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*'The Rani of Sirmur' Revisited: Sati and sovereignty in theory and practice**

ARIK MORAN

University of Haifa, Israel
Email: amoran@univ.haifa.ac.il

Abstract

In 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offered a literary analysis of British records to demonstrate the inextricability of language from the colonial/imperial project's goal of world domination. Honing her arguments on the threat of a Himalayan queen (rani) to 'become sati' (i.e. immolate herself), Spivak interpreted the event as representative of the plight of subalterns and of 'third world women' in particular. However, a close reading of the records reveals profound discrepancies between Spivak's interpretation and conditions that existed in and around the kingdom at the time. This article contextualizes the rani's story by supplementing archival sources with folk traditions, local histories, and recent research on sati and Rajput women. It shows that the rani was actually an astute ruler, similar to her peers in the West Himalayan elite, and that her threat of suicide resulted from reasons that go beyond an alleged attempt at recovering agency from the dual oppressions of patriarchal indignity and an invasive superpower. The discourses about sati in contemporary texts are also investigated, revealing a considerable overlap in South Asian and European views of sati among Himalayan elites in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century northwest India.

Introduction

In 1985, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first applied literary theory to archival documents in 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives'.[1] In conducting a literary analysis of records detailing the British East India Company's settlement activities in the

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[1] G. C. Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *Theory and History*, 24:3, October 1985, pp. 247–72.

little-known West Himalayan kingdom of Sirmaur shortly after its conquest in 1815, Spivak wished to show that the discourse emanating from the archives was integral to the East India Company's project of subjugation, in which language effectively transformed conquered people(s) into 'objects of knowledge'. These ideas were further developed in the more widely circulated 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' which appeared a few years later.[2] Spivak's somewhat grim answer to this question was an unequivocal 'no', because, she explained, the inextricability of language from power (structures/relations) served to further colonial/imperial oppression throughout history and continues to do so through global capitalism today.[3] That article's unprecedented influence notwithstanding,[4] the veracity of its claims proves questionable when reading the documents that informed its embryonic predecessor—the 'essay in reading the archives'—which point to profound discrepancies between Spivak's interpretation and contemporaneous realities. Thus, while 'The Rani of Sirmur' saw the threat of the kingdom's regent queen (rani) to become sati (i.e. kill herself) as an assertion of agency (or a 'Speech Act') by a woman doubly oppressed by '[indigenous] patriarchy and [British] imperialism', the preserved records suggest she was more likely an influential leader, similar to her peers in the West Himalayan elite.[5] In situating the rani of Sirmaur, alias the Guleri Rani, in the wider context of female agency in Pahari ('mountain') Rajput courts at the

[2] G. C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1988, pp. 271–313.

[3] In this respect, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is representative of the second phase of the development of the Subaltern Studies movement, in which empirical research gave way to postmodern literary criticism; see R. Eaton, '(Re)imag(in)ing Other^{2}ness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India', *Journal of World History*, 11:1, Spring 2000, pp. 57–78. On the consequent impoverishment of scholarly debate, exemplified in the failure to distinguish between the analytical categories of 'colonial' and 'imperial', see ibid, p. 70, fn. 44. For an overview and reproductions of key debates between proponents and opponents of the movement, consult V. Chaturdevi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Verso, London, 2000.

[4] According to Google Scholar, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' has been cited over 9,000 times [accessed 20 July 2014]. The article was revised and combined with 'The Rani of Sirmur' in the third chapter of G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 198–311, more on which below.

[5] Spivak, 'Rani of Sirmur', p. 267. The term 'Speech Act' was introduced in Spivak, *Postcolonial Reason*, p. 273. For the records informing 'The Rani of Sirmur', see British Library, Oriental and Indian Office Collections, India Office Records (hereafter IOR), F/4/571/13997.

turn of the nineteenth century, this article seeks to make sense of the apparent chasm between contemporaneous realities and their subsequent interpretation in studies of female agency in South Asia.

The first section examines the place of Rajputni elites in Pahari circles by tracing the careers of several ranis in relation to events in Sirmauri history *circa* 1775–1825. It shows that ranis held a dual position in Rajput society, both as symbols of status and as political leaders in their own right. The succeeding section situates Spivak's analysis in the context of regional developments by following the Guleri Rani's career before and after her appointment as regent (1815–27). In demonstrating the rani's substantive clout in politics, it argues for continuity with the pattern of powerful regent Rajputnis that characterized the preceding era. The discrepancy between these findings and Spivak's interpretation calls for a reassessment of the sati episode, which is addressed in the third section. By investigating the place of sati in British, Pahari, and Rajput discourses, in conjunction with studies on religion among Rajput women, it proposes an alternative explanation for the unrealized sati. The conclusions resulting from Spivak's ideological reading of the records—most notably the insistence on a strict dichotomy between Europeans and South Asians—are challenged in the last section. Examining contemporary literary depictions of sati by different authors, it highlights the variety of approaches to the rite that existed at the time. In doing so, it adds nuance to the rani's story, while vindicating Spivak's call for applying novel readings to textual sources, which, in the present case, reveal a shared appreciation of Pahari Rajputni satis among the multicultural parties at play in nineteenth-century northwest India.

The multiple roles of royal women, *circa* 1775–1825

West Himalayan elites modelled their world after that of Rajasthani Rajputs. In the early modern era, this meant following the latter's example by entering Mughal service, where male rulers became important *mansabdari*s (rank-holder) and participated in imperial campaigns.[6] The otherwise marginal aristocracy of the

[6] For a prominent example, see J. Hutchison and J.-P. Vogel, *History of the Punjab Hill States* (hereafter *HPHS*), two volumes, Low Price Publications, New Delhi, 1999 [1933], Vol. 1, pp. 249, 253.

hills consequently became imbued with the culture of North Indian elites. This process was paradoxically accentuated by the waning of Delhi's power in the eighteenth century as Pahari rulers reduced their participation in imperial enterprises while increasing their identification with Mughal culture.[7] As a result, the leaders of the modest-sized kingdoms on the fringes of the Himalayas became precariously positioned between 'uncouth' subjects, on whose loyalty they depended to maintain their rule, and the sophisticated urban-based culture of the plains that distinguished them from their power base and earned them recognition as worthy nobles in and beyond the hills. The emulation of behavioural norms concomitant with Mughal culture thus saw Pahari leaders fastidiously avoid the 'disturbance and contamination ... of plebeians in the bazaar' even as they remained firmly entrenched in their home surroundings.[8] The eyewitness account of a Sirmauri raja's return to the hills after a failed military campaign in 1783 exemplifies this condition: having entered the capital at the head of 'some dozen horsemen, sorrily clad and very slenderly mounted', Jagat Prakash (r. 1773–1792) reciprocated the welcome of his assembled townsmen 'in terms affectionate and interesting, which, like a stroke of magic, seemed in an instant to erase every trace of grievance'; this combination of 'pleasing manners and a liberality of temper' with the 'alluring qualities of a soldier' is paradigmatic of Pahari Rajput rulers of the time.[9]

The seeming incompatibility of indigenous (Pahari) and acculturated (Rajput) cultures centres on a fundamental tension between 'tribal' and 'caste' elements that pervades Himalayan peoples. David Gellner has usefully proposed gauging the place South Asian societies occupy on the spectrum delimited by these extremes by evaluating attitudes towards women. Drawing on research in the Kathmandu Valley, Gellner offers an alternative, trichotomous model that is based on a movement between tribal, caste, and mixed social

[7] The apex of Pahari miniature painting in this period, which resulted from the protected mountain courts' patronage of plains-based artists, illustrates this trend; see H. Goetz, 'The Coming of Muslim Culture in the Panjab Himalaya' in J. Jain-Neubauer and J. Jain (eds), *Rajput Art and Architecture*, Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1978, pp. 156–66.

[8] On the origins and transformations of elite culture in early modern North India, see R. O'Hanlon, 'Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 42:1, 1999, pp. 47–93, quotation from p. 71.

[9] G. Forster, *A Journey From Bengal to England, Through the Northern Part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia, and into Russia, by the Caspian Sea*, two volumes, R. Faulder, London, 1798, Vol. 1, p. 202.

norms.[10] Attitudes towards women among the Pahari elite suggest that this model is also applicable to the West Himalayas, where respected women were subjected to the Rajput custom of veiling (*pardā*) that set them apart from the bulk of mountain women, who 'appear[ed] abroad as unreservedly as men'.[11] These restrictions could not, however, prevent the periodic rise of women to positions of power, especially when they served as regents for infant rajas. At the same time, popular and written accounts altered the way in which such women were remembered so as to comply with the prescriptions of a male-centred Rajput culture. The resultant mitigation of their actual scope of action is clearly illustrated in the factual inaccuracies and typecasting found in oral epics that narrate historical events.

Rajputnis as sovereigns: Nagardevi Katochi of Bilaspur

The oral account or '*jheṛā*' (a specific type of oral tradition from the West Himalayas) of 'Fort Chinjhiar' (*Gaṛh Chiñjhyār*) tells the story of the last great battle between Pahari rulers prior to the advent of British rule.[12] The protagonists of the account—the Katoch rulers of Kangra and the Chand nobles of Bilaspur (alias Kahlur)—were the main powers active in the region at the close of the eighteenth century. According to the *jheṛā*, the root cause of violence was the occupation of a fort on the outskirts of Bilaspur by the raja of Kangra, Sansar Chand Katoch II (b. 1765, r. 1775–1823), who aptly named it '"*Chātīpurī*", that is to say that he had sat upon the chest (*chātī*) of the Kahlūriyās'.[13] Urged by his wife to react, the raja of Bilaspur

[10] D. Gellner, 'Hinduism, Tribalism, and the Position of Women: The Problem of Newar Identity', *Man*, New Series, 26:1, March 1991, pp. 105–25.

[11] The British officials who first entered the Sirmauri capital further noted that 'far from flying at the sight of strangers', its female residents tended to 'remain and converse, showing no other feeling than the occasional shyness natural to all uneducated women introduced to the presence of persons they never saw before'; J. B. Fraser, *Journal of a Tour Through Part of the Snowy Range of the Himala Mountains and to the Sources of the Rivers Jumna and Ganges*, Rupa and Co., Delhi, 2008 [1820], pp. 80–81.

[12] The text, in the Kahluri dialect, was transcribed and introduced by Balakram Bhardvaj in J. Sharma (ed.), *Himachal Pradesh ki Lokgathayen (Folktales of Himachal Pradesh)*, Himachal Academy of Arts, Cultures and Languages, Shimla, 2000, pp. 125–40; my thanks to Amar Nath Walia for help in its translation.

[13] Anonymous, *Tawarikh wa Jugraphiya Riyasat Bilaspur Kahlur* (*History and Geography of Bilaspur-Kahlur State* (hereafter *TJBK*), Shimla [1934?], p. 66. A similar etymology is proposed in A. Singh and R. Varma, *Bilaspur ki Kahani* (*The Story of Bilaspur*) (hereafter *BK*), Bilaspur Rajya, 1940, p. 24.

formed a coalition against the 'mountain emperor' (*Pahari Padshah*), which was headed by the young ruler of Sirmaur, Dharm Prakash (r. 1792–96). As is customary in such accounts, the hero's downfall was precipitated by the enemy's wily machinations: the Kahluri general accepted a bribe from Sansar Chand in return for abandoning the Sirmauri raja in the heat of battle. Vastly outnumbered and exposed to heavy gunfire, Dharm Prakash died on the battlefield and his body was brought back to Sirmaur, where his widow became sati by jumping to her death from the palace balcony.

What the *jheṛā* describes as a heroic confrontation between warring monarchs was, in fact, a singularly charged episode in a series of conflicts between Kangra and Bilaspur, then respectively led by Sansar Chand Katoch and the powerful regent queen, Nagardevi Katochi (r. 1775–~1800). As their names imply, the rivals were members of the same Kangra-based Katoch clan, Sansar Chand's grandfather having usurped the throne from Nagardevi's family half a century earlier (*circa* 1751).[14] The rani's subsequent marriage to the raja of Bilaspur was devised to ease tensions over contested territories along the kingdoms' boundary and distance the disgruntled rani from court. The death of her husband shortly afterwards (1775) foiled this plan, as Nagardevi became regent to her three-year-old son and thus assumed power at about the same time that her younger rival, Sansar Chand, ascended the throne in Kangra.

If the battle of Chinjhiar saw the centuries-old rivalry between Kangra and Bilaspur mature into a distinctly inter-familial affair, the political and familial ties that framed it are practically non-existent in the *jheṛā*. In keeping with the sensibilities of the Rajput milieu that commissioned its composition, the narrative conveniently omits the regent's role in the conflict and casts her son as *de facto* ruler instead. The relative freedom of oral tradition was denied the Pahari chroniclers, who committed their history to writing a century after the events took place. Subscribing to contemporary understandings of historiography as a narrative construct based on verifiable facts, Pahari authors could not entirely ignore Nagardevi's three decades-long career. As these texts habitually celebrate ranis for their past (and

[14] The usurper, according to a Kangra scribe, seized Nagardevi's 11 brothers at their father's funeral, had 'their eyes gouged, but very cruelly, and threw them into a deep and dark gorge ... where they perished slithering in pain without water and food'; S. Dayal, A. N. Walia (trans.), *Twarikh Rajgan-e-Zila Kangra* (*History of the Rajas of Kangra District*) (hereafter *TRZK*), Himachal Academy of Arts, Cultures and Languages, Shimla, 2001 [1883], p. 28.

therefore no longer threatening) accomplishments, they primarily mention Nagardevi in connection with her contribution to public works and care for her subjects, alluding to her as a political leader only in passing, as in her tough stance towards subordinate states, which rendered neighbouring rulers 'very fearful of the maharani'.[15]

The rani's sovereignty is more explicitly referred to in George Forster's account from the Bilaspur camp during an earlier conflict with Kangra (1783). Reporting to the governor-general with unreserved admiration, Forster recounted how the rani had surmounted 'every attempt to subvert her authority', overcoming 'the many difficulties incident in this country to her sex, the most embarrassing of which was a preclusion from public appearance [*pardā*]' to become 'firmly established ... [in] government'.[16] Forster further noted that although the Bilaspur warriors were led to battle by the kingdom's top-ranking nobleman and chief contender to the throne, the latter ultimately acted upon the rani's orders.[17] The shrewdness of this act should not be overlooked: in admitting a member of the ruling elite to a key administrative position that sustained his public dignity, Nagardevi could pretend to adhere to the cultural dictates of her peers while retaining real power. Such deft manoeuvres could not, however, abate the inevitable tensions that a regent mother would encounter from noblemen at court, which manifested in a continuous fear for the life of her son, the child-raja.[18] This major obstacle was overcome upon the death of Bilaspur's *wazir* (prime minister) in 1785: instead of accepting the customary candidate from the landed gentry, who was closely connected with the opposition at court, the rani placed her chief opponent in confinement ('during which he experienced lenient treatment') and nominated an external candidate of her choice to the post instead.[19] Thus, by the time Bilaspur and Kangra clashed at Chinjhiar, the rani was already a seasoned politician and a leader of considerable importance.

[15] *BK*, p. 24; also *TJBK*, p. 66.
[16] Forster, *A Journey From Bengal*, p. 217.
[17] Ibid.
[18] In a letter of 1782, Nagardevi cited the opposition's plan to assassinate her son as grounds for seeking protection with a neighbouring raja; see *HPHS*, Vol. 2, p. 505, fn. 1.
[19] The rani's appointee was a *bairagi sadhu*, an unusual choice that elicited excited responses from the soldiery, which presented its mistress's relationship with the *wazir* as a love affair transgressing caste boundaries; see Forster, *A Journey From Bengal*, pp. 217–18.

Gender stereotypes in Pahari oral traditions

The centrality of Nagardevi to Pahari politics renders her omission from the *jheṛā* all the more conspicuous. This conscious alteration of fact is typical of Pahari oral traditions, which habitually cast women in the polarized categories of virtuous sisters or spouses and warmongering mothers-in-law. Thus, if the *jheṛā* suppresses the memory of flesh-and-blood leaders like Nagardevi from historical memory, its representation of womanly virtue and vice is profusely expounded upon: the figure of the virtuous Rajputni is epitomized in the hero's faithful wife, who persistently tries to dissuade her husband from going to war and ultimately chooses death over life as a widow, and is juxtapositioned with the malevolent mother-in-law, who lures the protagonist to war through malicious taunts that ultimately deliver him to his death. In this respect, the *jheṛā* tradition, although locally recognized as conveying historical truth, clearly tinkers with facts in order to construe narratives that suit orthodox Rajput views of gender roles.

An alternative telling of the story from Kangra sheds further light on Pahari Rajput attitudes towards women.[20] Transcribed from an oral performance a century after the war, this substantially shorter version opens with a narrative of the events that preceded the battle and concludes with ten lines of song that eulogize the Katoch victors. Although lacking in historical precision (battle locations, names of individual participants, etc. are rarely mentioned), the account is revealing of Rajput customs and popular perceptions.[21] According to this version, the raja of Sirmaur challenged his Katochi wife to a game of chess, with the head of her brother, Sansar Chand, at stake. The rani reposted with the formulaic taunts attributed to the mother-in-law in the *jheṛā*, and then related the affair to her brother, who declared war on Sirmaur.[22] Details of the battle scenes follow in the sung portion

[20] R. C. Temple, *The Legends of the Panjab*, two volumes, Education Society Press, Bombay, 1884, Vol. 2, pp. 144–47.

[21] Despite its brevity, the text conflates fact with fiction to a remarkable extent: the raja of Sirmaur is cast as the then still unborn Fateh Prakash; the Kangra raja joins forces with his enemy, the leader of Bilaspur; and both wage war on 'Mohan Chand' (most likely confused with the child raja of Bilaspur, Maha Chand) of Kunhiar, a miniscule polity in today's Shimla Hills; ibid.

[22] In the Kangra version, the rani taunts her husband by exclaiming 'my brother's slaves are as many as your whole army'; ibid, p. 145. The Kahluri *jheṛā* offers a more poetic version of the same—'as many soldiers as you have, the same number are my father's horses, which he daily sends grazing at dawn'—that recurs in a later history from Kangra; see Sharma, *Lokgathayen*, p. 132, and *TRZK*, p. 30, respectively.

of the text, which concludes with the freshly widowed rani's return to Kangra alongside her victorious brother.

The primary aim of this account is to enhance Katoch prestige, which is successfully accomplished by addressing fundamental aspects of Pahari Rajput culture: the Kangra warriors' bravery and the explosive potential of domestic situations. However, the familial solidarity implied in Sansar Chand's rescue of his sister from an abusive husband is far removed from the historical reality of vehement animosity between the Katoch leaders of Kangra and Bilaspur. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the provenance of the two versions results in the Katochi rani being assigned antithetical roles: for the defeated party's *jheṛā* she is an evil mother-in-law who is partly responsible for the hero's death, while in the Kangra version she is the vanquished raja's wife, who is justly widowed by her protective brother. That the Kangra account insists on the rani's return to her natal kingdom is significant, for it not only highlights unity among the Katoch, but also deprives Sirmaur of a substitute figurehead of state (a widowed rani) after its monarch's death, thereby undermining the stability and legitimacy of its regime.

The different accounts of the battle of Chinjhiar were aimed at predominantly male audiences and circulated widely at both the court and popular levels. Accordingly, both versions misrepresent the place and role of women by subscribing to stereotypical representations that are rooted in local culture and expressed in fixed themes and formulas. While it is possible to overcome these impediments to historical enquiry in the case of prominent figures like Nagardevi Katochi, tracing the political biographies of mid-ranking women of the Pahari aristocracy, such as the widow of the slain raja of Sirmaur, remains exceedingly difficult. The latter's identity can nonetheless be determined by consulting the archival records of the East India Company, which reveal further information about the role of women in the Pahari Rajput world.

Rajputnis as status symbols

In 1827, the raja of Sirmaur wrote a letter of complaint to the Resident in his capital regarding the continued absence of two ranis from his court. The ranis had been residing in Kangra since the death of their husband in the battle of Chinjhiar and had already been instructed to return to Nahan by the Company's first settlement officer some

12 years earlier. Since then, however, the matter 'remained in status quo' as the officer had left for Calcutta shortly afterwards and failed to ensure his order was followed.[23] The fallen hero of Chinjhiar thus had had (at least) two wives, who not only neglected to become sati after his death, but were also taken to Kangra by the triumphant Sansar Chand. Neither rani, however, seems to have been a sister of Sansar Chand, as their titles ('Kottogee and Boghdurree') hint they belonged to the smaller polities (*thakurai*) of today's Shimla Hills.

Further reading of the archives, however, does allow the historical person behind the Katochi rani who recurs in the different accounts of Chinjhiar to be traced. The rani is indeed found to have been a sister of Sansar Chand and the widow of the aforementioned raja of Sirmaur, Jagat Prakash (r. 1773–92).[24] After her husband's passing, the rani was granted a *jagir* (land grant) by her brother-in-law and successor to the Sirmaur throne, Dharm Prakash (r. 1792–96), which was sustained after his death at Chinjhiar during the early years of the next ruler, Karm Prakash (r. 1796–1809). The widowed rani's subsequent meddling in Sirmauri politics induced the raja to order her imprisonment, at which point she escaped to the safety of her Kangra homeland.[25] The entanglement of a Katochi rani's memory in the accounts of Chinjhiar, which alternately describe her as an evil mother-in-law (in the Kahluri *jheṛā*) and as a courageous spouse who is rescued by her brother (in the Kangra version), thus seems to be inspired by this particular individual, affording an important reminder of the enmeshment of familial relations in Pahari politics.

Apart from clarifying the erroneous incorporation of the Katochi rani in oral accounts, the letter of 1827 is instructive of the gaps between prescribed ideals and actual conduct among Pahari Rajputs insofar as it indicates that the wives of defeated rulers were regarded as victors' spoils rather than as fuel for funeral pyres. That the defeated side was expected to finance the ranis in their new environment

[23] IOR F/4/1181/30743 (11), Fateh Prakash to William Murray, 16 February 1827, fo. 16–17.

[24] The 14-year-old Jagat Prakash insisted on passing through Bilaspur to attend the marriage ceremony at Kangra. As Sirmaur and Kangra were then (*circa* 1777) allied against Bilaspur, the young raja effectively fought his way to matrimony and back; see F. Hamilton, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal and of the Territories Annexed to this Dominion by the House of Gorkha*, Archibald Constable and Company, Edinburgh, 1819, pp. 303–04.

[25] On the rani's provocation of 'disturbances throughout the raj', see IOR F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 6 January 1816, fo. 77–81.

suggests this was more of an established custom than an exception, while incidentally pointing to a somewhat darker (if not entirely conscious) motive for the propagation of the sati ideal: it is, after all, far easier to praise a dead rani for her virtues than to pay for a royal widow's maintenance in a former foe's court, an act that is as financially cumbersome to the defeated party as it is publicly humiliating. The raising of the issue some three decades after the battle of Chinjhiar attests to the continued importance attached to the absent ranis in the Nahan Court, which was succinctly explained in the raja's letter:

> The Maha Rajah Dhurm Purkaush, my grandfather, was killed on the boundary of Kuttooch, and I am unable to send their [the ranis'] stipend to Kungra. I request orders may be given that the Ranee[s] return to Nahun and partake of our honour and reputation, this will greatly add to my felicity. Should they return to Nahun, an addition will be made to their former stipend [as sending] it to Kungra reflects dishonour on me.[26]

The association of the allocation of a stipend with the need to maintain honour (*izzat*) suggests these fundamental aspects of Rajput political culture remained relevant to Pahari elites under British rule. The Sirmaur raja's offer is thus best understood as a business transaction, in which the monarch 'purchases' prestige to redeem his family's honour by ceasing to pay what was most likely perceived as tribute in exchange for the increased expenditure that would be incurred by hosting the noblewomen in his court. The raja's professed concern for the ranis notwithstanding, his family would have hardly needed the aid of a British middleman to conclude a deal with Kangra. Rather, the matter seems to have been left aside due to internal considerations; namely, the need of the Guleri Rani, who was then acting as regent, to curb the influence of competing ranis in the capital. It was thus only after his mother's death (in 1827) that the raja could attempt to resolve the affair, which explains his letter's appearance at this juncture.

Although the maintenance of royal women in neighbouring courts played an important part in Pahari politics, the role of ranis was not exclusively ceremonial. By establishing a marital alliance, a rani entering her husband's kingdom not only partook in his family's prestige, but also received land grants, access to free labour (*begar*),

[26] IOR F/4/1181/30743 (11), Fateh Prakash to William Murray, [16–22?] February 1827, fo. 17.

luxury commodities, and, once established in her new abode, was free to advance her personal and natal clan's aims by influencing the internal workings of court.[27] The relations between royal families were thus constantly tested, the benefits in prestige and material gains being weighed afresh with each marriage proposal. The resultant flux in social hierarchies baffled British administrators, who found it difficult 'to indicate the line which separates the Rajpoot from the clans immediately below him'.[28] In the period under investigation, the Katoch of Kangra underwent a distinct shift from a preliminary phase of liberally marrying women 'out' during their rise to power (mid-eighteenth century) to severely limiting alliances with external families during Sansar Chand's supremacy (at the turn of the nineteenth-century), when marriage to a 'blue-veined Katoch' became the ultimate prize for aspiring rulers.[29] The beginning of the nineteenth century thus saw Katochi Rajputnis at the helm of the most substantial kingdom's surrounding Kangra, including Bilaspur, Kullu, Mandi, and Sirmaur. The latter kingdom's rani—the Guleri Rani of Spivak fame—occupied a particularly important place among her peers given her provenance with the senior branch of the Katoch (the Gulerias), which allowed her to retain significant powers even after the transition to British rule.

The Guleri Rani

After its defeat at Chinjhiar, the Sirmauri regime underwent progressive deterioration under the inexperienced raja, Karm Prakash (r. 1796–1809, d. 1826), which would only be remedied by the astute

[27] In 1840s Bashahr, for example, the raja's Garhwali wife was accused of usurping power by introducing servants from her natal state into the administration; see National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI), Foreign Department: Political Proceedings, no. 2515, Edwards to Elliot, 23 November 1847, fo. 291–93.

[28] G. C. Barnes, *Report on the Settlement in the District of Kangra in the Trans-Sutlej States, 1850–52*, Hope Press, Lahore, 1862 [1855], p. 83. This view of Rajput society in 1846 Kangra persisted into the next generation, when it was described as being in a state of 'chaos'; see H. A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab & North-West Frontier Province*, Government Printing, Lahore, 1914 [1883], p. 282.

[29] M. Singh, *History of Mandi State*, Times Pr., Lahore, 1930, p. 87. By the 1860s, the Katoch elite's selectivity in marital alliances peaked to the point of requiring British intervention to relax its criteria for marriage with other Rajput families; NAI, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, no. 143, Wood to Canning, 24 December 1861, fo. 1.

manoeuvrings of his second wife, the Guleri Rani. The third of four brothers, Karm Prakash was never groomed to rule and his reign is widely remembered as one of maladministration and strife.[30] His first decade in power was characterized by continual tensions between corrupt ministers, increasingly marginalized nobles, and an overtaxed citizenry that periodically took to revolt, and culminated in a *coup d'etat* that dramatically altered power relations in the hills. Having fled east of the Yamuna River, the raja secured the support of Nepal's Gorkha army (which had been steadily expanding through the West Himalayas since 1790) and returned to Nahan as a client of Kathmandu, enabling the latter's westward expansion in the process. Six years later (in 1809), the raja fell out of grace with his new masters and was once again forced to flee. Arriving in the British-controlled plains with his family and a handful of advisers, Karm Prakash stood out in his 'absolute state of misery', being 'without those resources which many of the lesser chiefs had secured [since resettling in the plains following the Gorkha conquest of 1803]'.[31] The Sirmauri royals were thus in particularly dire straits compared to their compatriots, including their erstwhile opponents in the Sirmaur nobility, who had been in continual contact with Company officers since 1803 (when they had quit Nahan) and with whom they were fervently preparing their return to power after the impending Anglo-Gorkha War (1814–16).[32] It was under these highly unfavourable circumstances that the Guleri Rani emerged as the saviour of the Prakash dynasty.

During their sojourn in the plains, symptoms of the raja's 'loathsome disease' (most likely correctly identified by Spivak as syphilis) became increasingly apparent and impeded him from making public appearances. The royal seal was consequently entrusted to his spouse, who conducted extensive negotiations with regional leaders over the family's future. The most important of these proved to be Sir David Ochterlony (1758–1825), the supreme commander of Company troops in the region and future hero of the Anglo-Gorkha War. During their meetings, Ochterlony developed a deep commitment to the rani and her son which would have long-lasting effects on Sirmaur's

[30] For the reign of Karm Prakash, see R. Singh, A. N. Walia (trans.), *Sirmaur Riyasat ka Itihas (History of Sirmaur State*, originally entitled *Tawarikh-e-Sirmur-Riyasat*) (hereafter *SRI*), Himachal Pradesh Academy of Arts, Languages and Cultures, Delhi, 2007 [1912], pp. 222–29.

[31] IOR F/4/571/13997, Ochterlony to Adam, 12 June 1815, fo. 19.

[32] On the war and its outcomes, see J. Pemble, *The Invasion of Nepal: John Company at War*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971.

future.[33] By the time the Company went to war, the officer had cleared the rani's path to power by securing a written promise from her 'notorious' husband to be absent from Sirmaur should it come under British rule and an approval for his wife to act as regent for their infant son.[34] The Gorkhas' ousting from Nahan in 1815 thus saw Karm Prakash (and his remaining wives) settle in the plains, while the Guleri Rani and her son resumed life in the capital.

After several months of turbulence, the kingdom's nobles and subjects came to accept the rani's regime, which was assisted by a Company-appointed *munshi* (scribe or clerk) (effectively acting as *wazir*) and Captain Geoffrey Birch, Ochterlony's personal choice of Resident for Nahan.[35] This veneer of political stability masked profound uncertainties that continued to haunt the court, since the rani was still coming to terms with the break with tradition entailed in her appointment as regent while her husband, the erstwhile raja, was still alive. The latter's reappearance in the hills shortly afterwards brought the rift between her position and Rajput norm to the fore.

Karm Prakash settled in the pilgrimage town of Trilokpur below Nahan in January 1816 in anticipation of the winter *navaratra*s (the name of a Hindu festial held twice a year—literally, 'nine nights'). This violation of earlier agreements with the Company was widely attributed (by both the British and local elements) to the rapid deterioration in the raja's mental faculties as a result of his disease. The raja's 'retinue and establishment' were thus described as 'out of all proportion to his pension of three hundred rupees a month, having upwards of a hundred sepoys, and at least that number of private servants, and about twenty men whom he has hired to keep up the appearance of a Durbar and bear him company, as he hires every one who will contribute to gratifying his vanities and follies'; and while Birch and Ochterlony went to great lengths to remove the raja from Trilokpur, they consistently failed to influence the 'perversely violent' exile.[36] Karm Prakash's reported 'irrational disposition' aside,

[33] Ochterlony's failed attempt to secure a pension from Calcutta for the Sirmauri royals affords the earliest evidence of his favourable disposition towards the rani; see IOR F/4/425/10403, Ochterlony to Adam, 1 March 1813, fo. 10–13.

[34] IOR F/4/571/13997, Ochterlony to Adam, 28 September 1815, fo. 54.

[35] On popular opposition to the rani's rule, see ibid, Birch to Metcalfe, 10 February 1816, fo. 97–118. For Ochterlony's assistance in banishing the opposition leader from Nahan, consult IOR F/4/570/13992, Birch to Ochterlony, 12 October 1815, fo. 23–24.

[36] IOR F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January1816, fo. 87–89.

his choice to settle in Trilokpur at that point rested on remarkably sound logic, since Sirmauri rulers were the traditional patrons of its 'Great Fair' and customarily received a portion of 'the customs and duties collected' during it.[37] In establishing a *durbar* (formal reception hall) in Trilokpur, the raja was thus not merely threatening to destablise Nahan, but effectively reclaiming authority as sovereign in contestation of the nascent political order headed by his wife. For the rani, this meant receiving a continual stream of messages, in which he implored her to join him in exile and emphasized the impropriety of their separation. The appeal to this breach of tradition (possibly accentuated by grief over the loss of her once sane husband) seems to have perturbed the rani to the point of threatening to become sati. This episode, its misreading by Spivak, and the consequences for scholarly research are treated in detail below. For now, suffice it to note that the rani remained in a persistent state of dejection even after her husband had left Trilokpur upon conclusion of the fair.

The sovereign regent, 1815–27

The emergence of Sirmaur as a prominent kingdom during the first decades of British rule in the West Himalayas is closely linked with the Guleri Rani's policies as regent and more broadly related to the 'deliberate misrepresentation[s] and manipulation[s]' that characterized the early colonial encounter.[38] The beginnings of this process can be traced to Ochterlony's intervention in Nahan following reports of the administrative mahem that resulted from the rani's continued despair in the aftermath of the Trilokpur episode. Mindful of his protégée's interests, the officer invited the regent and her son to visit him in the plains, where he could instruct them in governance so that 'the Sirmoor Raj may prosper and ... there shall be money enough to recover the Raja's ancestral territory [that the

[37] Ibid, Ochterlony to Birch, 27 September 1815, fo. 59. On the Sirmaur rajas' links with Trilokpur, see *SRI*, pp. 182–83.

[38] R. O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject. *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22:1, 1988, pp. 189–224, quotation from p. 217. For details of the rani's policies as regent, see A. Moran, 'Permutations of Rajput Identity in the West Himalayas, c. 1790–1840', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2010, pp. 139–45.

East India Company had annexed after the war]'.[39] Contrary to the bulk of communications with Indian states which employ vague terms (e.g. 'good government') that could be shifted and reinterpreted to perpetuate British rule, Ochterlony's wording is explicit, and his document subsequently formed the legal basis for the valley of Kiarda's reannexation in 1832.[40] In exploiting the letter to advance Sirmauri interests, the ruler of Nahan abided by a strategy that had originated with his mother's regency, in which East India Company sensibilities were exploited to the kingdom's benefit. In this respect, the official regaining of Kiarda in 1832 was but the culmination of a series of anterior manoeuvres that had brought the valley under the effective rule of Nahan soon after its conquest in the Anglo-Gorkha War.

Stretching from Nahan to the Yamuna River, the valley of Kiarda had been widely recognized by Paharis as Sirmaur territory since as early as the seventeenth century. Under Company rule, the valley was converted into a civil district whose revenue collections were entrusted to a zamindar from West Sirmaur in keeping with Calcutta's directive of adherence to 'prevailing usages'. The appointment, which was enacted by the Nahan Resident, Geoffrey Birch, was meant to sever links with Sirmaur insofar as the collector's father had evicted the fugitive royals from his territory in 1809. However, the rani's trenchant authority over Kiarda ultimately forced him to cede collection rights to Nahan and officially renew his allegiance to her rule.[41] The extension of Sirmaur's authority was further assisted by the East India Company's preoccupation with increasing agricultural productivity in the valley, which allowed the Nahan coffers to be

[39] IOR F/4/1483/58470, Ochterlony to Rannee of Sirmoor, 13 December 1816, fo. 13–14. Ochterlony's professed intention to restore tracts to the kingdom suffices to counter Spivak's 'conviction' that the kingdom's dismemberment was 'in the cards'; Spivak, 'Rani of Sirmur', p. 266.

[40] This despite the Company's official deed (*sanad*) to Nahan, which explicitly forbade the ruler to 'think of laying claim' to severed territories; see C. U. Aitchison (comp.), *A Collection of Treatises, Engagements and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries*, 4th edition, 13 volumes, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1909, Vol. 8, p. 317. For the raja's referral to Ochterlony's letter in a petition to the East India Company, see IOR F/4/1483/58470, Rajah of Sirmoor to Clerk, 12 August 1832, fo. 12. For acknowledgement of this document's importance in Sirmauri historiography, consult *SRI*, p. 243.

[41] For the zamindar's appointment, see IOR F/4/571/13998(1), Birch to Metcalfe, 3 March 1816, fo. 179; on the transfer of collection rights to Nahan, consult IOR F/4/1429/56516, Clerk to Prinsep, 10 October 1831, fo. 16; for the renewal of the refractory zamindar's allegiance, see *Sirmur State Gazetteer 1934*, Indus Publishing Company, Delhi, 1996 [1934], p. 18.

filled with revenues from alternative sources in the valley, such as the (officially illegal) taxing of transit goods at mountain passes and at river crossings.[42] Apart from facilitating the transfer of Company territory to 'a foreign prince', which the Delhi Resident deplored,[43] the rani's policies sustained an economic growth that increased the kingdom's annual income from 37,000 to 53,000 rupees between 1817 and 1830 alone.[44] This would have directly contributed to Sirmaur's rise to prominence, since the redistribution of powers after the war was carefully fashioned to balance the incomes of the four largest kingdoms in the region—Sirmaur, Garhwal, Handur, and Bilaspur—at around 40,000 rupees per annum.

The circumvention of Company restrictions was complemented by the rani's position as insider of the Pahari elite. Specifically, diplomacy and ceremonials allowed the crown to retain its influence over former tributaries in the Shimla Hills, despite the East India Company's official annulment of hierarchical relations between the states. The investiture of the ruler (*thakur*) of Tharoch in 1818, for example, was arranged by the rani and presided over by her nine-year-old son alongside distinguished visitors from Lahore. The order of seating and the presence of Khalsa officials deep in Company territory (instead of, say, British officers) reflects a freedom in foreign policy that was diametrically opposed to East India Company directives.[45] Such displays of power also held material benefits, as in the erstwhile highland polity of Jubbal, whose ruler was still forwarding tribute to Nahan in 1831.[46] The rani's foresight is also discernible in the education programme devised for her son. Apart from the study of

[42] Transit duties had risen from 1,000 to 3,000 rupees per annum between 1815 and 1824, reaching 13,735 by 1847; see IOR F/4/1429/56516, Clerk to Prinsep, 10 October 1831, fo. 16–20 (for tax rates in 1815 and 1824, and notes on wood felling and timber traffic), and Aitchison, *Collection*, Vol. 8, p. 303 (for tax rates in 1847).

[43] IOR F/4/1181/30743(11), Metcalfe to Stirling, 21 June 1827, fo. 10.

[44] This information was proudly furnished by the raja himself; C. J. C. Davidson, *Diary of Travels and Adventures in Upper India: from Bareilly, in Rohilcund, to Hurdwar, and Nahun, in the Himmalaya Mountains, with a Tour in Bundelcund, a Sporting Excursion in the Kingdom of Oude, and a Voyage down the Ganges*, 2 volumes, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 2004 [1843], Vol. 1, p. 158.

[45] IOR F/4/1429/56516, Extract political letter to Bengal, 7 April 1824, fo. 5, citing a letter of 15 January 1820 regarding the settlement of Joobul, and IOR F/4/764, North-West Provinces: Political Department Report, 1 January 1841, fo. 1127–28.

[46] The Jubbal ruler reportedly sent 1,000 of his 6–7,000 rupees in annual revenue to Nahan; V. Jacquemont, *État Politique et Social de l'Inde du Nord en 1830: extraits de son Journal de Voyage*, l'Académie des Sciences Coloniales et la Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Françaises, Paris, 1933, p. 307.

Sanskrit and princely etiquette, the rani stressed the patronage of Pahari painters. This is not entirely surprising given the regent's origins in Guler, the kingdom that produced what are arguably the finest specimens of Pahari paintings.[47] The child-raja consequently became a discerning collector and passionate patron of painting, a kingly activity that also served political purposes. His sister's marriage to a descendant of the erstwhile master-patron, Sansar Chand, thus increased the prestige of both Houses: the artists in the incoming prince's retinue enriching those with artistic persuasions in Nahan to form a novel 'Sirmaur School' of painting, which added to the kingdom's prestige as the last bastion of royal patronage for the art.[48]

Finally, the rani's careful attention to family politics was crucial for securing the kingdom a leading position among the hill states. By keeping a check on the location and pensions of her widowed relations (e.g. the widows mentioned in the letter of 1827, above), the rani preserved power and reduced the influence of subversive elements such as Jagat Prakash's infamous Katochi widow. Looking to the future, the regent was meticulous in planning the marriages of the succeeding generation: five of her son's six marriages were arranged before he had turned 15 and, once they were settled in Nahan, the incoming spouses' movements were closely monitored.[49] The same care was extended to her daughters, who were married into the most prestigious families in the hills through the support of Ochterlony, who secured a waiver of the tax on royal marriages (*phant-biahlari*) at the rani's request.[50]

From second wife to a floundering raja to resourceful exile to powerful regent, the political biography of the Guleri Rani is consistent with that of anterior Rajputnis like Nagardevi Katochi. Thus, despite her officially limited mandate, the rani cleverly manipulated and/or

[47] The painters who accompanied the Guleri Rani to Nahan upon her marriage are believed to have occupied important positions in government; S. Vashisht (ed.), *Himachal Pradesh ke Dharmik Sansthan (Religious Sites of Himachal Pradesh)*, Himachal Academy of Arts, Cultures and Languages, Delhi, 2004, p. 89. The existence of similar artist-statesmen in the region, such as Mola Ram of Garhwal, seems to support this claim; see M. Lal, *Garhwal Painting*, Publication Division, Ministry of Broadcasting and Information, Government of India, New Delhi, 1982 [1968].

[48] On painting in Sirmaur, see W. G. Archer, *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills: A Survey and History of Pahari Miniature Painting*, 2 volumes, Sotheby Parke Bernet, London, 1973, Vol. 1, pp. 413–16.

[49] The raja's retrospective accusation that his mother had poisoned his favourite (and therefore dangerously influential) wife is further evidence of the Guleri Rani's pervasive influence; see Davidson, *Diary*, Vol. 1, pp. 167–68.

[50] *Sirmaur State Gazetteer 1934*, p. 18. For details on these marriages, see *SRI*, pp. 250–51.

ignored British regulations to empower her kingdom through recourse to her high-ranking benefactor and local customs alike. How does this portrait measure against Spivak's depiction of a woman so utterly oppressed that she could only regain her voice by threatening suicide? Part of the answer lies in the particular functions and meanings of sati in the West Himalayas in the early days of British rule.

Sati and female agency in British India

The demonstrated access of Pahari noblewomen to power in the decades surrounding the early colonial encounter contradicts their depiction in local traditions outlined above. The predictable adoption of this approach by East India Company officials aside, its perseverance in the writings of some present day-scholars is puzzling. For Spivak, for example, the privileged position of men in Indian society came at the expense of women, who were further marginalized by the biases of British rule, which resulted in the suppression of their voices from history. This argument, presented in various forms, is nowhere more apparent than in the legion studies on sati, which is often depicted as the 'silencing rite' par excellence. Assessing the rite in the context of Pahari Rajput elites at the onset of British rule helps to explain how such decorative claims gained acceptance, while allowing for a re-evaluation of the Guleri Rani's sati and Spivak's interpretation thereof.

Sati in the Pahari setting: manipulating tradition in Bashahr

The custom of sati, traditionally conceived of as the immolation of a widow upon her husband's death, was known and practised by the Pahari ruling class centuries prior to the British conquest.[51] While it is impossible to determine the actual extent of its occurrence, it is clear that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the notion that widowed wives should join their husband's funeral pyre had developed into the supreme ideal of womanhood among the Pahari elite. This

[51] On *barsela* stones commemorating satis, see P. Bindra, 'Memorial Stones in Himachal' in S. Settar and G. Sontheimer (eds), *Memorial Stones: A Study of their Origin, Significance and Variety*, Institute of Indian Art History, Karnataka University, Dharwad, 1982, pp. 175–82.

ideal diffused into other parts of society through the public worship of former ranis as *satimatas* (deities charged with the protection of kingdoms) and in popular narratives that praised past satis.[52] While the distance between the roles prescribed for womanly conduct and their actual implementation was often vast, instances of Rajputnis becoming sati occurred throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and coincided with increased British interest in the rite. Sati thus figured prominently in exchanges between Pahari elites and Company officials, in the course of which it acquired new meanings and novel interpretations. A cogent example of the underlying interests propelling these discussions may be found in the records pertaining to post-war Bashahr.

Shortly after the Company's triumph, Robert Ross, the second of Ochterlony's officers entrusted with conducting revenue settlements in the hills (along with Birch in Sirmaur), arrived at the capital of Bashahr, the largest and remotest state to come under British rule. Ross was instructed to form an administration based on 'local usages' that would be capable of complying with the Company's tribute demands. In order to achieve this, he first had to establish a clear hierarchy of power at court, where confusion had prevailed since the late raja's death a few years earlier. While the government was ably managed by the chief *wazir*, the role of paramount authority during the minority of the late ruler's son was contested between the child-raja's mother (the deceased's second wife) who hailed from the modest highland chiefdom of Dhami and the late raja's first wife, who came from the infinitely more prestigious kingdom of Sirmaur.[53] Although this division was already present during the war, a Company envoy to the hills noted the noblewomen's friendship and consequently

[52] In recalling the aftermath of the defeat at Chinjhiar, twentieth-century Kahluri elites emphasized the looting of deities from Bilaspur temples, especially that of the deified wife (*satimata*) of the kingdom's founder; see *BK*, p. 25. For songs lauding satis in the Shimla hills, see Sharma, *Lokgathaen*, pp. 168–81. On *satimata* worship in contemporary Rajasthan, consult L. Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p. 172, fn. 20.

[53] The royal household was depleted of additional contenders at the raja's cremation, when 'twenty-two persons of both sexes burnt themselves along with his body; of these, twelve were females, and three Ranees; one or two of his wuzzeers, and his first chobedar'; Fraser, *Journal*, p. 250. On the history of Bashahr in this transitory period, see A. Moran, 'From Mountain Trade to Jungle Politics: The Transformation of Kingship in Bashahr, 1815–1914', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 44:2 (2007), pp. 151–155.

recommended that 'the reins of government should partly be entrusted to the Surmoure Rannee'.[54] However, by the time of Ross's visit, the ranis' relationship had soured: the Dhamiani rani was demanding protection from the elder queen, whom she accused of conspiring to assassinate her infant son and herself. After a careful investigation into the matter, in which he made 'every allowance for Asiatic exaggeration and for the unmeasured vehemence with which female resentment sometimes finds vent', Ross decreed that since there was 'little chance of cordiality after such an accusation' it would be best to nominate the young raja's mother as regent exclusive of her rival.[55]

In explaining his decision, the officer repeated the arguments advanced by the Bashahri elite in the course of consultations, according to which the Sirmauri rani had 'indisputably ceased [to have a right to govern] on her neglecting to become *suttee* with the remains of her husband as that of every Hindoo female of rank does, who being neither pregnant nor having children to nurture and educate declines immolating herself on the funeral pile [*sic*] of her lord'. The officer added his personal gloss on the matter to explain the rationale behind this decision:

> While we shudder at a superstitious enactment of abhorrence to humanity, yet on a question of right and in arguing on usage it must be allowed its weight. If these premises therefore have been correctly stated, the Surmore Rannee has no claim of Right to a share in the government nor do I conceive her to possess any on the ground of expediency ... [for] to give the Surmore Rannee a share in the Government of Bussaher would materially interfere with the simplicity of its form, would impinge an established usage and sow the seeds of faction, intrigue and disorder.[56]

Resigned to the moral comfort of cultural relativism, the officer's solution was made simple: in failing to become sati, the elder rani had relinquished her right to govern. The transition from alleged custom to unwritten law is telling of the situation on the Pahari frontier, where the lack of written legal devices (the Bashahr state archives were allegedly burned during the Gorkha occupation) saw regional traditions develop into rules whose meaning was open to interpretation. This allowed the Dhamiani rani to exploit the British officer's ignorance of local traditions at the expense of her rival. The

[54] IOR F/4/570/13992, Ross [referencing Fraser] to Metcalfe, 6 November 1815, fo. 56–57.
[55] Ibid, fo. 58–59.
[56] Ibid, fo. 58–60.

interpretation of the perceived custom of widow immolation as law thus worked to the satisfaction of both parties: conditioned by their respective backgrounds, the rani used the rite to gain the regency and shame her rival, while Ross could come to terms with its 'abhorrence to humanity' by adopting a legal criterion for adjudicating similar disputes that were certain to arise in his dealings with other Pahari states.

The importance of honour as a factor influencing the behaviour of Pahari elites is significant.[57] In highlighting the elder rani's 'shame' at outliving her husband, the contender not only outdid her competition but also bought her silence. The elder rani thus acquiesced to relocate to a minimal *jagir* far from Bashahr's political centre which greatly diminished her influence at court. Although officially a lucrative holding, the tract barely sufficed to cover the noblewoman's expenses. The rani, however, preferred to hide her descent into (relative) poverty than admit to an inconsistency between her living conditions and social rank.[58] The cardinal role of honour and shame in determining the comportment of women of the Pahari elite, it will be seen, played a central part in the Guleri Rani's threat to become sati. Another important factor was the increased concern over the rite among British officials.

East India Company understandings of Pahari sati

The mention of sati in Bashahr would have tapped into a larger set of worries haunting the settlement officer, for it was precisely in this period that the heated debates about abolishing the rite were reaching their zenith.[59] As Andrea Major observes, sati came to reflect the 'internal struggle of a society' that was reinventing itself 'as progressive and humane' even as its different components—in both India *and* Britain—struggled to define what 'civilized behaviour' actually was.[60] The exchanges between Company officers and Pahari

[57] Like other aspects of Rajput culture, today the notion of honour is central to Pahari women throughout the social spectrum; see K. Narayan, '"Honor is Honor, after all": Silence and Speech in the Life Stories of Women in Kangra, North-West India' in D. Arnold and S. Blackburn (eds), *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 227–51.

[58] IOR F/4/570/13992, Ross to Metcalfe, 1 April 1816, fo. 110–112.

[59] For a nuanced analysis of these debates in Bengal, see L. Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988. On the history of European reactions to the rite, consult A. Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati, 1500–1830*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006.

[60] Ibid, p. 142.

ranis on sati thus took place in a particularly charged environment, independent of the clashes and displacements inherent in the transition to British rule. For East India Company administrators in the Himalayas, suppressing the rite helped affirm their 'humane' superiority in a region that was perceived as lying beyond the pale of civilization. This approach was accentuated in the decades that followed Ross's settlement in Bashahr and that officially culminated with the rite's abolition in 1829. The absence of satis at the death of Bilaspur's raja in 1824 was thus gleefully reported as progress from 'the obligation of human sacrifices' and juxtapositioned with the 'incredible' number of martyrs who had joined his predecessor's funeral pyre.[61] Such confident tones, however, say more about the zeal of Company servants in the hills than about any decline in the prevalence of sati, as widow immolations continued to be reported throughout this period.[62]

If Company officials shared a common understanding of sati, attitudes among Paharis—and women of the aristocracy, in particular—were more complex. As seen above, leading Pahari Rajputnis had no qualms about manipulating the rite to their advantage. In this capacity, sati falls into the same category as the allocation of pensions for women of royal households, a type of 'local usage' that was redefined by Rajputnis in positions of power in their interactions with British authorities.[63] That the profits to be gained from such manoeuvres were far removed from the experience of the average Pahari woman, let alone Indian women in the plains, is significant, for it is precisely the latter who inform the most elaborate scholarly studies on the subject.

Lata Mani persuasively argues that the multiple discourses emanating from the debates about the abolition of sati by the male-dominated parties of foreign missionaries, British administrators, and Bengali *bhadralok* relegated women to a passive role that 'erased'

[61] Punjab Government, *Punjab Government Records, Vol. 1: Records of the Delhi Residency and Agency, 1807–57*, Lahore, Punjab Government Press, 1911, Gerard to Kennedy, 20 November 1824, p. 319. Beyond British territory, sati persisted as before. The death of the raja of Mandi in 1826 thus saw '26 ladies of the harem' join the funeral pyre; Singh, *History of Mandi State*, p. 93.

[62] See, for example, IOR F/4/1483/58471, Kennedy to Fraser, 20 June 1832, fo. 5–7. The last sati in Sirmaur reportedly took place in 1834 (more on this below).

[63] The Sirmauri-born widows of the raja of Bilaspur similarly exploited British biases at their husband's death in 1839 to secure hefty pensions from Company officials in exchange for foregoing the rite; IOR F/4/1829/75522, Clerk to Metcalfe, 13 April 1839, fo. 6–7.

their voice from the public arena and, consequently, from history itself.[64] Mani's assertion, which was offered as an alternative answer to Spivak's question: 'Can the subaltern speak?', is relevant to the Pahari case insofar as where Mani found a voice that was silenced, Spivak determined that speech was not possible to begin with. The evidence presented above suggests that for Pahari Rajputnis of the ruling class, at least, this was not the case. As the Guleri Rani's career indicates, such women not only spoke and were heard, but they also actively 'worlded their worlds' (to borrow Spivak's Heidegerrian phrasing) both prior to and after the establishment of British rule. Why, then, did the rani threaten to kill herself? To answer this, it is necessary to account for the rani's peculiar situation and its relation to the values of her milieu.

The Guleri Rani's sati

Recall conditions in Nahan at the time of the Guleri Rani's declaration. Barely six months into her regency, the regent was still recovering from a series of disastrous attempts at governance that nearly ended in popular revolt when her husband unexpectedly returned to the pilgrimage town below the capital in what was effectively a reclamation of authority over the kingdom. Throughout his stay, the raja feverishly communicated with his wife through messengers who scaled the seven-hour footpath to her hilltop palace. In his letters, the erstwhile ruler stressed the shamefulness of his spouse's situation by highlighting the impropriety of their separation and insisting that she join him in exile. Several weeks later, the perturbed rani announced that 'her life and the raja's are one'.[65] Interpreting this as a threat to become sati, the Resident at Nahan swiftly reported the matter to his superiors, who made concerted efforts—including the recruitment of court pundits to add scriptural authority to their decrees—to ensure that the rani retain the regency and oversee the education of her son. Such is the information available in the archival records.

Since the rani ultimately did not become sati but lived to dominate Sirmauri (and regional) politics until her death, her threat of suicide begs explanation. According to Spivak, the rani's announcement

[64] Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, p. 190.

[65] IOR F/4/571/13997, Birch to Metcalfe, 1 March 1816, fo. 123. For evidence of the raja's appeal to Rajput sensibilities, see ibid, Birch to Metcalfe, 20 January 1816, fo. 86.

comprised a 'Speech Act' insofar as it was the only means by which she could assert agency in the face of an oppressive patriarchal husband and intrusive East India Company officials. This enticing interpretation would be valid had the rani not amply demonstrated her capacity to take action before (as negotiator on behalf of her husband during exile) and after (as sovereign in Nahan) this event. Combined with the abovementioned findings on the manipulation of sati in Bashahr, these factors suggest the rani may well have used the rite as a ploy to manipulate Birch: in hinting at her intent to become sati, the regent could have pushed for the reinstatement of her husband to the throne or, somewhat more craftily, for his removal from the kingdom so that she might govern unhindered.[66] Such a Machiavellian reading of the event is, however, not entirely satisfactory since it fails to account for the effect of cultural norms and values on the rani's actions. The reasons for the regent's declaration should thus be sought elsewhere.

As Spivak notes, the threat of sati reflects a critical point in the Guleri Rani's life. This critical moment, however, has less to do with the twofold oppression by husband and Resident than with the break from tradition entailed by the rani's acting as regent while being separated from her husband. The threat of suicide is thus best read as the climactic implosion of tensions ensuing from these irreconcilable aspects of her circumstances. The deranged raja's appeal to Rajput sensibilities—most notably, the need to avoid public humiliation—would have played a central part in provoking the rani and is, in this regard, reminiscent of his choice to settle in Trilokpur. If the latter occasion saw the traditional role of Sirmauri sovereigns in pilgrimage festivities harnessed to challenge the new regime, the stress on honour and shame in communications with the rani was similarly calculated to attain a concrete political goal; namely, the recovery of his wife or the dampening of her spirits to the point where she would prove incapable of sovereignty, which would lead to his reinstatement as king. That the raja deliberately targeted his spouse's core beliefs can be deduced from anthropological studies on Rajput women today.

In her study of religion and Rajput women in urban Rajasthan, Lindsey Harlan concluded that 'a wife's all-encompassing

[66] Spivak notes that Birch may have not 'read the Rani right', suggesting she may have 'merely want[ed] to be with her husband and leave her colonized prison palace'. This hypothesis is then dismissed on the grounds of its forming a crude 'critical subject-predication' on the officer's part; Spivak, 'Rani of Sirmur', p. 270. The meaning of this argument is, unfortunately, beyond the grasp of this author.

responsibility is to protect the happiness and health of her husband'. This responsibility manifests in a customary ban on the remarriage of widows which strengthens the notion that 'a woman must do everything in her power to safeguard her husband's longevity'.[67] The link between these precepts and the widespread fear of widowhood in Rajputni circles is apparent in the attitude of Harlan's informants towards women who become sati, which they explained 'as a corrective for the fault of failing to protect ... [a] husband from premature death'. Thus, women who 'lacked the dedication necessary to die as satis were expected to lead a life of penance and privation. The general feeling was that a widow should want to live a hard life to make up for her failure as husband-protector ... [or] *pativratā*, meaning "one who has taken a vow (*vrat*) to [protect] her husband (*pati*)"'.[68]

The pervasiveness of this 'ethos of protection' in Rajput women's lives is, according to Harlan, particularly apparent in attitudes towards marital relations, and is thus—with obvious limitations—instructive in elucidating the Guleri Rani's conduct. Under the unique circumstances of her situation, the rani could not afford the luxury of grieving over a dead husband; for although syphilitic and slightly mad, Karm Prakash was still alive, albeit in forced exile. Her nomination to the regency by the power that was responsible for her husband's expulsion from the kingdom would have compounded her misery insofar as it implicated her in his banishment. Thus, despite her phenomenal success as a political leader, in the domestic sphere the rani had failed to live up to her duties as wife/husband-protector (*pativratā*). The gravity of this inner conflict, as has been seen, sustained the rani's dismal state months after Karm Prakash had left the region and was only alleviated through the timely intervention of David Ochterlony. The Guleri Rani's threat to become sati is therefore more properly interpreted as a momentary surge of anguish that stems from the inconsolability of her situation.

Redressing post-colonial discourse theory and Pahari sati

Having linked the Guleri Rani's threat to become sati to the perpetual divide between the duties of a Rajput wife and the reality of quasi-imposed sovereignty, it remains to be seen why Spivak read the

[67] Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, pp. 43–44.
[68] Ibid, pp. 44–45.

regent's actions as an assertion of agency against oppression from the complementary milieux of Rajput noblemen and British conquerors.

Spivak's interpretation stems from a distinct political agenda that remained consistent even as it was developed and refined in the amalgamation of 'The Rani of Sirmur' (1985) with its ideological successor, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), in the third chapter of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). According to Spivak, the rani's 'disappearance' from history has to do with the broader issue of Western dominance of the developing world, which persists in present-day global capitalism.[69] This interpretation, although sweeping in vision and breadth, overlooks elements that are crucial for situating the rani's sati in context. Thus, while Spivak concedes that her analysis is 'not historical work' insofar as 'historical knowledge cannot be established on single cases',[70] her misreading of evidence goes beyond the boundaries of the discipline as such. For example, despite investing considerable time and energy in research, her writings on the affair fall short of accounting for fundamental characteristics of the Pahari Rajput world, as in the assertion that 'Gulari', 'Gulani', and 'Guleri' are misspelled versions of the rani's first name rather than her official title, which derives from her provenance in the kingdom of Guler.[71] Similar inaccuracies abound,[72] and although they do not necessarily detract from the theoretical exposition, their accumulation depletes her analyses of much-needed nuance in support of the claim that the discourse(s) emanating from the archives is solely bent on reducing the rani to 'an object of knowledge'.[73]

[69] Spivak, *Postcolonial Reason*, p. 304. On the tendency of post-colonial discourse theory to address issues of immediate concern rather than the historical questions it investigates, see D. Washbrook, 'Orients and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire' in R. Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume 5: Historiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 608–09.

[70] Spivak, *Postcolonial Reason*, p. 198. This important clarification is wanting in the original article of 1985.

[71] Ibid, p. 231.

[72] Examples include the grouping together of the Kiarda and Dehra Duns as a single valley stretching between Nahan and the Yamuna River, instead of two distinct territories on either side of the latter (ibid, p. 210); the attribution of Birch's comments regarding the remote highlanders of Jaunsar and Bhawar to the bulk of Sirmauri society (ibid, p. 213); the identification of the refractory zamindar noted above (footnote 41) as a member of the 'House of Sirmur' instead of the loosely connected subordinate that he actually was (ibid, p. 231); and the dating of the rani's death to 1837 rather than 1827 (ibid, p. 244).

[73] Ibid, p. 227. This was more straightforwardly put in Spivak's first and, arguably, more historically inclined version of the article, which sombrely concluded that

If Spivak's analysis dooms the rani to oblivion, its addressing of the British milieu similarly denies its agents human complexity. Accordingly, Captain Geoffrey Birch is portrayed as a pawn of British imperialism in the exclusive service of the Company, despite evidence to the contrary.[74] More importantly, as an enabler of the 'anonymous technique of capital', the officer's unwitting empowerment of local elites through misguided settlement policies (e.g. the myriad methods of extending authority over Kiarda) goes entirely unnoticed.[75] These oversights are compounded in the case of Ochterlony, 'a gentleman ... [who] cordially hated the hill people'. The Boston-born Scotsman who made India his home thus falls prey to post-colonial stereotyping, as his intermarriages, sponsorship of Mughal architecture, and deep integration into North Indian elite culture are effaced to make room for 'the kind of person one imagines in the first flush of enthusiasm against imperialism'.[76]

While the omissions resulting from Spivak's ideological reading of the archives may be misleading, her fresh approach to source material does point to the cardinal importance of interdisciplinary research. It is, indeed, only by applying new readings to different types of texts (e.g. oral traditions, local histories) that the relationship between language and power, which she insists upon in her writings, is most forcefully exposed. In the case of textual depictions of Pahari Rajputni satis by contemporary European and South Asian authors, the predictable differences in interpretation also reveal an overlap in perceptions of West Himalayan society. This shared understanding of Pahari Rajput culture may be discerned by recourse to three

archival production and indigenous patriarchy render it impossible to find any 'real Rani'; Spivak, 'Rani of Sirmur', p. 271.

[74] While Spivak has Birch in continual East India Company service from the age of 16, a contemporary acquaintance reports he was a mercenary with the Marathas before (re)joining the East India Company in 1803; see Spivak, *Postcolonial Reason*, p. 213, and J. B. Fraser, *Military Memoir of Lieut.-Col. James Skinner, C.B.*, two volumes, Smith, Elder and Co., London, 1851, Vol. 1, p. 307, respectively.

[75] Spivak, *Postcolonial Reason*, p. 212.

[76] Ibid, p. 213. For a concise biography, see A. P. Coleman, 'Ochterlony, Sir David, first baronet (1758–1825)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/20492>, [subscription only]. On Ochterlony's marriages with Indian women, see W. Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*, Flamingo, London, 2003 [2002], pp. 30–31, 382–83; and p. 326, fn, for Mughal influences on his architectural legacy at Lahore. For a trusted first-hand account of the elder Ochterlony as an 'Eastern Prince', consult R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824–1825*, 4th edition, three volumes, John Murray, London, 1828, Vol. 2, p. 392–93.

such works that were composed by authors of pronouncedly different backgrounds—a Pahari nobleman, an American mercenary, and an East India Company officer—which demonstrate that the gap between Europeans and Indians was far from unbridgeable.

The last sati in Sirmaur

The *Tawarikh-e-Sirmaur Riyasat* (1912), the official history of the Guleri Rani's erstwhile kingdom, includes a detailed account of the last sati in Sirmaur. Prefacing the event, the author tells of a celebratory visit by the raja of Sirmaur (the Guleri Rani's son) to the recently renovated 'old temple of satis' in 1834, where widows of high standing used to become sati out of 'dutiful loyalty' (*pativrat dharm*).[77] While the event denotes the continued importance of *satimata* worship in this period, the actual sanction of the rite was more problematic insofar as subject Indian rulers were expected to enforce the British ban on sati (enacted in 1829) within their territories. The delicacy of this situation became apparent soon afterwards:

> Mian Hastā, who was an attendant (*sevādār*) of the raja sahib, had died. His wife, who was a beautiful and faithful (*pativratā*) woman, prepared to become sati with her husband. The raja sahib made great efforts to explain to this woman that the English government had ordered to put a stop to sati. The raja sahib himself went to her house and explained that she cannot become sati, but she was unmovable (*aṭal*). Mian Hasta's body thus remained in the house for two more days, since the woman would not let it go. Ultimately, the raja sahib gave her an order (*āgñā*) to become sati and on the morning of the next day she bathed and adorned herself with jewels, sat in the palanquin behind the body of her husband and went to the temple of Jagannath Ji. The dead feet (*caraṇmṛt*) of the *thakur* were taken to the cremation ground and consumed [by fire]. She set fire to herself there along with the dead body of her husband. After this no wife in Nahan-Sirmaur ever became sati again.[78]

As the description of the widow—beautiful, obstinate, faithful—makes clear, the husband-protector (*pativratā*) ideal remained important for early twentieth century-readers. Further, by highlighting the victim's volition, the story agrees with similar accounts from Rajput states, in which the sati's agency is stressed to reify cultural values.[79]

[77] *SRI*, p. 251.
[78] Ibid, pp. 251–52.
[79] A. Major, *Sovereignty and Social Reform in India: British Colonialism and the Campaign against Sati in India, 1830–60*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2010.

Finally, the careful balancing of a monarch subject to East India Company restrictions with the Rajputni's insistence on becoming sati successfully acknowledges the difficulties of the raja's position, while allowing for their resolution. The raja's approval of the rite thus brings the entire state machine into play, which attests to his 'absolute' authority over the kingdom. In sustaining the worship of *satimata*s through the renovation of a designated temple and sanctioning the sati as an exceptional measure, the ruler assumes the role of custodian of Pahari Rajput tradition while operating under British limitations. In this respect, the evolution of Pahari Rajput attitudes towards sati seems to have followed the course dictated by the British in the course of the nineteenth century. Responses to the rite among foreigners were no less ambivalent or varied.

An American mercenary's view of sati

Company service was not the sole source of income available to foreigners in the subcontinent during this period. Stretching from the Himalayan foothills in the east through the Punjab plains up to the Afghan border in the west, the empire of Ranjit Singh (r. 1799–1839) at Lahore was a renowned haunt of European and American mercenaries, who occupied key administrative positions in its apparatus and adopted the habits and lifestyle of its elites. The acculturation of foreigners is particularly apparent in the case of Alexander Gardner (1785–1877), who dictated his biography towards the end of his life from the comfort of his Kashmiri home. The depth of his integration is patently evident in his account of a Pahari Rajputni's sati.

In the turmoil that followed Ranjit Singh's death, Gardner had sided with the faction of the erstwhile chief *wazir*, the Pahari (Dogra) Rajput Dhyan Singh, brother of raja Gulab Singh (r. 1822–1857) of Jammu. When news of Dhyan Singh's murder reached Lahore, his wife, a princess from Nurpur (a kingdom to the west of Kangra), sprang into action. Striding among her deceased husband's soldiers, the Rajputni worked the warriors 'up to a frenzy' by calling for revenge, exclaiming 'she would not become sati until she had the heads' of her husband's killers. The aged adventurer narrated what followed with remarkable precision:

> I myself laid the heads at the feet of Dhyan Singh's corpse that evening. ... During the day, while inciting the army to avenge her husband's murder,

she had appeared in public before the soldiers, discarding the seclusion of a lifetime. When his murderers had been slain she gave directions as to the disposition of his property with a stoicism and self-possession to which no one beside her could lay claim: she thanked her brave avengers, and declared that she would tell of their good deeds to her husband when in heaven. There was nothing left for her, she said, but to join him. … They placed her husband's diamond *kalgi* (aigrette) in her turban, and she then fastened it with her own hands in the turban of her stepson, Hira Singh. Then, smiling on those around, she lit the pyre, the flames of which glistened on the arms and accoutrements, and even, it seems to me, on the swimming eyes of the soldiery. So perished the widow of Dhyan Singh, with thirteen of her female slaves.[80]

This vivid account affords a rare view of the conduct of Pahari Rajputnis in moments of crisis beyond British India. The Rajputni's alien origins and noble countenance clearly attracted the warriors' attention in this politically charged period of Punjabi history, which is strengthened by her 'discarding the seclusion of a lifetime'. The contrast between the sati's life up to that point and the brief moments of public exposure seem to have enhanced her authority, enabling her to divide her husband's estate and nominate his successor with no apparent opposition from the mesmerized audience. Thus, if the political activities of Pahari Rajputnis habitually took place in the confines of palace halls, the moments preceding the mounting of a funeral pyre offered a palpable demonstration of their authority by shifting it to the public sphere. Further, the widow's call for revenge and insistence on becoming sati point to continuity with Rajput tradition insofar as they agree with the martial aspects of the Rajputni ideal of husband-protector (*pativratā*), and are congruent with Harlan's assertion that 'substituting for a husband is the basis for a woman's heroism'.[81] The distinction between heroines of Rajput legend and *satimata*s (deified satis) is also pertinent, since these aspects of womanhood are theoretically said to appear in succession in ideal wives (*pativratā*s), as they do in the princess of Nurpur's conduct.[82] Lastly, the compatibility of Gardner's account with the tenets of

[80] A. Gardner and H. Pearse, *Soldier and Traveller: Memoirs of Alexander Gardner Colonel of Artillery in the Service of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh, 1898, pp. 249–50.

[81] Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, p. 189. Nowadays, Rajput women similarly tie the future sati's enhanced authority to the abandonment of seclusion, the practical measure that facilitates movement on the battlefield being interpreted as the internalization of the merit accumulated by a lifetime of veiling; ibid, pp. 190–91.

[82] Harlan notes a distinction in attitude towards heroines and *satimata*s, the former being revered while the latter are worshipped; ibid, p. 181. This agrees with the

Pahari Rajput society is supported by the young sati's choice of words, which correspond with expressions found in oral tradition; the devoted princess of the *jheṛā* of Chinjhiar, who announces to her husband's corpse, 'I now owe you nothing' (*kuch nī deṇā huṇ asāṃ terā*), just before jumping to her death, thus finds its parallel in the stoic princess's remark that 'there is nothing left for her but to join' her spouse.

The proximity of Gardner's account to Indian perceptions reflects the adventurer's deep integration into South Asian society, the result of a unique personal history. Born to Scottish and Spanish parents on the shore of Lake Superior in North America in 1785, little is known of his early career save that his knowledge of handling heavy guns was probably acquired during time spent in the East India Company's army. In 1830 he entered service with the rulers of Kabul and took an Afghan wife, but, having made too many enemies and lost his spouse (who reportedly took her own life with a knife) and their child in an attack on his fortress, Gardner left for the Punjab, where he was engaged by Ranjit Singh and, ultimately, by the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir.[83] Recounting his tale from his former master's domain, Gardner belongs to the seldom-heard group of European mercenaries who made Asia their home. It is thus not with remorse that he recalls placing the decapitated heads of his foes in the widowed princess's lap, but with an emphatic pride and appreciation of her qualities.

Sati in the writings of Henry Lawrence

While British officials may have found participation in a sati ceremony unimaginable, their fascination with the rite continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century and, in some cases, was sustained through fiction. Sir Henry Lawrence (1806–57), a leading Company figure and hero of the British public, authored a series of such accounts. Basing his stories on personal encounters with foreign adventurers in the Punjab (he met Gardner in Kabul in 1841), Lawrence wrote about a fictional European mercenary in the service of Lahore in short entries that were anonymously published in the *Delhi Gazette*.[84] His seductive

male-centred worldview of Rajput culture, which praises warring women, but ultimately holds sati as the supreme ideal of womanhood.

[83] Gardner and Pearse, *Soldier and Traveller*, p. 71.

[84] See Kushwant Singh's introduction in H. Lawrence, *Adventures of an Officer in the Service of Runjeet Singh*, two volumes, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1975 [1845], Vol. 1, pp. 3–5.

prose and capacity to bring to life the region that he knew so well led him to comply with a demand to publish a book version of these stories under his real name, which was released as *Adventures of an Officer in the Service of Runjeet Singh* in 1845.

In *Adventures*, Lawrence awards Pahari Rajputnis a place of honour by weaving the plot around a love affair between the foreign mercenary 'Bellasis' and 'Māhtāb Kaur', the imaginary 12-year-old daughter of the dispossessed raja of Kangra, Sansar Chand.[85] As the tale develops, the Katochi princess is progressively brought deeper into the European fold: Bellasis meets her on numerous occasions (always in the presence of her mother), he teaches her English, she learns to read the Bible, and is even baptized to become 'in heart and soul a convert', after which the protagonists unite in marriage 'by Christian rites, in the presence of God and man'.[86] Despite his evident sympathy for the Rajputni, Lawrence concludes the alliance on a tragic note: Mahtab Kaur drowns in a river while fleeing 'infidel' soldiers from a faction opposed to her alliance with Bellasis, a seemingly unconscious attempt by the author to preserve his heroine's purity through baptismal waters that might quell the idolatrous flames of sati. The novel concludes with the heartbroken hero leaving the heathen Punjab in despair.

The Rajputni's idealized portrait in *Adventures* is indicative of the growing distance between Europeans and Indians in the build-up to the events of 1857–58. Still fascinated by the noblewomen of the hills, Lawrence stops his fantasy short of fulfilment lest it cross the boundary between the two cultures. Less than half a century after the occurrence of 'indigenized' officers like Ochterlony, a new generation of British officials was replacing the receptivity of its predecessors with a growing wariness of South Asian culture. Nevertheless, the coexistence of Gardner's radically different appreciation of sati alongside Lawrence's work of fiction attests to the variety of approaches among foreigners inhabiting northwest India at the time. The continual contact with Pahari Rajput communities thus gained the Rajputnis mythic qualities, their cultural heritage and physical beauty provoking the imaginations of contemporaries on either side of the British frontier,

[85] The character was probably modelled on Sansar Chand's real daughter, whom Dhyan Singh attempted to marry before settling for the princess of Nurpur, the sati of Gardner's account; see *HPHS*, Vol. 1, pp. 193–94.

[86] Lawrence, *Adventures of an Officer*, Vol. 2, pp. 113–14. The Rajputni's receptivity to 'new customs' is realistically credited to her Pahari origins, which rendered her 'less fettered by custom and form than the people of the plains'; ibid, p. 169.

including in forerunners of Victorian conservatism such as Lawrence's *Adventures*.

Conclusion

From the case studies of Rajputnis to the evidence attesting to the Guleri Rani's achievements as a talented political leader, this article sought to establish the centrality of Pahari Rajputnis to West Himalayan statecraft in the decades around the early colonial encounter. The review of archival records, oral traditions, and travellers' accounts showed that, contrary to the claims of post-colonial discourse theory and despite the restrictions imposed by indigenous culture and British rule, Pahari women in positions of power did find a voice and actively participated in the political struggles of their time. The custom of sati, hitherto regarded as the ultimate symbol of female oppression, has similarly proven more elastic than customarily depicted: the struggle for power in post-war Bashahr was thus won by transforming the rite into a tool for political profit, while the reasons for the Guleri Rani's threat of suicide were shown to derive from precepts of Pahari Rajputni culture rather than the pernicious dual grip of indigenous chauvinism and global capitalism. By carefully reading divergent sources and attentively situating them in their historical and cultural contexts, a more credible depiction of Pahari Rajputni elites has been offered, one that incidentally points to a more intimate understanding of regional traditions among contemporaneous Europeans and South Asian elites than post-colonial discourse theory might care to acknowledge.