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## The Religious Cult of Karni Devi and Making of Bikaner State

Rajshree Dhali & Bhupinder Chaudhry

The formation of a state does not only require the military might and administrative skills on the part of the founder but a strong ideological apparatus that will take the state beyond geographical boundaries controlled by the physical strength. The ideological moorings, therefore, helps a state to strike its roots deep into the society it is ruling and create hegemony over its subjects. Given the society of believers, the religious ideology was considered pertinent to win over or co-opt in Gramscian sense, the subject who otherwise are considered antagonist to the state. The formation of Bikaner state in medieval Rajasthan was no exception. The paper explores the relationship between formation of Bikaner state and the popular religious cult of Karni Devi.

The religious cult and the ruling Rathors both complimented each other. The patronage extended to Karni Devi by the Rathor rulers helped to increase its popularity whereas the cult in turn provided a much required legitimacy to the newly founded state. Not only the Rathors but several other Rajput clans were also indebted to *Charan* female saints and regarded them as deities. The Bhatti clan held Awadji as incarnation of goddess and venerated her, the Gaur clan beheld Gigai Devi, and likewise Sisodia clan of Dungarpur and Udaipur were indebted to Barawadeja.<sup>1</sup> The reason for accepting a *Charan* female deity as 'Kuldevi' by the Rajput ruling dynasties is not very difficult to understand.

### Brief Overview of the Charan Community:

Charans, though not a social group occupying a high pedestal in the caste hierarchy, had carved out an important role for themselves in the society. They functioned as an important link between the ruling dynasty and its subjects. Being bards and employed by the state, their task was to entertain and record the events of the court, compose poems and stories to eulogize the king and the family members. They also entered into client-patron relationship with socially dominant people in the villages. They would visit them on special occasions, maintain genealogical record and in return received gifts from the head of the family. They also entertained people by reciting poems and stories on occasions like marriage and other social gatherings in return for gifts. In the absence of modern means of communication, *Charans* had created a wide network to disseminate the state ideology among common people which made them indispensable for the ruling elite. They would accompany the king on hunting and military expeditions, compose stories and songs magnifying and