Devi Kund Sagar: The Iconography of Satī and Its Absence in Bikaner’s Chattrīs

In the windswept desert several miles south of Bikaner city, capital of the former state of the same name, is the royal Bika Rathore chatrī bagh, Devi Kund Sagar (Fig. 5.1). Its chatrīs present a sharp contrast with those of the Jodha Rathores. While the most conspicuous feature of the latter is a morphological instability that testifies to the dynasty’s inconsistent foreign relations, the Bika Rathores, who split from the Jodha Rathores and founded the kingdom of Bikaner in the fifteenth century, memorialize their royals with surprising architectural consistency. While there is some variation in their individual features and plans, the Devi Kund Sagar cenotaphs are, with only one exception, open, pillared, and domed in the typical chatrī manner. Moreover, their domes are remarkably similar—a trait that can be traced to the sweeping building and restoration projects instituted by Mahārājā Ganga Singh (r. 1888–1943).

Unlike the Kachhwaha, Naruka, and Jodha Rathore chatrīs, which are all now empty, each royal Bika Rathore chatrī shelters a devalī centrally placed under its dome. And while the forms of the chatrīs are consistent, each devalī is unique and personalized. The steles’ detailed, low-relief friezes and epigraphs present the memorialized kings and their satīs as gendered Rajput paradigms. This iconographic and epigraphic program, however, underwent a sudden, radical shift in the early nineteenth century when, in response to the growing British influence in their states, the Rajputs were pressured to discontinue satī and refashion other aspects of their dharm and public identity. With this erosion of their autonomy—and particularly the prohibition of satī, which had been one of their strongest funerary traditions—the Bika Rathores were compelled to devise new visual expressions of legitimacy and authority in their chatrīs.

The first section of this chapter examines the iconographies of the gendered paradigms of satī and martial Rajput kingship in Bika Rathore funerary art and how they were redefined under Mahārājā Surat Singh in the early colonial period. In addition to refashioning his dynastic identity in the face of encroaching British hegemony, Surat Singh skillfully ensured that his daughter-in-law, Princess Deep Kunwar, who became Bikaner’s final satī, was posthumously deified. She is still worshipped at Devi Kund Sagar today.
The chapter’s second section situates Ganga Singh’s chatrī restorations within the colonial milieu in which he ruled and reads them against his other architectural commissions. In his extensive study on Indo-Saracenic architecture, Thomas Metcalf identifies Ganga Singh as an ideal colonial royal subject, a “model prince” who was both “liberal” (modern) and “conservative” (i.e., a traditional Rajput ruler), and employs this dual identity as a lens through which to examine the various Indo-Saracenic architectural projects Ganga Singh commissioned in his capital. Metcalf concludes that Ganga Singh was pliant in face of the dictates of the Raj, passively allowing, and even participating in, its rebuilding of his capital, his residence, and his identity. However, his chatrī restorations suggest that he was also an assertive agent, and that the dutiful colonial subject and “model prince” were only two aspects of his polyvalent public identity. His restored chatrīs aggrandize his forbearers and present them as equals, if not superior to, the British. Ganga Singh was of course not the first Rajput ruler to subvert imperial power, at least visually, through his chatrī commissions. We have seen, for example, how Rājā Udai Singh commissioned a renaissant-style deval for his father to belie his own alliance with the

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