

Royal Women and Construction Works in and around Jodhpur

Dr. Sumit*

Studies around women and their lives have been undertaken on a large scale by scholars across streams. However, not much attention has been given to Royal Women and the welfare work they have done for the society. This paper is an attempt to highlight the nature of social and economic work done by *zanana* royal women. Most historians believe that royal women in the subcontinent did not have a public presence, and that their participation in the administrative activities was less important and less 'official' than that of men. But some manuscript accounts, available in original Marwari language, of royal women under the patronage of Rajput rulers, tell a different story. So far perhaps no research has been undertaken on these sources. Here is an attempt to reconstruct the lives of a royal female life and their significant contribution in construction works.

Popular stereotypes in the region of South Asia, have led most of us to believe that royal women in the subcontinent did not have a public presence, and that their participation in the administrative activities was less important and nothing 'official' in comparison to that of men. But one needs to look beyond this established stereotype. It is useful to trace the historical background of the past royal women (called as the *rani*, *maji* and *dadi maji sa*, *pad-dayats*) in Marwar, and the impact of these women on the Marwar court and society.

Between the fifteenth and early twentieth centuries, royal women who lived at the *zenani deodhi* (female quarters of a royal palace) were referred to as *rani*, *maji* and *dadi maji sa*, *pad-dayats*. Once a *rani* entered the *ranivas*¹, she would become an integral part of these female quarters in the royal households. Although they

were subject to specific rules and regulations in these quarters, sources attest that until Independence, till the year 1947 CE, royal women had always been an important part of royal families in Rajasthan. The rulers used to bestow jagirs on them. The revenues earned through these jagirs were used for their personal expenditure as well as for charitable acts by the *ranis*. The royal women were free to disburse the income raised from the jagirs assigned to them as they liked. In addition to this, they looked after the administration of their respective *jagirs* on their own. If need be, they personally appointed their own staff. The jagirs of a village were given in *patta* by the rulers of Jodhpur to their queens and *pad-dayats* (concubines or co-wife with special rights). They were totally free in disbursing the income raised from these jagirs and managed the administration of their respective jagirs themselves.

In the Maharaja Man Singh Pustak Prakash Research Centre, Jodhpur, we come across many *bahis* (ledgers) that deal with the jagirs given to the queens by the Maharaja. These *bahis* also shed light on their administration in the nineteenth century. These *bahis* are available for the time-period covering almost all the rulers of the region. In the history of Marwar, the queens carried out the construction work of temples, wells, *bawadis*², *jhalra*³, etc. The Raja and Maharaja of Jodhpur had contributed in this realm unprecedentedly. Whether it was political, economic, social or cultural realm, they made sacrifices for the development and progress of Marwar. But behind these works there lies the unnoticed contribution of *ranis*, *maharanis*, *paddayts* and *paswans*. The queens had done many works for the welfare and upliftment of society. Unfortunately, these works are not always recognized.

Ranis, *maharanis* and *kanwarnis* of the Jodhpur royal families, used to do many welfares from their personal expenses⁴. The details concerning the daily, monthly and

* Former Fellow, IAS, Shimla. She can be reached at sumitdahiya2009@gmail.com

yearly expenses incurred by raniyas have been given in the Janana Dyodi Jama Kharch bahis. That expense was recovered from the villages, the ones that had been given to the queen as lease.

Apart from the political, social and cultural works undertaken by the queens of Marwar, they made a significant contribution in the realm of construction as well. Queens were inspired by a devotional spirit, and they used to do construction work for public interest. They had constructed gardens, wells, ponds, lakes, jhalara, tanks, etc. Sometimes they constructed temples as palaces for private worship, and along with that few temples, bawadis were constructed in the nearby villages and cities by the queens so that larger public could benefit. Details of the various water bodies and temples constructed by the raniyas, maharaniyas and paswans are given below:

Teeja Maji Ka Mandir

Pratap Kunwari, the third rani bhatiyani of Mansingh (the Jodhpur king), was the peerless worshiper of Lord Rama. After the death of the king, she was completely devoted to God. After six years of the kings' death (1843 CE) there was a lunar eclipse. Thus, the queen took the resolve to do charity on the occasion. She started to construct a temple on the shore of Gulab Sagar Pond in 1846, and placed Ram, Janki and Lakshmans' idols that were ordered from Jaipur. For the lunar eclipse in 1846, the queen sent a chariot to call mahant Motiram of the Niranjani Sect of Nagaur and presented the temple with the resolution. Few months later, that temple sunk in the ground. Seeing her resolve broken, the queen bought a piece of land in the Ghasmandi area and built a new temple which is these days known as Teeja Manji Ka Mandir (the temple of Teeja Manji)

The temple land was bought from the pushkaran brahmna family worth 2101 Bijeshahi (Vijayshahi) silver coins, and the temple was built in eight years by spending one lakh such silver coins. Pran pratishtha (anointing ceremony) had been done in 1857, then Rajmata Pratap Kunwari and Jodhpur king Naresh Takht Singh stayed in the temple premises for a duration of three days. The temple is approximately 10 feet at height from the ground level. Before climbing the stairs, the idols of Hanuman Ji and Ganesh Ji have been placed. Stone elephants stand at both the sides of the stairs. The main segment of the Temple lies on the left side. Lord Ram, Janaki and Lakshman's idols are placed at the core of the temple. There is a magnificent painting on the ceiling of the core of the temple. It depicts the story of the Lord, right from the birth to coronation and scenes from the the life of Lord Krishna.

King Takhat Singh gifted two beegha land in Bawdi village for this temple. The temple used to get earning from this piece of land. To offer fruits to the beloved Lord, a mango tree had been bought from a gardener in Mandor for 300 silver rupees.⁵ Teeja Bhatiyani, the queen of Maharaja Man Singh, used to worship the Sun God. Charity used to be done by the queen Bhatiyani upon special occasions. According to one of the bahis (no. 304), details of such charities are available therein.⁶

Temple of Lord Shri Krishna Thakur Ji

Bahi number 145 provides the statement of the account of the Temple of Thakur Ji, built by Shrimati (third) Bhatiyani. It has the details about the names and attendance of the temple building artisans. Rani Bhatiyani's religious life specifically emerged out of it. This bahi also certifies that the queen had faith in other gods, apart from keeping the record of attendance of artisans and laborers, and maintaining the statement of expenditure incurred from time to time⁷.

Achalnatha Shivalaya

The Achalnath Shivalay was built by queen Nanki Devi of Ganga Raw in Vikram Samvat (VS) 1588 (21 May 1531). Queen Nanki Devi was the daughter of Raw Jagmal from Sirohi. A bawadi was also built nearby the Shivalaya, which is known as Ganga Bawadi. Earlier this place was covered with trees. According to legends, few Naga sadhus started living there. One day they saw that a cow was standing on a sand pile, and milk was pouring from her udders. Sadhus dug out that place and a *Shirolinga* was found from inside the ground. They started worship the *Shirolinga*. When the queen came to know about this incident, she decided to place that *Shirolinga* on a high platform. After trying several times, they failed to remove the *Shirolinga* from that very place. One night, the queen saw God in her dream and God asked not to remove the *Shirolinga* from that place. Thereafter, the queen built a temple over that very site. Since then, it was named as *Achleshwar* or *Achalnatha*.

Rasik Bihari Temple

The Rasik Bihari Temple, situated on Udaymandir Marg, has been built by Nanhi Bai (a Paswan of Maharaja Jaswant Singh Second). This temple is also known as Neni Ji Temple. This magnificent temple is 17 feet high. There is a huge kaam nandi idol made of white marble situated therein. King *Jaswnat Singh* brought this idol in the year 1885 AD. Presently, this temple is under the upkeep of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Temple of Thakur Ji

Udot Kanwar Ranawat, the queen of Maharaja Ajit Singh, built the Thakur Ji temple in Golaghati Makrana Mohalla. This temple is situated in the foothills of Meharangarh. Her other name was Amolkanda. Queen had borne all the expenses of this temple from the earning of her estate⁸.

KunjBihari Temple

The Kunj Bihari temple is situated in the Katla Bazar. It was built in the year 1779 by GulabRay (a Paswan of King VijaySingh). GulabRay took personal interest in the construction of this temple, and erected the Gang Shyam Ji temple. Decuman elephants can be seen standing at the left side of entrance. This temple with its fabulous architecture, is one of the most magnificent temples of Jodhpur. The ritual of prayers, i.e. *Arti*, is performed six times in a day in this temple. Special events are organized on the occasions of Janmashtmi, Annkuta, Dipawali, Holi, Radhashtmi, etc⁹.

Temple of Amreshwar Mahadev

Kanwarani Amarkanwar Chauhan Ji (Sointra) was the wife of Maharaj Kumar Sardar Singh. She had built Shri Amarsur (Amreshwar) Temple. Kanwarani Amarkanwar Chauhan Ji had also built a Shiva Temple, which is situated in the fort nearby the *pataliya* well on the Chidiyanath ji marg. She had also built the Raghunatha Ji Temple in the Tarnau village, and had planted a garden at 'Anar Bawadi' outside of Chandpol. She had estate in 'Melawas' as well. Moreover, she used to spend the earning coming from that estate, on the Amreshwar Mahadeva Temple¹⁰.

Temple of Murli Manohar Ji

This temple was built by the queen Sire Kanwar Tunwar Ji from Thikana Kelawa. The ritual of Pratishta was done by the Kamdar Bakhtawar Mal, near Ramgopal in Brahmpuri, after the death of Maharaja Bheemsingh Ji. Queen bore all the expenses of this temple, from the earning of her estate. These facts are in accordance with the Rani Manga Bhaton ri bahi.¹¹

Temple of Shri Jaland Harnath Ji

Amar Kanwar Chauhan Ji Thikana Sointra was the Kanwarani of Maharaja Kumar Sher Singh. She was a great worshiper of the gods. Amar Kanwar Chauhan Ji had built the Jalandharnath Ji temple upon the lake Gulab Sagar. This temple is also known as 'Jas Temple'. Kanwarani AmarKanwar Chauhan used to meet all the

expenses of worship and offerings made to the Lord from the earning of her estate. These facts are in accordance with the Rani Manga Bhaton ri bahi.¹²

Temple of Jhalra and Thakur Ji

Kanwarani Daulat Kanwar Bhatiyani (Jakhad), the wife of Maharaj Kumar Fatehsingh Ji, had built temple of Thakur Ji and *Jhalra* outside the meiyada darwaza. These are very magnificent and artistic in appearance. Kanwarani Daulat Kanwar's belief and devotion can be sensed by looking at this temple. The queen used to meet all the expenses of this temple from the earning of her estate¹³.

Temple of Madan Mohan Ji

Queen Inder Kanwar Tunwar Ji had built this temple. She was the wife of Tunwar Ji Maharaja Vijay Singh Ji and was a great devotee of Krishna. Madan Mohan Ji's temple was very grandiose and artistic in structure. The temple has a huge tower and the artistic work is an excellent example of architecture. Queen Inder Kanwar bore all the expenses of the construction of Madan Mohan Ji's temple and she used to take personal interest in the construction work.¹⁴

Temple of Shri Lakshmi Narayan Ji

Queen Jatan Kanwar Ji (Khandelwal), the wife of Maharaja VijaySingh, was a great devotee of Shri Lakshmi Narayanji and had built a temple dedicated to him. A very artistic idol of Lakshmi Narayanji has been placed in the core of this temple. All the expense of this temple was bore by the queen Jatan Kanwar. These facts are in accordance with the Rani Manga Bhaton ri bahi.¹⁵

Temple of Ganga Shyam Ji

Ganga Rao was married to Padmawati, the daughter of Raw Jagmal of Sirohi. Princess Padmawati was very fond of the idol of Krishna that was worshipped by Jagmal. Princess asked for that idol at her wedding but Jagmal refused. Then princess asked Ganga Rao to ask for that idol from her father as dowry. Hence, Jagmal was forced to give the idol. Ganga placed that idol in the fort. After his name the idol came to be known as 'Ganga Shyamji'. Queen Padmavati built a huge temple in Junidhan Mandi and placed this idol of Ganga Shyamji. She even offered a golden *Kalash* in this temple.

After the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh (first), Aurangzeb attacked Jodhpur. Commander Tebar Beg demolished the Ganga Shyamji temple and built a mosque over it. In 1760 CE, King Vijay Singh renovated

the temple and turned it into a huge and magnificent marvel. Paintings on the life of Krishna and Rama have been depicted on the outside of the main courtyard and on the walls¹⁶.

Tunwar ji ka Jhalra

Tunwar ji ka jhalra is the largest surviving jhalra in the city and was commissioned by a Tunwar queen from Patan, who was a chief queen (*patrani*) of Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur. It was completed in 1748 CE. The jhalra is sheltered by steep steps that rise from the ground surrounding it, before plunging into a deep stepped pond. The arched face of the well contains niches that once held small shrines.

Within Jodhpur, jhalras are generally associated with religious uses such as the performance of pujas and kriyas (funerary rites).¹⁷ This is quite an interesting place to visit as it renders a glimpse into the kind of responsibilities women held in royal families. The structure has layers and layers of stairs, and fencing from all corners that eventually lead towards a pond. The women had to manage the water system on their own; hence it comes as no surprise that it was built by the queen, a consort of Maharaja of Jodhpur Abhay Singh. It is located in the Makrana Moholla and near Gulab Sagar lake in the old city. Till date it is being used as an unofficial swimming pool; the locals enjoy a dip or a dive (making use of its height) to cool themselves off. During the recent cleaning and restoration of the stepwell, the architects found 200 feet of treasure. The items found include a red rose sandstone with carvings of elephants, medieval lions, cow water-spouts, and an alcove housing Hindu deities.

Gulab Sagar

The Gulab Sagar Lake is among the few lakes of Jodhpur, situated in old city located near the Sardar Market. The lake was constructed in the year 1788 CE by Gulab Rai, the beloved of Maharaja Vijay Singh, from whom it derives its name. Originally, it was built as a water storage¹⁸ replacing the old Bawri. It took a time of around eight years to complete the construction of the Gulab Sagar lake. It measures 150 x 90m in size, receives water through a canal from Bal Samand Lake.¹⁹

Gulab Sagar is a large twin-tank within the city which was fed by rainwater and water channelled from the Balsamand lake in the outskirts of Jodhpur. The lake is best known for its patron—the formidable concubine Gulab Rai from the court of Maharaja Vijay Singh of Jodhpur (1772-1793 CE). Being a close confidant of the Maharaja, Gulab Rai held the exalted title of Paswan

within the court, and had vast resources at her disposal as indicated by the work of construction of Gulab Sagar undertaken by her along with an entire complex of palaces, temples and wells around it, including a jhalra known as the Mahlyabagh Jhalra.

There are several places of interest near the Gulab Sagar Lake. One of them is the Kunjebihari Temple which is dedicated to Lord Krishna. The place is quite peaceful and serene, especially during the evenings with dim lit lights and water outpouring from the fountains.

Ranisar and Padamsar

The Ranisar's name commemorates its patron, one of the queens (*rani*) of Rao Jodha, the founder of Jodhpur. It was constructed in 1460 CE, simultaneously while Jodha was building the new city. Located close to the Mehrangarh Fort and protected by the city wall, the Ranisar Talab is fed by rainwater runoff from the hills that surround it. Nearby lies the twin, i.e. Padamsar—a similar lake. These are two adjoining lakes in the city of Jodhpur built over 500 years ago.

Both the lakes are situated at the rear of the Mehrangarh Fort, near the Fateh Pol. These scenic lakes were created to conserve water, as Jodhpur falls under a desert region where water is scarce. The tranquillity of these adjacent lakes is complemented brilliantly by the stark contrast of the majestic Mehrangarh Fort, making it a sight to behold. The clear waters have been preserved and maintained for centuries, providing a serene vibe and an almost identical reflection of the grand fort on the water surface.²⁰

The development of the two lakes was commissioned by two different queens in the fifteenth century. Ranisar Lake was made on the orders of Queen Jasmade Hadi, wife of Rao Jodha, the founder of Jodhpur. Padamsar Lake was developed by Queen Padmini, the daughter of Rana Sanga of Mewar. These lakes were built to conserve water in the desert region, serving as excellent examples of the age-old tradition carried on by the royal women as in-charge of overseeing the public water system in the area.

They represent the classic water storage systems that are present throughout this region. They are considered as a consistent source of water in the city. Ranisar still holds clean water as its catchment area is largely protected, having been converted into a protected private reserve known as the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park. The red sandstone *ghat* of this lake comes alive on religious occasions, especially the annual celebration of the Gangaur festival.²¹ The water of Ranisar holds symbolic import for this desert city, the overflowing of the lake in the monsoon is greeted with jubilation by the residents

of the old city. It serves not only as a symbol of water preservation mechanism in the region, instead it is also a source of prosperity for the entire region.²²

By these details, it is apparent that through the medium of such multiple construction works undertaken by them, the royal women were active participants in the regular activities of the state and society. Even those medieval times they can be seen as agents of public welfare works, construction and able administrators. They were not only economically apt in management, but also had specific abilities, as such works require skills of a totally different nature.

Notes

1. Another term for *zenani deodhi*
2. The common English term being 'stepwell' that encompasses two main types of structures and their hybrids: the *baodi*, *baoli* or *vav* which is typically a sheltered step well where a deep well spills into a rectangular tank that is reached by descending levels of steps from one of the sides
3. *Jhalra* are square shaped open structures, closer in resemblance to a stepped pond, with staggered stairs reaching down to the water from three or four of the sides
4. Tanwar, Mehandra Singh, *Rajasthan ki sanskritik prampraye*, p. 27
5. Gupta, MahonLal, *Jilewar Sanskritik Avam Atihasik Adhyan*, p. 27
6. *Teeja Bhatiyani re hath kharch ri bahi* no. 304, VS 1905, p. 24, Maharaja Mansingh Pustak Prakash Research Centre, Jodhpur.
7. *Teeja Bhatiyani ri bahi* no. 145, V.S. 1905, p. 29. Maharaja Mansingh Pustak Prakash Research Centre, Jodhpur.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Vyas, Ramparsad. *Rajasthan ka varth itihis*, p. 465.
10. Nagar, Mehandra Singh. *Ranimanga Bhaton ki bahi*, p. 20, Maharaja Mansingh Pustak Prakash Research Centre, Jodhpur.
11. *Ibid*, p. 63.

12. *Ibid*, p. 64.
13. *Ibid*, p. 67.
14. *Ibid*, p. 69.
15. Nagar, Mehandra Singh, *Marwar ki Sanskritik Virasat*, p. 116, Maharaja Mansingh pustak Prakash Research Centre (MMPP), Jodhpur.
16. Nagar, Mehandra Singh, *Ranimanga Bhaton ki bahi*, p. 20, MMPP, Jodhpur.
17. *Maharaja Abhay Singh ri khyat*, pp. 156-59, Rajasthan Prachya Veethapeeth, Jodhpur.
18. *Maharaja Vijay singh ri khyat*, Pg.98, Rajasthan Prachya Veethapeeth, Jodhpur, Mangelal, Vyas, Gulab Sagar Ke Kriti Stambh Ka Lekh no. 348, p. 119.
19. Gupta, Mohanlal. *Jilewar Sanskritik Avam Itihasik Adhyan*, p. 80
20. Nagar, Mehandra Singh. *Jodhpur Marwar Ke Paramprik Jalsharoto Ki Sampriti* VS 2062-2063, MMPP, Jodhpur.
21. On Gangaur, idols of the Hindu goddess Devi Parvati are brought to the lake for worship and immersion.
22. *Teeja Bhatiyani ri bahi* no. 145.

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