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Tracing the Many Lives of Rani Padmavati through Oral Narratives

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Abstract

Identities of several communities in India are constructed and formed on the conventions drawn from oral histories. Legends and folk tales passed down from generation to generation are an integral part of how people view themselves and the world around them. In such cases it gets difficult to distinguish between facts and fictions. The legend of Rani Padmavati is one such instance where oral narratives have sentimental values for communities and modern day interpretations and adaptations of these narratives have sparked outrage. In light of the riots that tore through the city before the release of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Padmavat*, it has become essential to analyse historical circumstances surrounding some of our heroic figures. it is crucial to understand how such tales have been twisted and morphed to suit the needs. This paper attempts to analyze texts that have been influenced by the oral narratives and examine the socio political conditions under which they have developed. These oral narratives can sometimes be traced to particular textual traditions as it is in the case of Rani Padmavati. It is also essential to understand the source of these textual traditions as some were commissioned by certain communities or by powerful royals and might have a bias. Therefore, only through the holistic understanding of all textual traditions or conventions, as well as through the understanding the community perspective in question can we aim to arrive at a certain conclusion. Methods employed to establish this trajectory is a systematic literature review and interviews.

The conclusion raises critical questions about whether or not such debates are viable and how if at all interpretations have been biased.

Introduction

In a country with a complex and intertwined history it is often difficult to make distinctions between what is fact and what is fiction. Numerous communities have histories of war and destruction associated with them that shape a substantial part of their identity. Hence, how identities have been formed or constructed is very problematic trace in modern day India. Especially communities such as the *Rajput*, a proud landowning warrior Indian community, are not very forgiving of their age-old tales that are central to their identity, being discarded as fictitious narratives that have over time come to be seen as historical facts. The identity of Rajput, linked to the glory of the kings and queens of their past, is often distorted due to the oral transmission of tales associated with them. One such example is the tale of Rani Padmavati. The tale of Rani Padmavati or Padmavati is almost sacred within the *Rajput*community. This legend has been passed down orally and has come to be regarded by the *Rajput* as a part of their history. After the communal outrage in different parts of the country over Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film Padmavat, the legitimacy of the legend of *Padmavati* has become a point of constant debate in the media. Therefore, it is important to approach this narrative carefully and place it in the context of the times that it was formulated in and analyze the modern day understanding of it as a source of *Rajput* and Hindu pride. It is also important to understand if oral traditions of history are enough to justify the kind of outrage sparked when artists rework these tales. My research will attempt to understand if the modern day Rajput view of *Rani Padmavati* is purely based on oral traditions and if so then why does it incite deep-seated violent controversies. This paper will also attempt to include questions of validity of memory and biases that shaped these oral narratives.

We come across the first mention of Rani Padmavati in Malik Muhammad Jayasi's 6th century poem *Padmavat* as the intelligent and brave queen of Chittor who thwarts the advances of Alauddin Khalji. Jayasi composes his poem around the characters of Padmvati, her husband and king of Chittor Ratansen and the sultan of Delhi Alauddin Khalji to narrate a tale of love and sacrifice. In the sixteenth century, when *Padmavat* was written, it was common for the Sufi *pirs* to provide religious legitimation to the ruling elite in return for patronage from the rulers.

It is important to note that unlike Padmavati Alauddin Khalji was a verified historical figure who ruled the Delhi Sultanate between 1296 and 1316 – about two centuries before Jayasi writes his poem. Why Jayasi chooses a real life Sultan as a character in his seemingly fictitious poem? A review of Khalji's history provides a little clarity on this subject. During Khalji's rule the boundaries of the Sultanate expanded swiftly to occupy regions in western, central and peninsular India. Khalji's attack and consequent wars on Rajasthan destroyed the rule of several

regions, due to which Kahlji share a particularly hatred fueled history with the Rajput. Khalji's rule was also noted for having destroyed the authority of local chiefs, most of who belonged to the Rajput community. However, we need to note that Amir Khusrao, the Sultan's court poet who had accompanied him during his invasion of Chittor, mentions no account of a Rani Padmavati. In *Padmavat*, Jayasi mentions about Raja Gandharva Sen, who was Rani Padmavati's father. It is important to remember that there seems to be no mention of any such name in the entire Sinhalese history. To understand the journey of Padmavati, we must review the historical conditions that she has travelled through. The modern interpretation of *Padmavat* is an outcome of the twentieth century rendition and is mingled with aspects of the nationalist movement. The Rajput community idolizes the figure of Rani Padmavati. In debates that arose post the pre-release publicity of Bhansali's film, one of the issues that the community had was the transformation of the legendary queen, a symbol of heroic principles that they have lived by into an icon in a fictitious film. Her tale, filled with honor and bravery is used to instill values in the younger generations of this community. Through these oral histories she has become an immortal and integral part of their identity.

On the other hand, arguments supporting the release of Bhansali's film claim that oral histories are distorted over time owing to the contexts. It is possible that the original story formulated by Jayasi did not aim to hail the queen as a goddess or propagate ideas of Rajput valor; instead it propagated ideas of a particular tradition of Sufi love poetry that explored themes of inner peace and harmony with nature through the characters of Rani Padmavati and Raja Ratan Sen. If this is the true aim of the narrative, it leaves space for modern day interpretation of a fictitious nature and such interpretations or adaptations must not warrant controversy and violence.

The question that this paper explores is not an ethical one. Instead it attempts to draw a trajectory of how different versions of Jayasi's poem gained popularity all over the subcontinent and also how a textual narrative morphed into oral history that became central in the way that the Rajput understood themselves. Since over time textual evidences of this have transformed into oral narratives that have occupied the space of history in the minds of this community, I have analyzed these different narratives that grew out of Jayasi's poem.

This research might raise questions of morality associated with such instances where banned practices such as *Sati* and *Jauhar* (acts of self-immolation practiced in certain communities of India, which are now banned) are believed to be acts that evoke pride, however such issues are beyond the scope of my paper

Versions of the Legend

Several 16th century texts offer different variations of the legend of Rani Padmavati. Ramaya Sreenivasan's book *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen* explores how modern regional elites;

caste politics, mystical and monastic communities helped shaped the distinctive versions of the past through repeated refashioning of the legend of Padmavati. Sreenivasan investigates these legends and traces their appropriation by colonial writers in order to achieve their own political agendas. Using Padmavati as a means to illustrate the power of gender norms while constructing heroic memories, she shows how such narratives about virtuous women changed as they travelled across different communities in Asia between the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The earliest of these texts can be attributed to Muhammad Jayasi, composed in Persian. Jain texts from 14th and 16th century such as *Nabiandan Jenudhar, Chitai Charitra* and *Rayan Sehra* mention a "Rani Padmavati" (Khan). Large variety of legends are found in the regional oral traditions from about 1500 or later, which are remembered retold and passed down from generation to generation in multiple languages (Sreenivasan, p.3-4). It is also important to understand that these legends were subject to many modifications. Written texts that survive show proof of modifications and it is obvious to assume that in the oral tradition these legends were subject to such modifications. Literary works that include Rani Padmavati as a character can be divided into four main categories –

Persian and Urdu Adaptations

In the 16th and 19th century, at least 12 versions of Jayasi's tale were produced (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.3). More versions were written in the 20th century in the Sufi love poem tradition. The poem has often been read through the lens of contemporary Hindu and Muslim identity. However, Thomas de Bruijn distances himself from the anachronistic understanding of modern national and religious identities being applied to the analysis of the poem, and turns to the time of its creation. His work *The Ruby in the Dust* employs the means of closed textual analysis to analyze the imagery and metaphors present in the poem and links them to historical discourses on religion and politics. An important rereading of Jayasi's seminal work, this book provides not only a meticulous literary study of *Padmavat*, but also a powerful look at the cultural climate of early modern Islam in India.

According to Bruijn Jayasi's poem, introduces Rani Padmavati the beautiful princess of the Sinhala (modern day Srilanka) kingdom. A talking parrot narrates the tale of the beauty of Padmavati, the daughter of Gandharvasen to Raja Ratansen. Moved by the parrot's description of Padmavati's beauty Ratansen longs to make her his wife and crosses the seas to Sinhala to win her over. There he meets Padmavati, marries her, overcomes several obstacles and with the blessings of the gods Shiva and Parvati makes his way back to Chittor, his kingdom. Ratansen goes ahead to banish a Brahmin scholar Raghav Chetan who makes his way to Delhi and earns favor with the Sultan, Alauddin Khaliji by singing praises of Rani Padmavati's beauty. The Sultan lusts for Padmavati and invades Chittor to complete his quest for her. Meanwhile,

Ratansen and his warriors are killed in battle with a rival Rajput king. Following the pride and honor of the Rajput, Rani Padmavati along with thousands of women of Chittor commits *Jauhar*, the act of women jumping into a pyre to avoid any other man besides their husbands laying claim to their bodies. Alauddin therefore succeeds in conquering Chittor but is unable to fulfill his personal quest for Padmavati.

The dates of Jayasi's birth and death are unclear, although historians place him during the rule of Babur. Between 16th and 19th century, the legend of Padmavati was picked up by many Sufi saints, manuscripts of such texts still survives (Sreenivasan, 2007 p. 29-30, 123-124). In one such version written in 1750 C.E, the parrot who narrates Padmavati's story to Ratansen is called Hiraman (no such name is mentioned in Jayasi's work) (Sreenivasan, p.207). The princess and Hiraman are close companions and Gandharvasen, Padmavati's father, does not approve of this. The king orders for the parrot's execution but Hiraman escapes and flies to Chittor, where he meets Ratansen and tells him of Padmavati and her beauty. Ratansen goes to Sinhala and marries Padmavati. After returning to Chittor, a rivalry develops between Padmavati and Nagmati, Ratansen's first wife. Mention of this rivalry is not there in Jayasi's text – an example of modification of the original tale over time. The rest of the story remains the same in this version.

Rajput Ballads

Hemratan composed a Rajput version of the legend in 1589 CE named *Gora Badal Padmavati Chaupai* (Sreenivasan, 2007, p.3, 209). A *chaupai* is a genre of Indian poetry that uses a meter of four syllables. It was a common form of poetry in medieval times. This version has been passed down orally and the community holds it as a "true tale" of Rajput valor and honour. Several other versions from the 16th and 18th century are found produced under the patronage of Rajput chiefs. The Rajput ballads are distinctly different from Jayasi's version as their central theme is the Rajput pride about defending their kingdoms and honor against the invasion of Alaudin Khaliji, whereas in Jayasi the main theme seems to revolve around courtship and marriage (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.3).

In Hemratan's *Gora Badal Padmavati Chaupai*, Rani Padmavati is known as Rani Padmavati. Ratan Sen's wife Prabhavati challenges the king to find a woman who can cook better than she can. Furiously, Ratansen set's out in search of such a wife and comes across as ascetic, a "*nath yogi*" who tells him of the island kingdom of Singhala, which is home to *Padmavati*women, who are genetically the best kind. Ratansen crosses the sea to Singhala and defeats the king in a game of chess, following which the king gives his sister Padmavati's hand in marriage to Ratansen (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.207). In Chittor, Ratansen and Padmavati are interrupted during their leisure time by a Brahmin Raghav Vyas. Fearing the king's anger, the Brahmin escapes to Delhi where he is greeted by the Sultan Alauddin Khaliji. The Brahmin tells the Sultan of the kingdom of Singhala and about Padmavati women. Impressed Khaliji sets out to find these women but is

faced with a major obstacle when his soldiers drown in the sea during the journey. Khaliji finds out that the only Padmavati woman on the mainland is Rani Padmavati of Chittor and in order to capture her, he lays siege to the fortress of Chittor. He deceitfully captures Ratansen and asks for the queen in return of his freedom. The frightened nobles consider giving the queen to the Sultan, but two brave soldiers – Gora and Badal, decide to defend her and rescue the king. The Rajput deceive the Sultan by putting soldiers in the *palanquins* in which Rani Padmavati is supposed to be sitting. Gora is killed in the battle while Badal escorts the king and queen back to Chittor and lives on to tell the brave tale of the Rajput soldiers. This version makes no mention of the *jauhar* of Padmavati and the other women in Chittor, instead concentrates on the bravery of the Rajput.

Colonial Retelling

The 19th century British writer James Todd, in his work *Annals and Antiquities of Rajas'han*, includes a colonial retelling of Rani Padmavati's legend (Sreenivasan,2007 p.137). His work is mainly based on the information gathered from the oral and textual traditions of writers who worked under the patronage of the Rajput kings (Sreenivasan, p.137). Todd does not name any particular source for his work. He makes no mention of Jayasi's poem and seems to be unaware that this work exists (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.137). He mentions *Khumman Raso* in connection to the legend of Padmavati but it seems that he mainly relies on the orally passed down tales amongst the Rajput along with the Hindu and Jain versions (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.119). His work borrows from multiple oral sources and a Jain monk Gyanchandra guides him in his research (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.119).

In this version Padmavati (not Padmavati), is the daughter of Hamir Sank, the Chauhan ruler of Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka) (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.140). The ruler of Chittor at this point was a child king – Lachhman Singh. Padmavati is the wife of Lachhman Singh's uncle Bhim Singh. tales of her beauty reach the Sultan of Delhi Alauddin Khaliji who raids the fort of Chittor in his quest for her. After catching a glimpse of her in a mirror during his visit to Chittor, the Sultan takes Bhim Singh hostage and demands Padmavati in return for his freedom. The story then follows the Rajput ballads and introduces Gora and Badal who defeats the Sultan and rescues Bhim Singh with soldiers concealed in palanquin. Though soldiers led by Gora and Badal manage to rescue Bhim Singh a large number of Rajput forces die in the struggle. Khaliji attacks the fort of Chittor shortly after and due to the loss of soldiers in the previous battle, Chittor faces inevitable defeat. While the men bravely fight to death against the Muslim invaders, the women join the cause by committing jauhar. Khaliji captures the fort but does not manage to capture the honor of Rani Padmavati.

The inscriptions discovered in the James Todd version later revealed that Todd had made a mistake and it was actually Ratansen who was the king at the time when Khaliji had attacked Chittor (Datta, p.289-290). Evidence confirms that Lakshman Singh (Lachhman Singh from

Todd's version) succeeded Ratan Sen and continued leading the Rajput in battle against the Muslim invaders (Datta, 1931).

Nationalist Bengali Versions

In the late 19th century, James Todd's version of the tale reached Calcutta and was adapted by Bengali writers as a means to fuel nationalist sentiment. In these versions Rani Padmavati is presented as a Hindu queen who killed herself to safeguard her honour from the Muslim invader (Sreenivasan, p.3).

Yagneshwar Bandyopadhyay's work *Mewar* (1884) explicitly describes the *jauhar* of Padmavati and several other Rajput women. This work mentions that the women committed this act to save their chastity against the "wicked Musalmans" (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.224-225). .Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's patriotic poem *Padmavati Upakhyan* (1858) also tells a similar story of Rani Padmavati's bravery (George). shirode Prasad Vidyavinode's play *Padmavati*(1906) is based on the James Todd version (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.222-224). The play introduces the king of Chittor as Lakshmansinha (Lachhman Singh) and Padmavati as the wife of the Rajput warrior Bhimsinha (Bhim Singh). The play has multiple plot narratives such as the exile of Khaliji's wife Nasiba and Lakshmansinha's son Arun. It follows Todd's versions with a few variations for like Padmavati with the help of a warrior Gora saves Bhimsinha who has been taken hostage by Khaliji, using the palanquin tactic. The Rajput men fight to death to defend their fort and the women commit *jauhar*. The Rajput lineage is carried on through Lakshmansinha's exiled son Arun.

Abanindranath Tagore's *Rajkahini* (1909) is also based on Todd's version. In this version, Bhimsinha a Rajput warrior marries Padmavati a Sinhalese woman after a voyage. A singing girl gives the information of Padmavati's beauty to Khaliji who invades Chittor to obtain her. The fierce Rajput refuses to give up their women to an invader and defeats Khaliji in the battle. Later Khaliji deceitfully captures Bhimsinha but Padmavati using the palanquin trick with the help of the Rajput rescues her husband. Meanwhile Taimur invades the Delhi Sultunate causing Khaliji to return to protect his territory. Thirteen years later Khaliji returns to invade Chittor with larger forces. The king Lakshmansinha considers surrendering but Padmavati appears in front of him as a goddess and demands a blood sacrifice for the sake of Rajput honor. The men fight to death while the women die in jauhar. Victorious Khaliji looks for Padmavati everywhere in the fort but has no luck and returns to Delhi defeated. (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.225-226) The story has a strong sense of the victory of the Hindus over a Muslim invader.

Historical Trajectory

A verified historical event Alauddin Khaliji's attack on Chittor fort can be placed in 1303 CE. . Although popularly this event is narrated with the legend of Rani Padmavati or Padmavati, it has little historical evidence (Asher and Talbot,2009 p.41). One of the earliest sources which mention the seize of the fort of Chittor by Khaliji, is by Amir Khusrau, a court poet who accompanied Alauddin during the event (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.22-23). Khusrau makes no mention of the beautiful queen but later translations of Khusrau's work are considered to have some allegorical references of Padmavati. Amir Khusrau then went ahead to describe the same siege of Chittor in his composition *Diwal Rani Khizr Khan* in 1315 CE, where he mentions about the love between a son of Alauddin and a princess of Gujarat. Here too there is no mention of Padmavati (Sreenivasan, 2007, p.22-24).

Scholars such as Ashirbadi Lal Srivastav, Dasharatha Sharma and Mohammad Habib, suggest that Khusrau does make subtle references to Padmavati in his work *Khaza'in ul-Futuh* (Somani,1976 p.97-98). In another such instance historian Subimal Chandra Datta in 1931 mentioned that in Khusrau's 14th century description of Khaliji's siege of Chittor, there is a mention of a bird "hudhud" and seems likely that this might have morphed into the character of the talking parrot Hiraman in the Padmavati legends (Datta, 1931 p.298). Datta also states that in this work of Khusrau's, it is implied that "Alauddin insisted on the surrender of a woman, possibly Padmavati" (Datta, p.297-298).

Historians Kishori Saran Lal and Kalika Ranjan Qanungo have questioned whether interpretations such as Datta's are valid because it seems too wide a leap to suggest that a bird mentioned is the same as Hiraman from the legend and that the implied woman is Rani Padmavati. According to them there is simply no evidence in Khusrau's works to prove Padmavati's existence as anything but as a fictional character.

It is also significant that Datta states that a definitive historical interpretation of Khusrau's poetic works is not possible. It also seems to be an unlikely event that the reason behind Khaliji's attack on Chittor was his lust for a queen instead of a political agenda. Khaliji attacked other parts of Mewar region as well to expand the Sultanate and Chittor seems to be a similar conquest (Datta, 1931, p.297-298). According to Ziauddin Barani, a Muslim political thinker of the Delhi Sultanate, one of Khaliji's officers had mentioned to him that the political plan was to capture Ranthambore, Chittor, Chanderi, Dhar and Ujjain before the forces moved towards a world conquest (Datta, 1931, p.290). Allaudin's agenda to conquer Chittor seems to be a part of his political plan and did not have anything to do with Rani Padmavati. Datta argues that there is a mention of Khaliji demanding a surrender of a Rajput woman but this seems to be a ploy to humiliate the Rajput chiefs (Datta, 1931, p.298). Therefore, the Khusrau account confirms the siege of Chittor and implies some vague mentions of Rajput women that may have formed the basic framework of the Padmavati legend.

Emergence of Padmavati as a Historical Figure

Historical evidences and a review of the timeline of different versions of the legend provides us with a seemingly clear idea of how Rani Padmavati moved from being an icon of love and desire in a Sufi poet's literary text, to becoming an icon of community identity and pride. Following this colonial retelling it led to the emergence of Padmavati as a national icon which roused sentiments of nationality during the independence movement and in modern day it has made into children's classrooms and Padmavati is now believed to be a historical figure.

Early accounts of Ziauddin Barani and Isami of the siege of Chittor have no mention of Padmavati (Behl, 177). ecords state that Khaliji captured Chittor, set up governors and returned to Delhi to proceed with other conquests (Agnihotri, 2010, p.2). The first indisputable mention of Padmavati is Malik Muhammad Jayasi's poem *Padmavat*. Ramaya Sreenivasan says, "It is possible that Jayasi mixed-up Alauddin Khaliji and Giyath al-din Khaliji of the Malwa Sultanate (1469-1500) who had a roving eye for Padmavati (not a particular Rajput princess, but the ideal type of woman according to Hindu erotology). Ghiyath al-din Khaliji, according to a Hindu inscription in the Udaipur area, was defeated in the battle of 1488 by a Rajput chieftain and Badal-Gora, which incidentally also happened to be the names of the twins, Badal and Gora, the vassals of Ratansen". Hemratan's Rajput version of this tale narrates an alternative to Jayasi's work and presents it as true events (Sreenivasan, 2007, p.3, 209). After this version until the 19th century, there have been multiple versions of the legend that produce is as a historical event. Firishta and his contemporary Haji-ud-Dabar, were 16thcentury historians who can be credited with one of the earliest mention of Padmavati as a historical figure, but their works differ with each other as well as with Jayasi's version. For instance, according Firishta, Padmavati was a daughter and not the wife of Ratan Sen (Basu, 1963 p.139).

James Todd's colonial writing of the legend is now considered unreliable (Freitag, 2009 p.3-5). This mainly seems to be because it is based on oral histories composed under the patronage of Rajput chieftains and hence biased. This version can also be considered a British tactic to further their divide and rule agenda during the colonial times by pitting the Hindus against Muslims. Todd's versions paint Padmavati as a historical figure who came to be associated with the siege of Chittor. This work popularity in the 19th century caused Padmavati to become a national symbol. A number of plays were written after 1905 showcasing Padmavati as an example of heroic sacrifice *Rajkahini* by Abanindranath Tagore between 1871-1951 popularized her as a historical figure in schools (Chatterjee, p.37). Some history textbooks began to refer to Khaliji invading Chittor with the primary motive to acquire Padmavati (Chatterjee. p.38).

By 20th century, Hindu Rajput women considered Padmavati as a historical figure who exemplifies Rajput traditions and womanhood (Sreenivasan, 2007 p.1). Hindu activists characterized her as a chaste woman and her act of *jauhar* as a heroic display of resistance

against a Muslim invader. In modern day India Padmavati is admired for her character, her willingness to sacrifice her life instead of submitting to a Muslim ruler, as a symbol of bravery much like Meerabai (Harlan, 1992 p.182-187).

Dichotomy of Padmavati as an Icon of Love and a Historical Rajput Queen

In order to understand the modern day disturbances that followed Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Padmavat*, by the *Karni Sena* (a Rajput political organization), it is important to understand the dichotomy that exists in the character of Padmavati as an icon of love and desire in the Sufi love poetry and as a historical icon with whom the Rajput identifies.

Mughal invasion and rule had a distinct impact on the literary culture of India. As a result there were two types of narratives formed – "a Muslim epic of conquest and a Hindu epic of resistance and psychological resistance". Aziz Ahmad in his article "Epic and Counter Epic in Medieval India*"* proves how these two literary urges in medieval India developed and the socio-political environment in which they developed. The Muslim epic of conquest as the "epic" and the Hindu epic of resistance as the "counter-epic" is what Ahmad establishes in his article. His arguments form a sort of blueprint for the folk tales that were popular in medieval India. The epic story of Queen Padmavati hence falls into the category of Ahmad's counter epic. Ahmad writes about the epic of Padmavati and notes discrepancies between the modern day popularly believed glorious tale and Jayasi's original text. He emphasizes on these discrepancies by noting possible instances from Jayasi's time that he may have used for the formulation of his characters. Through the process Ahmad forwards the argument that Padmavati was a fictional character.

We may refer to poet, academic and philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal's letter written in 1929 to young Raghupati Sahay Firaq Gorkhpuri to understand Jayasi's poem. Iqbal writes, "For an Islamic mystic, woman is always a catalyst or medium to reach higher consciousness.She could also be his imaginary muse, unadulterated and unspoilt by thought and action. She's an indispensable character whether fictitious or real, but mostly the former, because only a fabricated male or female can be so divinely chaste. Jalaluddin Rumi's Irfa, Nizami's Nahila, Attar's Qaneem, Hakim Sanai's Aviara did never exist, but they were woven and assimilated into poetic plots by all mystics so beautifully, that with the passage of time, they began to appear as real-life characters. Poetry, especially Islamic *tasawwuf* — spirituality based poetry –always have a central or powerful clandestine female character, who is often unreal."

According to Sumit Paul in his article for the newspaper Speaking Tree, it is understood that this fictitious character meets her end in a symbolic event (Paul, 2017). Padmavati's jauhar is a symbol of end of the last obscure vestiges of carnality necessary for the union of the individual with universal consciousness. The sacredness and purity that surround this woman's character is a central point in the Sufi tradition. It is also an interesting point that self-immolation, is

considered ‘unislamic’ in central Asian mystic traditions. However, Jayasi was a product of the complex culture and tradition of India. His mysticism was rooted in the ethos of India and he uses the act of jauhar in Padmavat as a symbol of a certain symbiosis. Similar spiritual traditions were followed by successors of Jayasi like Rumi, Hafiz, Jami and Bedil among other.

According to Persian mysticism the woman is viewed as ‘alamat-e-pakeezgi’ that is the ‘perfect symbol of purity’. She cannot be defiled and hence Padmavati could not be desecrated by the ‘lustful’ Khaliji. In the James Todd version which is unverified and unreliable as mentioned earlier, Jayasi was enamoured by a Rajasthani woman ‘Padma’, whom he has seen near Ajmer. Todd summarises that he immortalized Padma as Rani Padmavati in *Padmavat*. The Hindu and Jain manuscripts lead us to understand the legend as symbolic. Dated to the 17th century they state that Chittor or rathe ‘*chit’*and ‘*aur’* meaning ‘body’ and ‘heart’ symbolizes the human body, Ratansen is the human spirit, Rani Padmavati is the human mind and Sultan Khaliji represents ‘*maya*’ meaning worldly illusion (Sreenivasan, p.946).

Contradictorily in oral traditions of the Rajput, Padmavati was a queen of Ratansen, the ruler of Chittor. Khaliji is the evil Muslim invader but because of Padmavati’s bravery and loyalty to the Rajput traditions, is unsuccessful in his quest of her. Multiple unstructured conversations with members of the Rajput community has led me to understand that Padmavatiis a revered icon of their history. Participants of the interview are all part of migrant Rajput community who have settled in Mumbai. Aged between 18-25 years their opinions form a vital part of the discourse surrounding this topic as their version of the narrative is what has been orally passed down. For them she is a goddess like queen who they believed to have lived and died like a true Rajput. She is an integral part of their identity and to depict her in a film for the sake of profits is a gross distortion of their history.

But this study has led us to the conclusion that there seems to be no historical textual proof of the existence of Padmavati. Why then is this at the root of a controversy? To understand this, we must understand the place oral history holds. Questions of reliability of memory, biases on the parts of the narrators and the socio political circumstances are intrinsically involved in the formulation of oral histories. As a community the Rajput are bound to place their faith in the oral histories of their ancestors but as researchers we must understand the flip side of the issue. The review of literature presented in this paper, provides us with an idea of how a text morphed into a narrative that in turn morphed into an identity. Analysis in this paper presents us with clarity of the conditions in which the icon of Rani Padmavati developed. However, it is easy for us to see why and how she has come to be such a big part of this community’s identity. To conclude, Jayasi’s work ends with the line “I have made up the story and related it” and hence that is the spirit with which it should be understood. However, it is also extremely important to understand the delicate situation that has arisen given the history of this legend.

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