

Writing Victory in Defeat: Memory, Kingship, and Rajput Identity in Padmanabha's Kanhadade Prabandha

By: Yashasvi Verma

“The Kanhadade Prabandha is a narrative of court intrigue, intention of conquest, courtly romance and, in the context of hostility between Rajput and Turk, a description of failed attempts at negotiating relationships.”¹

The Kanhadade Prabandha, hailed by V.S. Bhatnagar as the most significant patriotic tale of medieval India, was crafted by Padmanabha, a Brahman from Nagar. He identifies himself as a poet associated with the Jalor court in the mid-15th century, and this epic recounts events from two centuries prior. The language used in the text is Prakrit, overlapping with Rajasthani as well as Gujarati, which suggests its access to a further population than that of the Jaina texts.² The poem is a eulogy to yet another Chauhan ruler, Kanhadade, who had ruled in Jalor in southern Rajasthan and was an ancestor to the current ruler.

For Padmanabha and his patron, feel that simply honouring Kanhadade's brave defence of Jalor is not enough. They believe it's crucial to affirm Kanhadade's authority over his lands, especially since his descendants have lost control of them. The Kanhadade Prabandha is thus preoccupied with aggrandising Kanhadade's kingship, not merely his heroism³. The emphasis on kingship clarifies why the narrative is presented in the chosen genre. The Prabandha was already widely employed in the Gujarat and Rajasthan regions for a specific reason: to craft stories about exemplary kings, blending both mythical and historical figures, thus serving the purpose of constructing ideal royal lineages. “I Padmanabha invokes shastric norms of kingship in explaining Kanhadade's resistance to Alauddin Khalji.” The text begins with an invocation to Ganesha, and Sarasvati, the goddess of learning as well as paying obedience to the lord Krishna himself where instances from his life are quoted as well.

Amir Khusrau, in his firsthand narrative of Alauddin Khalji's campaigns titled 'Khaza 'inul Futuh,' indirectly mentions the downfall of Jalor while describing the Sultan's conquest of Siwana. The defeat at Jalor was remembered differently, however, in the region of Rajasthan and Gujarat where it took different tones⁴.

The conflict between Kanhadade and Alauddin Khalji originates from an issue involving Madhava, a Brahman closely associated with the Jalor court. Madhava claims that he was insulted by the king of Gujarat and seeks revenge by inviting the Turks to conquer Gujarat. To aid the Sultanate's army in this endeavor, he approaches the Khalji Sultan. However, when Ulugh Khan, the Sultan's general, leads the army, they face opposition from Kanhadade, who denies them passage through Jalor. The territories conquered by Alauddin in the region are consistently portrayed as domains embodying an idealized Brahmanical order.

In striking rhythmic verses, Gujarat is described as the land where the saligram⁵ is worshipped; where the name of Hari is chanted; where Brahmins are given alms and gifts; where the tulsi plant and pipal tree are worshipped; where the Vedas, Puranas and dharma are understood; where everyone makes pilgrimages; where even the cattle believe in the Smritis and Puranas.⁶ When Madhav, the brahmin minister brings the

¹ Romila Thapar

² Romila Thapar, page 94

³ Ramya Sreenivasan, page 97

⁴ Ramya Sreenivasan, page 87

⁵ a sacred stone representing the god Vishnu

⁶ Ramya Sreenivasan page 97

mleccha Alauddin⁷, he is universally condemned. Padmanabha continues these depictions to describe other towns and kingdoms he has conquered. Whether it's the town of Bhinmal or the kingdom of Jalor, he portrays them in a similar light, as strongholds of moral integrity, where the Vedas and Puranas hold sacred significance, and Brahmins are respectfully honoured. Thus, Kanhadade refuses to allow safe passage through his kingdom to Alauddin's armies on their way to Gujarat because of the nature of Alauddin's conquest.⁸

Due to Madhava's knowledge of the concealed entry points, the Khalji army infiltrates the city and loots it. The author however as noted by Romila Thapar does not compare this to the earlier plunder by Mahmud of Ghazni, as one could expect, but does it to the sack of Lanka by the armed forces of Rama⁹. Madhava is identified as the instigator of the conflict and is subsequently slain by the defenders of Somanatha. Remarkably, there is no mention of Mahmud or the previous raid on Somanatha. The temple remains visibly unconverted into a mosque. According to Thapar, the primary focus in this account appears to be less on the desecration of the temple and more on the Khalji's attempted conquest.

Like demons the armies of the Delhi Sultanate, brutally strike the stone statues with hammers. They employ iron crowbars and wooden beams to forcefully extract the Siva lingam from the temple. Padmanabha observes that it is Kaliyuga.¹⁰ "The seizing of the icon amounts to the symbolic seizing of the legitimacy to rule, apart from an Islamic victory over Shaivism".¹¹ Richard H. Davis points out that just as images might retreat from threatened temples, so apparently deities could abandon their icons under duress. But the Padmanabha views this as an act of divine cowardice and addresses Siva directly to remember past deeds where he had shown greater fortitude.¹²

The story moves forward with Parvati and Ganga appearing in Kanhadade's dream, advising him to liberate the lingam. The goddesses reveal that the Turks have captured Shiva¹³, Like the goddess who appears to Kampana in Madhurdivijaya, Shiva's two female companions here have selected their instrument of recovery, and they cite the example of an earlier incarnation of Visnu to urge him into action. The icon appears to remain significant even though Shiva had deserted it¹⁴. Kanhadade rescues the Siva lingam, ensuring its protection by transforming it into five icons. The close proximity of Jalor to Gujarat undoubtedly amplifies the attention on Somanatha, a site of relatively minor importance in other epics.

Richard H. Davis opinions that Unlike story of Kampana recovering Madurai, Padmanabha does not end his narrative with this successful recovery. The momentary defeat of the Delhi sultanate and reestablishment of the order in Jalor is only the first part in this further tragic epic of resistance. Padmanabha goes on to recount Alauddin Khalji who mounts several campaigns against Jalor, each resisted by Kanhadade and his fellow Rajputs with great heroism. By Kanhadade's orders, the city has been adorned especially to show the sultan the grandeur and might of the Chauhan kingdom, The poet uses the convention effectively to

⁷ The concept of 'otherization' as explained in detail by Cynthia talbot in her article 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India'. Use of words like mlecchas being commonly used for the ones not fitting in own cultural norms.

⁸ Canto 1, This is not our dharma! Where villages will be destroyed, people will be enslaved, where the ears of helpless women will be torn off (for their ornaments) ... where Brahmins and cows will be oppressed, there the Rai will not give free passage [to the Sultan]

⁹ Romila Thapar, page 95

¹⁰ "Such strange and improper happenings were taking place: the kaliyuga was, no doubt, showing its true temper: Lord Siva, leaving the earthly abode, went away to Kailasa"

¹¹ Romila Thapar, page 96

¹² Earlier, O God, Rudra (Siva), in the fire of your anger, all the demons (daiytas) were burnt! You fostered righteousness again on this earth and removed the fear in the Devaloka [Divine World]. Your anger reduced Kamadeva to ashes and destroyed Tripurasura, as easily as a strong gust of wind blows away a piece of cotton. I, Padmanabha, ask you plainly, Lord Somanatha (Somaiya), "Where is your trident now?"

¹³ "Wake up, O immortal one!" they urge him. "The Asapati (i.e. Emperor) is taking away Somanatha through your territory. Earlier also, Rama had Rudra freed from the demons. Again, Bali, son of Virochana, displayed his intense devotion and got Siva freed. Now, on this third occasion, you must come forward, O Kanhadadeva! O brave one, delay not in this

¹⁴ Page 192 Davis, R. H. (1997). *Lives of Indian Images*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400844425>

show the Rajput resistance to Alauddin, constructing a golden utopia of song, dance, architecture, painting, and, at the centre of it all, the figure of the ideal king¹⁵.

The sultan's daughter comes to believe that Kanhadade is the tenth incarnation of Visnu, and She implores her father to end his conflict with the Rajput kingdom. She falls in love with Viramade who is Kanhadade's son. The sultan proposes to end the hostilities through a marriage alliance and offers to make Kanhadade governor of all Gujarat, but Viramade refuses the marriage proposal as shameful¹⁶. The war goes on until Alauddin Khalji finally succeeds in overcoming the renegade state and Kanhadade dies in battle. The final battle is compared to the battle between Ram and Ravan (the devas and the asuras) as well as to the epic battle at Kurukshetra between good and evil¹⁷.

A common gesture of reconciliation among enemies is the offer of a daughter in marriage and this occurs as a theme in more than one such narrative¹⁸.

In the context of caste society, this is a significant issue, Offering a daughter in marriage was also viewed as an acknowledgment of the higher status of her husband, although this wasn't the case in this marriage proposal. Generally, the Turks avoided marrying their daughters to local rajas. Medieval Rajput chronicles documents various instances of this practice, portraying it as a means to solidify alliances between rival Rajput chiefs. The act of surrendering a daughter symbolized, both materially and symbolically, her father's defeat in battle.

It is thus significant to note that Padmanabha's text inverts this gendered relationship between the victor and vanquished to suggest that the Rajput Kanhadade and his son did have the upper hand after all¹⁹. In order to do so, the character of Piroja, the Sultan's daughter is introduced by the author. Whether she was a real historical figure or not, Piroja becomes the instrument through which material and political hierarchies are symbolically dismantled. The narrative of her past and future further assimilates her into the Rajput community. Piroja solidifies her love and commitment to sati-dharma by regarding herself as wedded to Viramade, even after he rejects her.

The Rajput order here wins a double victory symbolically, despite the victory of turks over Jalor. "First, Piroja is revealed to have been a Rajput in all her previous births. Second, as the daughter of a turk in the present birth, the barrier between her and Viramade is absolute and cannot be bridged even by her transcendent love."²⁰

Piroja's sacrifice illustrates a love that transcends political and social constraints. Connected to the struggle against the Turks is the act of kshatriya women, including Piroja, choosing to end their lives through the Jauhar ritual. This in some ways was an extension of the much previous ritual of becoming a sati, expected initially of a woman on the death of her husband²¹. When the princess is shown the head, she speaks to it: "Earlier, the Chauhan had vowed that he would never look at my face. Now, at least today, he will have to break his word!"²²

¹⁵ Behl, page 195

¹⁶ Romila Thapar, Marriage alliances among kshatriyas served many purposes: endorsing caste status, making political connections and settling disputes, establishing loyalty and bonding, and acquiring territory and land. Hierarchy of rank reflected hierarchy of authority and access to resources. The intrusion of the Turks interfered not only with controlling territory but also the demands of loyalty. The refusal of the relationship between the Khalji and the Chauhan therefore, may have been due not just to a difference in religion but also to the threat of ending a system of interlocking controls. Such relationships were complex and were not always understood by outsiders.

¹⁷ canto 4, verse 259.

¹⁸ Romila Thapar, page 97

¹⁹ Ramya Sreenivasan page 103

²⁰ Ramya Sreenivasan, page 104

²¹ Romila Thapar, page 98

²² Behl, page 197, Those who are brave and of good lineage do not give up their plighted word even after death. The moment the princess came in front of Viramade's face, it turned away!

Exchanging women can make important statements about alliance or hostility, about values and symbolic honour²³. The stories of the children of Sultan fetishize the woman belonging to the enemy, who becomes the source of symbolic honour for her own side and the object of romantic longing and attraction for the other side.²⁴

In his poem, Padmanabha passionately praises punya, deeming it the highest virtue. According to Padmanabha, Kanhadade's success against the outsiders is a result of his past righteous deeds. As a result, Kanhadade not only earns considerable punya for himself but also for his entire family through his current actions. Padmanabha promoted the virtues of resistance to a local ruler who might soon have the opportunity to follow Kanhadade's example²⁵.

II

Modern commentators have routinely interpreted the poem as demonstrating Rajput and therefore 'Hindu' heroism in the face of 'Muslim' assault and conquest.²⁶ The categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' are here understood as signifying two homogeneous religious communities who have always been at war with each other.

The poems of Isami and Padmanabha exemplify well the medieval genres of literature that Richard H. Davis discussed as Indo-Muslim "epics of conquest" and Hindu "epics of resistance." Mahmud's devastation of Somanatha is associated with the Prophet Muhammad, whereas Kanhadade's retrieval of the Linga is guided by two goddesses.

The two poets clearly present them as actions of rulers or claimants to rule, which are undertaken in "frontier" political circumstances of contested rule as ways of constituting authority²⁷. Romila Thapar points out that Certain aspects don't appear highly supportive of resistance. The argument posits that despite the effort to depict a heroic clash between the Turks and the Rajputs, the focus leans more towards the actions within the courts and the atmosphere of Rajput society.

Counterparts to resistance can take the form of millenarian movements but these again are absent among the Rajput.²⁸ Although there are occasional references to the dharma of the Rajput being opposed to the demands of the Khalji, the focus is not centrally on religious differences.

According to Cynthia Talbot, the language used in this description is predetermined, originating from a Brahmanical practice of depicting the danger posed by external groups. Rulers and their court scholars consistently used these terms to characterize Muslim conquests during the medieval era. Padmanabha's use of these expressions reinforces Kanhadade's stature by aligning him with a lineage of epic and Puranic defenders of the kingdom and the Brahmanical order.

Romila Thapar emphasizes that these epics serve as summaries of diverse conflicts, originating from pre-Islamic compositions and inscriptions where confrontations are justified, legitimized, and celebrated. Rajput epics not only serve as a response to 'Muslim invasions' but also represent the literature of those who emerged victorious in the rivalries within Rajput society. Thapar reasserts that "Epic poems are forms of legitimizing power and status or attempts at explaining why these were lost, and they vary from

²³ Behl, page 197

²⁴ Behl, page198

²⁵ Richard H. Davis

²⁶ Ramya Sreenivasan, page 107

²⁷ Richards 1974

²⁸ Romila Thapar, pg 146

chronicles as they often focus on the acts of individuals and not without the exaggeration required of the genre.”

Behl opines that Genealogy, political memory, and loss are invoked in this ideal biography as Padmanabha remembers the events that led to the passing of Jalor into Turkish hands and the death of Kanhadade the heroic ancestor of his patron, Akhairaja²⁹.

III

To conclude I would like to point out the importance of the text such as Kanhadade Prabandha Kavya, as not only does it provide us with the socio-cultural background to the time period which in reality without these descriptions gets so hard to imagine, it gives us the outlook of the author’s mind, information about various aspects such as the fruits and vegetables being eaten, the kind of decorative ideas prevalent, the army structure known by author, the emotional connect which author is able to make with not only the Rajput but also while imagining the sufferings of the Turkish women³⁰. The text has been called as psychological in nature as the poet deals with people and emotions in a sensitive light. The kind of literary craft which we witness is quite astonishing. There is a noble theme followed throughout the text, long lists of names are provided, there is a familiarity with the Turkish courtly manners, geography of land is described along with vivid city descriptions, the knowledge of the Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, lord Krishna’s stories such as him killing ‘Vansa’ and subduing the great serpent, Hindu scriptures and idols, Ideas of Punya³¹, Dharma, Rebirths, Reincarnations, Karma, The verna system and Jati Systems, Jauhar while reciting name of Rama, etc. There are multiple references made to the epics throughout the text such as Kanhadade’s brother Maldev bears as much love for him as Lakshman did for Ram³². The victory of the Pandavas because of Punya, Rakshasas defeated by lord Rama, all to present the difference between good and evil. As Cynthia Talbot has pointed out, Padmanabha’s narrative actually ‘consists of complex layers of both rejection and appropriation’.³³

There can also be seen common themes in vernacular literature such as Hammira Mahakavya, Padmavat and Kanhadade Prabandha such as the instances of the treachery of the offended Brahmin counsellor of a good Rajput king, entertaining enemy royalty within the fort³⁴, themes of sacrifice, the Rajput values and morals, ideas of bravery, punya through which defeat is also a win, quoting of the epics, which tells us of the nature of these Vernacular texts being written under the patronage of various regional kingdom rulers.

The Historical value of vernacular texts is something which was not as appreciated or discovered before as it is now. It is important that we see these vernacular texts as an important source of History, for they can provide a lot of information and knowledge about the social and cultural histories of the time period of study as we saw in the example of the text Kanhadade Prabandha Kavya.

References:

1. Behl, A. (2012). Love’s subtle magic. In Oxford University Press eBooks.
2. Davis, R. H. (1997). *Lives of Indian Images*.

²⁹ Behl, pg 185

³⁰ Canto II

³¹ Canto I, 26

³² Ramya Sreenivasan 98

³³ For more, Cynthia Talbot, ‘The Story of Prataparudra: Hindu Historiography on the Deccan Frontier’, in David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, Gainesville, 2000: 293.

³⁴ Just as Padmanabha recounted the lavish entertainment and feast that was prepared for Princess in Jalor, Jayasi devotes a long section to the grand preparations for the emperor’s banquet in Chittaur.

3. Padmanābha. (1991). Kānhaḍade Prabandha, India's greatest patriotic saga of medieval times: Padmanābha's Epic Account of Kānhaḍade.
4. Sreenivasan, R. (2004). The "Marriage" of "Hindu" and "Turak": Medieval Rajput Histories of Jalor. *The Medieval History Journal*, 7(1), 87–108.
5. Thapar, R. (2003). *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History*.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.