and the rest became Rajput clans, while the lower developed into Hindu castes of less honourable social status, such as Gujars, Ahirs, Jats and others."[5]

V.A. Smith includes them with "... clan-castes of foreign descent are the proud and chivalrous Sisodias or Guhilots of Mewar, the Parihars (Pratiharas), the Chauhans, the Pawars and the Solankis, otherwise called Chaulukyas or Chalukyas ..." while he maintains that the "... Rashtrakutas of the Deccan, the Rathors of Rajputan (Rajasthan) whose name is only a vernacular form of the same designation; the Chandels and the Bundelas of Bundelkhand"[6] are examples of indigenous ennobled groups.

G.H. Ojha maintains that the Rajput descend from the Kshatriya of mythical times; however, in this category he not only includes those Kshatriya lineages who claim to descend from Surya (the Sun) or Chandra (the Moon), and boast of their inclusion in the *Puranas*, but also non-Indian warrior groups such as the Kushans, the Sakas (Scythians), the Pahlvas (Persains), the Chinas (Chinese) and others[7]. What is maintained by Ojha is, however, criticised by Sharma who considers his colleague's explanation to be: "beyond the sphere of a valid historical discussion"[8].

However, Sharma agrees with Ojha with regards to the *Agnikula* myth on the origins of the Rajputs, cited by Chand Bardai in his *Prithviraj-Raso*, by certain Rajasthani chroniclers and mentioned in the 16th century inscription of the Chauhan of Bedla. The myth[9] recounts that the respective progenitors of the Rajput clan: Pratihara, Solanki, Parmar and Chauha miraculously trace their origins to a sacrificial fire during a *yagna*, a rite centred on the energy which comes from the sacred fire, officiated by the old sage Vashishtha. From this comes the Rajput name *Agnikula*, born of the fire.

According to Rima Hooja, if this myth is effectively confirmed in the 16th century Sisana inscriptions, it could have more ancient origins and have been passed down through the centuries by word of mouth. The myth

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[5] V. A.Smith, *The Oxford History of India* (Oxford, 1922), 172, 73.
[6] Smith, *The Oxford History of India,* 172.
[7] G.H. Ojha, *History of Rajputana Vol I* (Ajmer, 1927), 49.
[8] D. Sharma, *Rajasthan Through the Ages* (Bikaner, 1966), 104.
[9] The term *myth* is used as defined in the introduction.

could indicate a purification ritual for foreign warriors by yagna, the sacred fire, that in this way they would have been accepted into the traditional Brahamanical society and included with the Kshatriya.[10]

According to V. A. Smith, in the past "the line of demarcation between the Brahmans and Kshatriya, that is to say, between the caste groups of the learned and warrior groups of castes, was not sharply defined. It was often crossed, sometimes by change of occupation and at other times by intermarriage. Ordinarily the position of leading Brahman at court was that of minister, but sometimes the Brahman preferred to rule directly, and he seized the throne."[11]

Dasharatha Sharma maintains that the Guhilas, the Parmars and the Chauhan were originally of the Brahmanical caste, but having undertaken a military career and the role of the Kshatriyas they were assimilated into the Rajput warriors, as: "... all warrior clans have the right to be considered Kshatriya"[12].

Despite the debate which still rages over the origins of the Rajput clan, enthusiasts leave the historians to their disputes. Twenty-first century Rajputs accept without hesitation the traditional genealogy which is part of their folk history as it is ritually told or sung by the bards during feasts and ceremonies. They are not too worried about establishing when in time the term 'Rajput' entered into common use. According to R. Hooja, however, epigraphic and literary sources appear to indicate a period between the 12th and 13th century when terms such as *Rajputra, Kshatriy, Raut* and similar alternatives were used and therefore Rajput would be simply a synonym.[13]

Indeed J. N. Asopa confirms that "Rajput is a corruption of the Vedic term Rajputra which can be found in the *Rigveda, Yajur Veda, Samhita,* and *Aitareya Brahmana* of *Rigveda*, as a synonym of *Rajanya*. In the Mahabharata too, the term Rajputra is used to define nobles and leaders, as is Kshatriya.

The literal meaning of *Kshatriya* is 'son of *Kshatra*', therefore the meaning of Rajanya and Kshatriya is the same, as is Rajputra, a synonym of both, but the meaning of which will begin to slowly change over the following centuries."[14]

In the 4th century CE the great Samudra Gupta, a learned prince, reigned in the state which is now known as Bihar. During his forty year

[10] R. A. Hooja, *A History of Rajasthan* (Delhi, 2006), 178.
[11] V. A. Smith, 173.
[12] Sharma, 105.
[13] Hooja, 180.
[14] J. N. Asopa, *Origins of the Rajputs* (Delhi, 1976), 4.

reign he decided to expand his dominion to include the entire Indian subcontinent and, to this end, undertook a series of military campaigns which proved victorious and, moreover, led him to extend towards Hindustan, incorporating all the small states therein.

The founder of the Gupta dynasty, Chandragupta I, who reigned from 320 to 355 CE, came from a rich family of noble landowners. Profiting from the opportunities offered by the political situation of the time, he seized power and became king, or *maharajadhiraja*, namely "king of kings", taking control of the entire territory which today stretches from Uttar Pradesh to Magadha. His son, Samudra Gupta, surpassed his father, carrying out a series of interminable military undertakings which led him to conquer a vast empire which included almost the whole of Rajasthan, the Punjab, Nepal and parts of Assam and Bengal. The sovereigns of the conquered kingdoms were forced to pay homage to the *maharaadhiraja* and, above all, to pay a regular tribute. The inscription on Samudra Gupta's column in Allahabad, also known as *Prayag Prashasti* and the work of Harisena[15], not only names the nine kings who were defeated and whose kingdoms were annexed, but also the five kingdoms and nine feudal states on the borders of Gupta's empire which became subordinate, accepting Gupta's sovereignty. Among these nine defeated kings are Nagasena and Ganapati-Naga, who belonged to the powerful Naga clan and reigned over three states: Padmavati, Vidisha and Mathura. Another two ousted kings were Achyuta, who was ruler of Ahichchhatra and Chandra Varman, who reigned over part of western Bengal. The names of the other kings inscribed on the Allahabad column are: Rudradeva, Matila, Nagadatta, Nandin and Balavarman. According to Rima Hooja: "it would seem that Rajasthan was entirely under the influence, if not the direct control, of Samudra Gupta. In such case, Rajasthan probably had a socioeconomic and administrative structure in common with the rest of the Gupta Empire, though we have little information in this regard"[16]. The political situation of Rajasthan would probably not have changed radically during the reigns of Samudra Gupta's successors, the powerful Chandragupta II, Kumara Gupta and Skanda Gupta.

Chandragupta II succeeded Samudra Gupta reigning from 375 to 415 CE; he reinforced the power of the dynasty with important matrimonial contracts, uniting his caste to the royal Deccan family. His military campaigns brought him the conquest of the Malwa region, defeating the

[15] Harisena, or Hirisena, was a poet, panegyrist and minister during the reign of Samudra Gupta. His most famous poem recounts the feats of his sovereign and is inscribed on the pillar of Allahabad.
[16] Hooja, 135.

reigning Saka dynasty. He was succeeded by Kumara Gupta (415-455 CE), whose reign was notable for a long period of peace during which the arts and literature flourished: in this period the two major Indian works of literature were written, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which were handed down orally by bards and probably date back to the second millennium BCE.

The *Ramayana* tells of the capture of Rama's wife, Sita, by the ten-headed demon, Ravana. Her rescue is the cause of military action at Lanka, where Rama and his brother Laksmana, assisted by Hanuman and his monkey helpers, battle against the forces of evil represented by Ravana, who is killed by Laksmana. We come across these characters in the epic of Pābūjī as our hero is the reincarnation of Laksmana.

Kumara Gupta's reign comes to an abrupt end with a coup d'etat led by his stepson who assumed power on the death of his father and reigned until 467 CE under the name of Skanda Gupta. Upon his death, Buddha Gupta ascended the throne (467-497 CE) and was faced with military attacks from Battriana. In 510 CE the Gupta dynasty suffered a decisive defeat close to Eran in Madhya Pradesh. Here the dream of Chandragupta I of placing the entire Indian subcontinent under the power of his caste came to an end. During the Gupta period the plastic arts also flourished. Indeed many terracotta figures have been discovered in the Sambhar and Nagari excavations, while bronze statuettes have been found in the Abu area. From an iconographic point of view, images of Vishnu, Shiva and other divinities were standardised and the iconographic criteria remained through subsequent centuries without major alterations. The majority of the Gupta emperors declared their devotion to Vasudeva-Vishnu, Shiva, The Goddess and Surya; this brought about a proliferation of temples, sanctuaries and statues in almost the entire Indian subcontinent, obviously including Rajasthan. Certain innovations in sculpture styles and materials were introduced during this period and these crystallised the iconography of the subsequent centuries. According to Hooja: "In the case of Vishnu iconography, it is during the Gupta period that the image of Vishnu with four hands, each holding: a mace (*gada*), a discus (*chakra*), a lotus (*padma*) and a conch (*shankh*), is diffused and remains unaltered over time. From this period on, the character of each statue is determined by the various positions which these objects have in the hands of Vishnu"[17].

Other examples of architecture from the Gupta period in Rajasthan are the two rectangular columns, the *toranas*, on which are engraved certain scenes from Krishna's life; they were found amongst the ruins of the fort

[17] Hooja, 138.

in Mandore, not far from today's Jodhpur, and transported to the Museum of Jodhpur in the middle of the 20th century.

It is from the Gupta period onwards that a series of inscriptions have been discovered which have helped historians reconstruct the local genealogy. The stone inscription dated Vikram Samvat 428 (371-2 CE), found in Bayana in eastern Rajasthan, lists the names of various feudal lords of the Varika tribe. The inscription tells that Vishnuvardhana, son of Yashovardhana, grandson of Yashorata and great-grandson of Vyaghrarata, erected the pillar in memory of the Pundarika sacrifice officiated in that place. According to Rima Hooja, it is possible that Vishnuvaradhana was a feudatory of Samudra Gupta[18]. Another inscription from 423 CE, found in Gangadhar, approximately eighty-four kilometres south east of Jhalarapatan in the district of Jhalawar, records certain acts carried out by members of the Aulikara dynasty, who governed this area of Rajasthan during that period. The Gangadhar inscription describes public service works supported by king Vishva-Varman, son of Nara-Varman, and commemorates the building of a temple dedicated to Vishnu by one of the king's ministers, a certain Mayurakhshaka; he also built a temple for *Mataji*, as well as a drinking water well. Gangadhar city is described as being on the banks of the Kali Sindh River, known by the name of Gargara in the 5th century, and of its king it is said that he was always concerned for the wellbeing of his people, building irrigation canals, river embankments, reservoirs, temples, gardens and roads. According to D.C. Shukla, the Aulikaras, also known as the Vardhana dynasty, perhaps from the Malavas branch, founded an independent state which enlarged its hegemony into the adjacent regions. The Aulikara dynasty boasted heroes like the stalwart Vishnu-Vardhana who, in the next century, according to Mandsaur, Chhoti Sadri and Chittor inscriptions, dazzled the Huna king Mihirakula with his shining sword, blocking his advance towards Chitrakuta (Chittor)[19].

For more than a century the Gupta dynasty reigned over a vast empire of which Rajasthan was an integral part. From the middle of the 5th century, however, the Gupta had to deal with a series of incursions and invasions along their north western borders by the Huna (or Huns), from central Asia.

The Hunas, or Huns, were a nomadic group of animal breeders of Siberian origin, identified by many scholars as from the Hsiung-Nu or Xiongnu, a branch which was already active along the Chinese border

[18] Hooja, 139.
[19] D. C. Shkula, *Early History of Rajasthan* (Varanasi, 1978), 117, 118

during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE)[20]. Around the 1st century CE, the Xiongnu divided into three groups, the first was defeated and incorporated into China, thanks to the development of defensive structures and the use of new weapons, such as more precise catapults, bronze crossbows, composite bows, for example. A second group, called the Hephtalites, invaded Iran and India around the 4th and 5th century. Others migrated towards the west, settling along the river Volga and then invading the Alans, the Visigoths and Ostrogoths. They arrived in Europe at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century and in a matter of a few decades they brought about the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the birth of the Romano-Barbarian kingdoms.

Writing at the end of the 4th century, Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, describes them as follows:

> "The people called Huns, barely mentioned in ancient records, live beyond the sea of Azof, on the border of the Frozen Ocean, and are a race savage beyond all parallel. At the very moment of birth the cheeks of their infant children are deeply marked by an iron, in order that the hair instead of growing at the proper season on their faces, may be hindered by the scars; accordingly the Huns grow up without beards, and without any beauty. They all have closely knit and strong limbs and plump necks; they are of great size, and low legged, so that you might fancy them two-legged beasts, or the stout figures which are hewn out in a rude manner with an axe on the posts at the end of bridges. They are certainly in the shape of men, however uncouth, and are so hardy that they neither require fire nor well flavoured food, but live on the roots of such herbs as they get in the fields, or on the half-raw flesh of any animal, which they merely warm rapidly by placing it between their own thighs and the backs of their horses.
>
> They never shelter themselves under roofed houses, but avoid them, as people ordinarily avoid sepulchres as things not fit for common use. Nor is there even to be found among them a cabin thatched with reeds; but they wander about, roaming over the mountains and the woods, and accustom themselves to bear frost and hunger and thirst from their very cradles. When they are far from their settlements they do not enter buildings unless forced to do so by extreme necessity and they do not feel safe when under a roof. They wear linen clothes, or else garments made of the skins of field-mice; nor do they wear a different dress out of doors from that which

[20] Not all scholars agree with this theory: according to Kelly, who is not at all convinced of the link between the Huns and the Hsiung-Nu, the Huns could have come from the steppes of modern day Kazakhstan, an icy climate subject to very strong winds.
C. Kelly, *Attila e la caduta di Roma* (Milan, 2009), 17-35.

they wear at home; but after a tunic is once put round their necks, however much it becomes worn, it is never taken off or changed till, from long decay, it becomes actually so ragged as to fall to pieces. They wear round caps and cover their hairy legs with goat skins and their shoes, which have not been shaped on a last, prevent them from walking freely. And for this reason they are not well suited to infantry battles, but are nearly always on horseback, their horses being ill-shaped, but hardy and sometimes they even sit upon them like women if they want to do anything more conveniently. There is not a person in the whole nation who cannot remain on his horse day and night. On horseback they buy and sell, they take their meat and drink, and there they recline on the narrow neck of their steed, and yield to sleep so deep as to indulge in every variety of dream**.** And when any deliberation is to take place on any weighty matter, they all hold their common council on horseback. They are not under kingly authority, but are contented with the irregular government of their chiefs, and under their lead they force their way through all obstacles. Sometimes, when provoked, they fight, and they enter battle drawn up in wedge-shaped masses while their medley of voices makes a savage noise. And as they are lightly equipped for swift motion and unexpected action, they purposely divide suddenly in scattered bands and attack rushing about in disorder here and there, dealing terrific slaughter; and because of their extraordinary rapidity of movement, they cannot be discerned when they break into a rampart or pillage an enemy's camp. And on this account you would not hesitate to call them the most terrible of all warriors, because they fight from a distance with missiles having sharp bone, instead of their usual metal points, joined to the shafts with wonderful skill; then they gallop over the intervening spaces and fight hand to hand with swords regardless of their own lives. While the enemy are guarding against wounds from sword-thrusts, they throw strips of cloth plaited into nooses over their opponents and so entangle them that they fetter their limbs and take from them the power of riding or walking. None of them plough, or even touch a plough handle, for they have no settled abode, but are homeless and lawless, perpetually wandering with their wagons, which they make their homes; in fact, they seem to be people always in flight. In these wagons their wives weave their hideous garments, cohabit with their husbands, bear children, and rear them to the age of puberty ... In truces they are treacherous and inconstant, being liable to change their minds at every breeze of every fresh hope which presents itself, giving themselves up wholly to the impulse and inclination of the moment; and, like brute beasts, they are utterly ignorant of the distinction between right and wrong. They express themselves with great ambiguity and obscurity; have no respect for any religion or superstition whatever; are immoderately covetous of gold. They are so fickle and irascible that they very often, on the same day that

> they quarrel with their companions without any provocation, again become reconciled to them without any mediator."[21] (Ammianus XXX, 2).

This quotation from Ammianus serves to help us understand the characteristics of this population which unsettled and horrified the empires and kingdoms of both east and west and how refined and cultured populations viewed these adversaries, branding them coarse and uncivilised and therefore barbarians. Archaeological finds support their use of tents as homes as well as the use of copper cauldrons for cooking.

Although the Hun advanced rapidly through the west, this was not the case in the east. For almost a century, the kings of the Gupta dynasty strove to stop the hordes from crossing the Hindu Kush and entering their territory. In particular, under the reigns of Kumar Gupta (415-455 CE) and Skanda Gupta (445-467 CE), son and grandson respectively of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya, the Huns were kept from the empire's frontiers thanks to a series of victorious battles. Skanda Gupta personally led many expeditions, initially as crown prince and later as emperor. However, after the death of this emperor and warlord, the central authority of the Gupta Empire began to gradually decline. During the reigns of Skanda Gupta's successors, certain of the more powerful feudal lords began to govern and ignore the central power, gradually forming independent states.

During the Gupta period, caste divisions were set with the total exclusion of chandala (untouchables) from society. The myth of creation tells that *Purusha*, primordial man, was immolated as a sacrificial victim and that the cosmos and man were created as a result of this sacrifice; the *Brahman,* the sacerdotal class, was born from the head, from the arms came the *Ksatriya*, warriors, governors and kings; the *Vaishya*, the animal breeders and farmers, artisans and tradesmen came from the legs; from the feet came the *Shudra*, the servants. The *Manusriti* provides the rules for each of the four *varnas* in accordance with certain principles of purity, these principles inspired the authors of the *Dharma* texts which divide the

[21] Ammiano Marcellino (330CE-391CE), in his *Res gestae libri XXXI* (the first 13 of which are lost), traces a history of the Roman Empire from the accession of Nerva (96 CE) to the death of Valente at the Battle of Adrianople (378 CE) against the Visigoths and makes continuous reference to the work of Cornelio Tacito (*Germany*, 98 CE). Recent reviews have noted the rhetorical power of his narrative and the dedication to follow a precise religious and political programme which caused him to set Constantius II against Julian the Apostate, who revived the traditional Roman religion.