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Loyalty, Kinship and Honour
The Tales of Poet Jān in Mughal India

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the tales (*kathā*s) of the Kyāmkhānī poet, Jān Kavi (fl. 1614–1664) in order to explore the historical process through which a Rajput great tradition took shape in Mughal times. Firmly situated within the genre conventions of earlier Sufi love tales that emerged from the Avadh region, the Mughal-era Braj Bhasha *kathā*s present an archetype of the emperor-minister ideal in imaginary narratives, juxtaposing it with historical accounts rooted in Islamicate and Mughal-Rajput models. The tales illustrate how, during the centralization of power under the Mughal emperor and the allied Rajput kings, the fraught Rajput world is idealized, and infused with a heightened sense of self and honour. By situating the Kyāmkhānīs within the Mughal state and the *kathā*s within their genre conventions, Jān Kavi articulates the ethics of loyalty, service, and kinship in an upwardly mobile ruling family.

KEYWORDS**:** honour, *kathā*, Kyāmkhānī, *pradhān*, Rajputization

Introduction: The genre of Hindavi tales and Jān Kavi's *kathā*s

One of the major early trends in the development of vernacular literature in North India was the composition of love-narrative poems, known in Hindi literary historiography as *premākhyān*. These long-form

narrative poems, first attested in the Avadh region east of Delhi, constitute a distinct corpus characterized by shared genre conventions and metrical structures. Sufi poets who composed these love narrative poems referred to their language as *hindavī*, identifying it with the broader region of North India or Hindustan. This designation also served to distinguish it from the languages of other Islamic cultures, which they referred to collectively as *turakī*.[1] In recent scholarship, these narratives have been grouped under the emic term *kathā*, meaning 'tale' or 'story' (Orsini 2017; Orsini 2023: 24–73). The term aptly designates a body of literature often composed by Muslim authors with Sufi or courtly affiliations during the early modern period. However, *kathā* also refers more broadly to a wide range of narrative literature across North India, encompassing everything from religious texts to oral folk epics. While working on the epic poem *Pṛthvīrāj rāso*, scholars have identified several poetic and plot conventions (*kāvya rūṛhi* and *kathānak rūṛhi* respectively)—such as the awakening of love through a dream or a portrait, the appearance of messenger birds, prophetic foretelling, a king's longing for a son, curses by sages, and motifs of separation—as recurring stylistic features and literary motifs across Indian *kathā*s (Dvivedī and Siṁh 2008 [1952]: 12).

The *kathā*s explored in this essay relate both formally and thematically to the above-mentioned specific corpus of love-narrative poems composed by poets of Sufi or courtly orientation. The 17th-century Kyāmkhānī[2] Muslim poet Jān of Rajasthan himself referred to such stories as *kathā*s, identifying them with a long-standing tradition of storytelling. With Jān, the specific genre of *kathā*, which had emerged in the Avadh region in the pre-Mughal period, was reimagined and expanded. New themes and social-political contexts, including emerg-

[1] Orsini (2023: 14–15) notes that in North India, the vernacular was simply called "Indian" (*hindī*, *hindavī*) in Persian sources, denoting a continuum of circulation in the region. This was also true for the Hindavi Sufi poets, whose early manuscripts circulated in the Perso-Arabic script.

[2] I follow the Kyāmkhānī spelling, as used by the editors of Jān Kavi's better-known warrior narrative poem *Kyāmkhān rāsā*. Other variants include Kāyamkhānī and Qāyamkhānī.

ing communities in regions west of Delhi, were incorporated into the tradition.

The diffusion of *kathā*s west of Delhi reflects a shared, multilingual literary culture in which genres moved fluidly across geographic and linguistic boundaries, forming a continuum rather than sharply demarcated zones. In this paper, I draw on recent scholarship (Sreenivasan 2014a; Orsini 2017; Orsini 2023) that calls for a social history of the *kathā* genre, particularly as it evolved during the Mughal period. While *kathā* narratives have long existed, with poets creatively retelling familiar stories, a closer examination reveals how these tales were continually reinvented. Moreover, the Mughal-period *kathā*s offer valuable insights into the social and historical transformations of the regions in which they circulated.

I focus on the *kathā*s of the 17th-century Nyāmat Khān, a member of the Muslim-Rajput Kyāmkhānī dynasty of Fatehpur in northeastern Rajasthan, who wrote under the pen name Jān Kavi, or 'poet Jān.' Jān Kavi's tales highlight the social dynamics of Rajput society, which had been evolving over previous centuries but became yet better defined during the 16th and 17th centuries, often in relation to the Mughals. Although Jān Kavi was based in a region with a long tradition of composing in Marwari or Dingal, he chose to write in the widely circulating Braj Bhasha, thereby envisioning a broader audience.[3] The language Braj Bhasha, named after the Braj region associated with the Hindu god Krishna, began a new career in the late 16th century. It emerged not only as the medium of devotional poetry but also as a principal language of court literature of greater Hindustan, and especially among Rajput élites who allied themselves with the Mughal

[3] Turek (2023: 130) recently established that by the 16th century—before Jān Kavi began his career—"Mārvāṛī already had a fully developed and established literary language suitable for any kind of poetry." This characterization of Marwari builds upon and reaffirms the work of J. D. Smith (1975: 43–44), who described an earlier tradition of composition in Old Rajasthani. By the late 16th century, this older form had been supplanted by Middle Marwari, which became the most prominent literary language of Rajasthan until the emergence of modern Marwari in the 19th century.

empire (Busch 2011: 166–201). In this context, poet Jān adopted Braj Bhasha for his compositions. As the language gained prestige in Rajput courts, which was Jān Kavi's socio-political base, his tales spoke directly to the communities he was part of and whom he addressed.

Jān Kavi consciously positioned himself within a multilingual context, as his pen name suggests. The Indic word Jān means 'knowledge' or 'gnosis' (from *jñān*), whereas in Persianate context it denotes 'life' or 'soul.' He adopted the couplet-quatrain (*dohā/soraṭhā-caupāī*)—stanzas of quatrain strung together with couplets—as metrical style for his *kathā*s. This style was particularly suited to the tales composed in the region east of Delhi, in the language later known as Avadhi (the language of the Avadh region). Jān Kavi's corpus demonstrates the fluidity of this style, showing how the same metrical and narrative structures—required by the genre—could also be effectively adopted in Braj Bhasha.

The vernacular tales produced in the Turkic and Afghan courtly settings in the hinterland, "east of Delhi," between the late 14th and mid-16th centuries represent a significant milestone in Hindavi literature and reflect the growing culture of storytelling within North Indian literary traditions.[4] Prominent and well-studied examples of these tales include Maulānā Dāud's *Candāyan* (1379), Qutuban's *Mirigāvatī* (1503), Malik Muhammad Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* (1540), and Mañjhan Śattārī Rājgirī's *Madhumālatī* (1545), all composed prior to the consolidation of the Mughal Empire. Emerging from an Indo-Islamic, multilingual milieu, these narratives were written in Avadhi and transmitted through multiple scripts. In some cases, they were preserved in richly illustrated manuscripts, further broadening their reach. They were appreciated for their multilayered meanings and aesthetic richness across diverse settings, including Sufi religious circles, courtly

[4] Orsini describes the region located on the Indo-Gangetic plain, east of the city of Delhi, as Purab or Avadh. From the early Islamic conquests in the 11th and 12th centuries, this region was characterized as a linguistic-cultural zone with small towns and brick-mud fortresses. During the Mughal period, Avadh was administered as a province (*sūbā*), and, together with the Mughal *sūbā* of Allahabad, the entire region can be characterized as Purab, "the east" (cf. Orsini 2023: 9–10).

environments, city squares and village assemblies, and in some cases, even in people's homes.[5]

Aditya Behl's pioneering scholarship on the aforementioned Avadhi tales demonstrates how poets affiliated with Sufi orders such as the Chishtī and the Shattārī, in the absence of a central institution like a court or shrine, adhered to and perpetuated a shared generic logic (cf. Behl 2012, Behl and Weightman 2000). Drawing on literary conventions from the Persian *masnavī* (long-form rhyming couplet poem) and structural elements such as a prologue, these tales inscribe an Islamic divine authority into the local language. The prologue of these tales establishes contexts for reception in both Sufi and courtly settings, invoking praise for the Prophet Muhammad, the four righteous caliphs, the poet's contemporary emperor, his direct patron, and the poet's Sufi master.

The poets then ground the tales in Indian aesthetic principles such as *rasa* ('flavour' or 'essence'), particularly emphasizing the *rasa* of love. Furthermore, by employing allegorical frameworks, these tales depict "the ascetic quest of the hero towards the revelatory beauty of a heroine (or God) by linking mortification, fasting, and prayer with a female object of desire" (Behl and Weightman 2000: xiii).

The concept of religious syncretism does not significantly aid in understanding these Avadhi tales. In Thomas de Bruijn's formulation, these tales were open and dialogic, shaped by the interplay of genre, social structures, and content (2010: 140–141). For instance, the way the Sufi tales and Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574)—also written in Avadhi—drew from the Rama legends illustrates this dynamic. While Malik Muhammad Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* employs the Rama legends to present the idea of universal kingship prevailing over brute force, Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* localizes the epic Ramayana, embedding it within a discourse that resonates with its regional audience and extends beyond the generic aspects of the original. The shared trajectory of

[5] For example, the Jain merchant Banārsīdās wrote in his autobiography, *Ardhakathānak* (1641, *A Half Tale*), that he read *Madhumālatī* and *Mirigāvatī* at his home in Agra to an audience of ten or twenty people. For this content in *Ardhakathānak*, see Chowdhury 2009: vv. 335–336.

manuscript reproduction and circulation in the period between Jāyasī and Tulsīdās highlights how these tales were received and disseminated within similar cultural circles (*ibid.*: 141).

An exploration of the material aspects of these tales, including their narrative and rhetorical strategies as formulated by Francesca Orsini (2023), is helpful in understanding the social and religious contexts and circulation of these tales. Orsini argues that these Sufi tales, along with other Hindu devotional and non-religious heroic tales, should rightfully be considered *kathā*. Rather than labelling them as "romance," a term associated with European literary history, or *premākhyān* (love-narrative), which dominated Hindi literary historical constructions in the early 20th century, the emic term *kathā*, meaning 'story' or 'tale,' is more appropriate (ibid.: 2023: 27). This specific oral-literate genre had shared metrical and narrative features throughout North India. It encompassed diverse themes and addressed multiple audiences simultaneously. The *kathā*s were written in Persian, *devanāgarī,* and *kaithī* scripts and were often illustrated for courtly élite audiences, from the late Delhi Sultanate period (as in the case of Maulānā Dāud's *Candāyan*) until the late Mughal era. They were also translated into Persian, Bangla, and Dakani, reflecting the long history of this particular multilingual genre from the 14th to the 20th centuries.[6]

Interpreting such vernacular narratives, especially Maulānā Dāūd's *Candāyan*, Nārāyaṇ Dās's *Chitāī carit* (1526), and Jāyasī's *Padmāvat*, Ramya Sreenivasan (2014a: 242–272) proposes that reading of these tales should be more firmly grounded in the socio-political worlds of their time. She highlights how folk epics, circulating during 14th to 16th centuries, informed the development of the Avadhi tales through dialogue with those traditions. This is more so as the warrior heroes in

[6] The long history of this genre has been studied by several scholars. For a discussion of the Bangla author Alaol of Arakan (fl. 1651–1671) and his translation of Malik Muhammad Jāyasī's *Padmāvat*, see d'Hubert 2018. Other extensive studies of these tales include de Bruijn 2012, Pauwels 2013, Bocchetti 2019, Aitken and Busch 2022, and Williams 2024, which, except for Bocchetti, are all studies of *kathā*s composed prior to the 1550s, that is, before the consolidation and expansion of the Mughal Empire under Akbar.

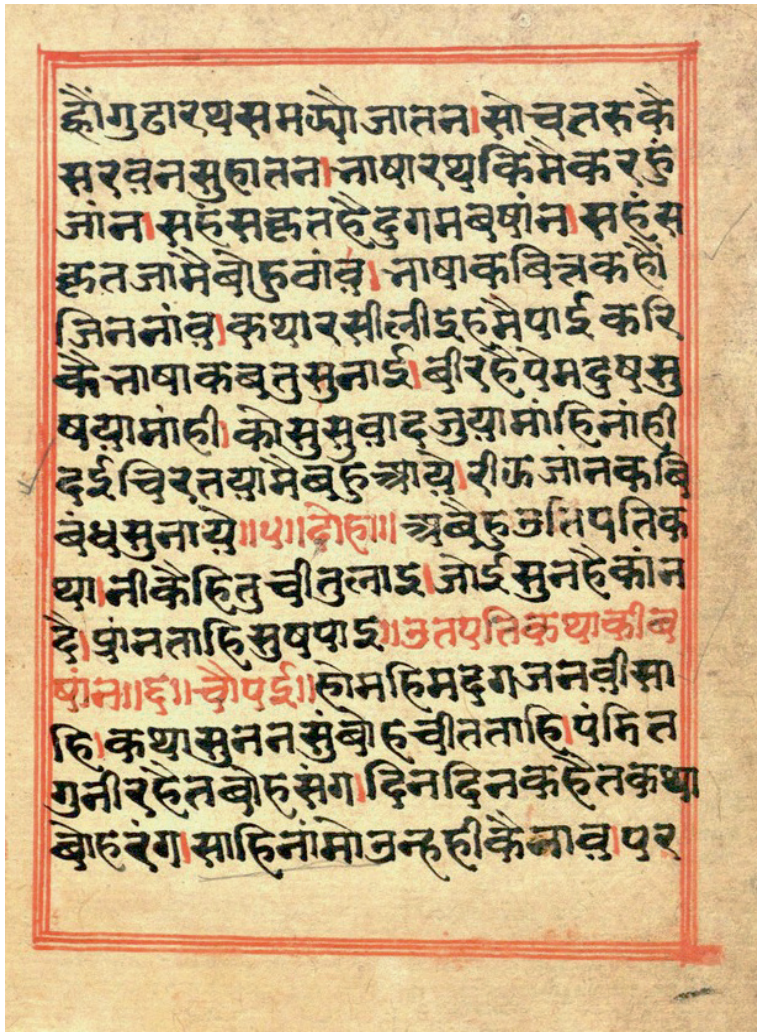

Fig. 1. Manuscript no. 37902, *Kathā ratnāvatī*, f. 4,
Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur.

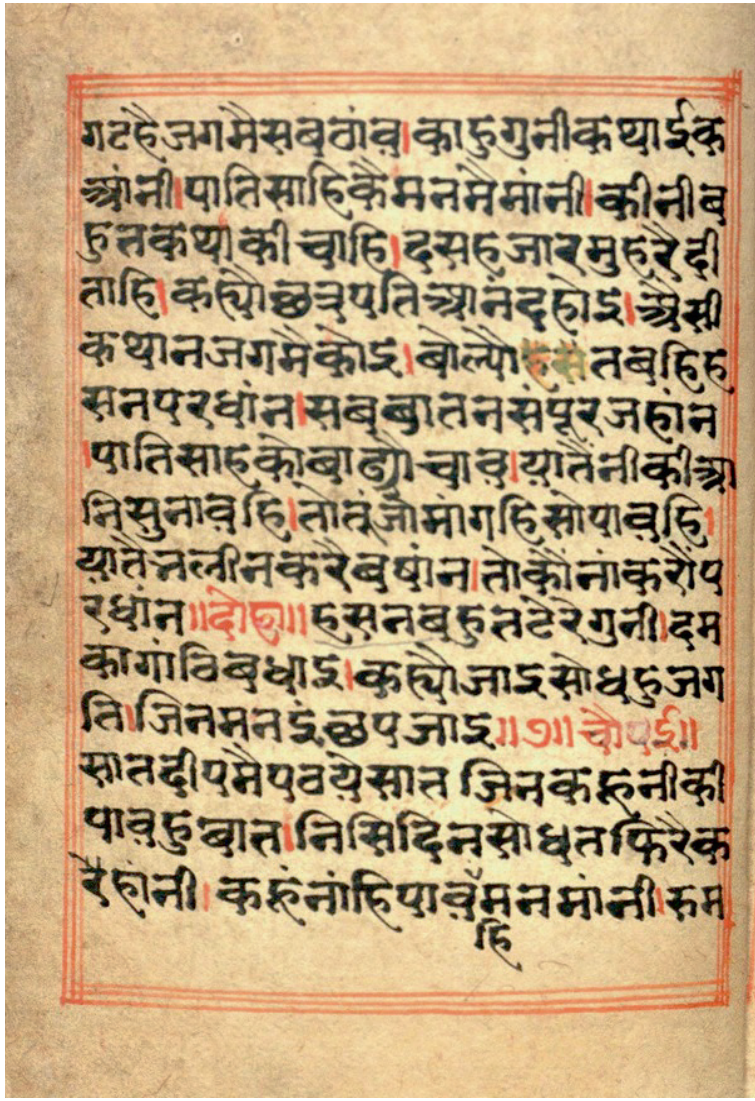

Fig. 2. Manuscript no. 37902, *Kathā ratnāvatī*, f. 5,
Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur.

these narratives emerge from the non-élite peasant-pastoralist groups who assert their identities as aspiring chiefs, contrasting with the kings of regional polities such as Jaunpur, Malwa, Gujarat, and the Rajput territories of Rajasthan.

In Sreenivasan's formulation, these narratives reflect the ambitions of men who occupied the continuum between the village headmen and successful warlords. This peasant-pastoralist social base was also a crucial source of military labour for regional states prior to the consolidation of the Mughal Empire.[7] Therefore, these works should be studied as addressing the aspirations and constraints of the rural gentry and local warlords in the hinterlands (*ibid*.: 242–244).

In a dialogue with the *kathā* genre of the pre-Mughal period, new type of *kathā*s emerged during the Mughal era (c. 1556–1857), incorporating themes such as elaborate courtly assemblies enriched with music and paintings, while reflecting the geographical and ethnic expanse of the Mughal Empire. As Shantanu Phukan notes, the reception of the Hindavi tales in the Mughal period—Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* and Muhammad Afzal's *Bikaṭ kahānī* (1636)—reveals an intricate and interdependent ecology of Hindi and Persianate literary communities. These tales mirrored Mughal society; for instance, works like *Bikaṭ kahānī* heightened the pathos of separation by evoking femininity through the "positioning and movement of the wayward man and the sedentary woman," reflecting the dynamics of the social world in the predominantly Persianate, male-dominated courtly circles of the Mughal period (Phukan 2001: 43).

It is within the vernacular storytelling tradition discussed above and the growing scholarship on the social history of the *kathā* genre that I aim to situate Jān Kavi. The foremost reason for this focus is that, despite composing dozens of tales, this poet has remained obscure to the studies of the long history of the *kathā* genre.[8] The first reason

[7] Kolff (1990) demonstrates that the military labour market extended from the pre-Mughal period through the Mughal era and into the colonial times.

[8] Michal Hasson (2018; 2021) is an exception in this regard, having studied Jān Kavi's tale of *Lailā Majnūṁ* as part of the translation strategies adopted by South Asian authors in retelling this 7th-century tale of Arabia.

for this obscurity is that Jān Kavi is not mentioned in the histories of Hindi literature, unlike other poets discussed earlier.[9] Second, much of his *kathā*s remain in manuscript form, and the published ones require re-editing for greater accuracy.[10] Third, while growing scholarship tends to emphasize the pre-Mughal era *kathā*s, Jān Kavi composed his works during the period of Mughal-Rajput empire-building. Residing in the small town of Fatehpur, where the local language was Marwari or Dingal in literature, yet composing in Braj Bhasha, Jān Kavi occupies an unnoticed position in the study of Rajasthan and its literary traditions.

Jān Kavi began composing *kathā*s in 1614, concurrently with his dynastic warrior narrative the *Kyāmkhān rāsā*, and continued writing them until his final composition in 1664. What I demonstrate in this essay, by exploring several of these *kathā*s, is that Jān Kavi portrays a model of perfect order—namely, the Mughal and Rajput one—in his direct experience, while also finding parallels in Persian, Islamic, and pre-Islamic history so that this order may be viewed as the most powerful and enlightened. Such a model not only reflects the cohesion of the Mughal Empire but also a spiritual unity to which Jān Kavi appears to have been devoted.

Central to this model is the Rajput rank-holder in the Mughal state apparatus, who is referred to by Jān Kavi as *pradhān* or *dīvān*, and is tied to the Mughals by the ideal of *svāmī dharma*, or loyalty to an overlord.[11] It is through extreme loyalty that this *pradhān* rises to great

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[9] Caturvedī (1964: 148–163) discusses Jān Kavi briefly in his canonical *Sūfī kāvya saṅgrah* (*Collection of Sufi Poetry*), but only the selections of a couple of Jān Kavi's works are included in this compilation. Moreover, Caturvedī positions Jān Kavi in contrast to Sufi poets like Jāyasī, arguing that Jān Kavi's poetry does not fully embody Sufi themes. Contrasting Caturvedī's formulations, particularly in light of recent studies on the *kathā* tradition, Jān Kavi's work should be read as encompassing multiple themes that are not necessarily Sufi.

[10] Three volumes compiling Jān Kavi's fourteen *kathā*s have been published: Jān Kavi 2003; 2004; 2005.

[11] Based on a close reading of the historical chronicles of Rajasthan, Saran and Ziegler define *pradhān* as "literally, 'foremost,' 'chief,' 'principal,' 'most eminent.' A chief minister, commander-in-chief, a general or leader of an army. Within

heights in the Mughal hierarchy. Therefore, Jān Kavi creates an archetype of a benevolent emperor and a loyal *pradhān*—an ideal that incorporates all the generic characteristics of the tales—and integrates it into the main story, bringing it to life with joy and harmony.

In addition to placing the emperor-*pradhān* ideal within the political spectrum, in his *kathā*s Jān Kavi invests considerable attention to concepts such as kinship, honour, and marriage—all drawn from the Rajput worldview. His *kathā*s portray an idealized picture of upholding these values during a period marked by contestation, threats, and the renegotiation of these ideals.

Tales of Jān Kavi in Mughal settings

The small town Fatehpur, from where the Kyāmkhānīs ruled, could hardly be considered a flourishing court; but Jān Kavi's work demonstrates significant engagement with Sanskritic, Persianate, and vernacular courtly traditions. He himself translated at least two tales into Braj Bhasha directly from Persian: one taken from Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāma* (late 10th–early 11th century, *The Book of Kings*), which is discussed in this essay, and the other from Niẓāmī's *Laylī and Majnūn* (1188).[12] Jān Kavi also shows deep familiarity with the *Arabian Nights* tradition, from which he borrowed his characters and tropes. His *kathā*s, those translated as well as the originally written by him, exhibit both theoretical and thematic sophistication.

Jān Kavi's tales are situated within the context of a critical historical transition in Rajasthan during the 16th and 17th century, period marked by internal conflict and change. Drawing from his extensive work on local historical tales (*vāt*), clan-histories (*khyāt*), and genealogical

Rajpūt kingdoms, a Rajpūt generally held the post of *pradhān*, and this individual could be either from to the same family (*kuḷ*) as the ruler of the kingdom or from a different family" (2001.1: 83).

12 Michal Hasson (2021: 159–160) notes that Jān Kavi closely follows Niẓāmī (d. 1209) but also draws on Abdullāh Hātifī's (d. 1521) version. Hātifī was the nephew of the poet-philosopher Jāmī (15th century).

records (*pīḍhiāvalī*) in Marwari, Norman Ziegler observes that "the rise of this literature coincides with the increasing authority and prestige of the Rajput ruling houses and indicates greater effort on the part of the local rulers to collect and preserve their traditions and histories" (1976: 234). It was a two-way process. On one hand, Mughal Emperor Akbar's (r. 1556–1605) court historian, Abū'l Faẓl, contacted many of the rajas and *ṭhākur*s of Rajasthan, requesting them to submit their histories, which were later incorporated into sections of the *Akbarnāma* and *A'in-i Akbarī*. On the other hand, these sources also addressed and functioned within localized contexts. Based on these historical developments, Dirk Kolff suggests that the Mughal state encouraged the development of a grand genealogical and aristocratic self-image among the Rajputs—a "great tradition"—that began to emerge during the 16th and 17th centuries (1990: 72). This tradition, with its core values, eventually came to dominate Rajput consciousness. Jān Kavi, thus, reimagined the sociopolitical ideals of an upwardly mobile Muslim-Rajput ruling family during a period of significant historical transition. In this regard, his martial narrative poem, *Kyāmkhān rāsā* (composed between 1630 and 1655), has received some attention from historians because it serves as the oldest surviving record of Kyāmkhānī dynastic history and memory.[13] However, I propose that Jān Kavi's significance lies not only in documenting the history of his ruling family but also in his contributions in popularizing élite Rajput social ethics and political aspirations through the *kathā* genre.

Many of Jān Kavi's *kathā*s are love narratives in that they present the idea of love as the ordering principle of the world and a guiding force that leads all beings to their ultimate goal—union with God or their beloved—further imbued with a distinctly Sufi world view. Some of Jān Kavi's *kathā*s such as *Sīlvantī* and *Satvantī* are more "social" in

[13] Jān Kavi (1996 [1953]) is a historical study of the poet Jān and his oeuvre, as well as the Kyāmkhānī gentry. Budhwar (1978) examines the socio-political status of the Kyāmkhānīs during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods. Talbot (2009) explores conversion and identity within the community during these eras. Sreenivasan (2014b) studies the Kyāmkhānīs' allegiance to the Mughals, while Tekiela (2023) situates the *Kyāmkhān rāsā* within its Islamicate and Rajput contexts.

nature, focusing on women characters who protect their virtue in the absence of their husbands, often depicted as traders who have journeyed to distant lands. The state apparatus plays a significant role in severely punishing violators of women's chastity in these *kathā*s, creating a parallel with the role of Mughal-Rajput jurisprudence in contemporary society. Finally, some of Jān Kavi's *kathā*s such as *Kathā ardesar pātisāh kī* and *Laiylā majnūṁ*, translated from Persian, feature characters exploring themes of divine love, separation, and loyalty. One would assume that Jān Kavi envisioned the overlapping Sufi circles, merchant communities, and Mughal-Rajput courtly spheres as the audience for his tales.

In terms of the form and structure of Jān Kavi's tales, all include a prologue, a feature common in the *kathā*s of the pre-Mughal times as well. In these prologues, Jān Kavi offers praise to God and the Prophet Muhammad. In some cases such as in *Puhap variṣā* (1628, *The Shower of Flowers*), the prologue is more elaborate, including praises for the Prophet Muhammad's four caliphs, the 8th-century theologian Abū Ḥanīfa known as Al-Imām al-A'ẓam, Jān Kavi's 17th-century Sufi master Sheikh Muhammad (whose shrine is in Hāṁsī), and the contemporary Mughal emperors—Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) in his earlier tales, and Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658) in his later ones. Additionally, in some prologues, Jān Kavi extols ministers, specifically Shah Jahan's most prominent noblemen (*umrā*) and his own Kyāmkhānī ruling family nawabs serving the Mughal emperor. Thus, he bases his tales in the Islamicate Sufi setting, where, within the Mughal imperial framework, his own Kyāmkhānī dynastic identity coexisted and, by remaining loyal to the Mughals, even flourished.

Laying the ground for the reception in the prologues of his tales, Jān Kavi sets the central premise to understand his tales by conceptualizing humanity, as created by God, into two categories: *virahī* and *vilāsī*. The *virahī* are those who experience the pain of separation and seek union with their beloved or with God, while the *vilāsī* are those who take joy in the pleasures of the world. Love serves as a unifying force between these two realms, bringing fulfilment to life:

I bow to the indestructible one first, the creator of pain-endurers and joy-lovers,
Both as shining lamps, their luster unquenched, without oil's aid.[14]

Jān Kavi's *kathā*s illustrate the *virahī* and *vilāsī* dichotomy on three principles: first, lovers' union (*milan*); second, their separation (*bichoh*); and finally, enchantment (*kautuk* or *kutūhal*). Men fall in love upon hearing of the heroine's beauty, seeing her image, or encountering her in a dream. This ignites an intense longing and agony within, leading them to pursue the beautiful woman while experiencing a series of enchanting and transformative events. Unlike pre-Mughal Hindavi tales, where lovers' union often finds climax in self-mortification (exemplifying the Sufi concept of *fanā* or self-extinction), in Jān Kavi's tales, the lovers live happily united at the end.

The world of enchantment (*kautuk*) firmly situates Jān Kavi within his Mughal cultural context. His *kathā*s reflect a deep familiarity with the Persianate tradition of *qissā*s or tales, including works such as *Arabian Nights*, *Shāhnāma*, and the widely known Indo-Persian narratives like the 12th-century Farīd ud-Dīn Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* or *The Conference of the Birds* and Niẓāmī's *Laylī o majnūn*.[15] Richard Eaton describes how from Akbar's time certain Persian works on ethics and morality were circulated among Mughal rank holders (*mansabdār*) to foster a cohesive and socially inclusive service

[14] परथम निमसकार अबिनासी । जिन बिरही औ रचे बिलासी ।
रचे दोइ दीवा ऊजियारे । ते बिन तेल न होहिं अंध्यारे ।। (Kavi 2003: 7, *Kathā kaṁvalāvatī*, v. 1). All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

[15] The narrative genre in Persian was referred to as *qissā*, meaning 'story.' According to Pritchett (1991: 1–4), the *qissā* tradition originated in the 9th-century Iran and came to India as early as the time of Mahmud of Ghazni in the 11th century. Among all of the *qissā*s the marvelous story of the Prophet Muhammad's uncle, Amīr Ḥamza, is considered one of the oldest. This tale is said to have influenced the *Shāhnāma*. Solid evidence of the presence of Ḥamza's story in India dates to 15th-century Jaunpur, particularly in the painting tradition. The Mughal era marked the efflorescence of the *qissā* tradition in India. Under Emperor Akbar, large-scale illustration and recitation of the *Ḥamzanāma* began and continued into later periods.

corps (2019: 225–226). Additionally, Jān Kavi draws upon the Indo-Sanskrit traditions of *rāga* and music, seasonal poetry like the twelve-month *bārahmāsā*, and heroine-types, reimagining many of these themes in his narratives. Some of his tales such as *Kathā ratnāvatī* and *Kathā madhukar mālatī* show a deep familiarity with Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* and Mañjhan's *Madhumālatī* in terms of characters' names and story's structure, demonstrating Jān Kavi's high regard for these two tales as well as their widespread popularity in Mughal times. The divine beauty itself is depicted as the embodiment of enchantment as one of his tales is titled *Kathā kautūhalī* meaning *the Tale of the Enchanting Woman*. Jān Kavi extends the idea of enchantment beyond the charms of the heroine to also include musical gatherings, captivating paintings, oceanic adventures and trade, shipwrecks, and heroes' encounters with extraordinary birds, dog-headed men, and deadly beasts. Lovers must endure trials and life-threatening events, but they also explore the mysteries of life, which transform them, perfecting them essentially as lovers.

In addition to Persian works, the broader Mughal historical and cultural context is crucial in understanding how Jān Kavi frames his narratives. This context includes the significance of Timurid genealogy in Mughal dynastic history, the discourse of universal sovereign kingship (*Sāhib-i qirān*), the *mansabdārī* system of rank assignments and revenue collection, the Mughal expansion into the Deccan, and campaigns against the Uzbeks to extend the empire's territory and consolidate much of India under the Mughal sovereignity. Additionally, Jān Kavi valorises the inland and oceanic trade under the Mughals. This is evident, for example, in his praise for Emperor Shah Jahan as he frames the prologue of his *Kathā ratnāvatī* (1634, *Tale of the Jewel-Bodied*):

> Now I describe the emperor. Shah Jahan is the Refuge of the World.
> The second *Sāhib-i qirān*, He has conquered the earth as his heart desired.[16]

[16] Shah Jahan self-fashioned as "the second Lord of the Conjunction" (the second after Tamerlane, hence *Sāhib-i qirān-i sānī*), which became a part of his name. This term used by Jān Kavi for Shah Jahan also proves that he was well

He belongs to the Cagatāī clan, with his capital in Delhi. His influence extends far and wide, all the way to the ocean.
He is the offspring of Emperor Jahangir and a descendant of Emperor Jalāl-ud-Dīn Akbar.
Flourishing in the lineage of Timur. He collects revenue from the seven continents.
When he became the emperor of the world, he renewed the assignments of all chiefs.
He resides in Agra. All seven continents live in awe of him.
The eight protectors of the cardinal directions serve him. In his empire, goods flow from Rome and Syria.
Even the Uzbeks, whose lands are far away, send revenue and prayers for Shah Jahan.
He conquered Daulatabad in a display of temper, and even the city of Indra in heaven trembled at his expansion.[17]

What Jān Kavi emphasizes in his praise of Shah Jahan is the reinstatement, upon the emperor's accession to the Mughal throne, of the *mansabdārī* assignments and ranks held which is highlighted through the word *baḍḍe* ('chiefs of high status') recurrent in Jān Kavi's corpus. In the above-mentioned phrase *baḍḍe sakala kīye phīr naye* ("he renewed the assignments of all chiefs"), inherent praise and legitimacy is directed toward the *mansabdār*s, which includes Jān Kavi's own Kyāmkhānī family serving in the Mughal administration.

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acquainted with the millenarian and messianic ideologies current at the time. See Moin (2012) for more on sovereignty and kingship during Mughal times.

[17] अबहुं बखांन करुं पतिसाहि । साहिजहां है जगत पनाहि ।
है साहिब कीरांन बहु सानी । प्रथी लई जीत मन मानी ।
चगता जात दिली अस्थांन । है वाकी दरया लुं आंन ।
जिहांगीर छत्रपति कै अंस । साहि जलाल अकबर वंस ।
भयो तीमर कुल मांहि परचंड । सपतदीप को लीनो डंड ।
साहिजहां जब के जग भये । बड्डे सकल कीये फीर नये।
रहित आगरे मांहि पतसाहि । सपत दीप मै डरपत ताहि ।।
सेव करै आठुं दिगपाल । रुम स्याम को आवै माल ।
मील मील उंजबक ओर आवास । डंड देहि नै पठवै अरदास ।
लियौ दोलताबाद रीसाइ । ईंद्रपुरी तब थै थहराइ । (Manuscript no. 37902, f. 6).

The remarkable rise of *pradhān* in Mughal era: *kathā*s of Jān Kavi

> He brings fulfilment to the cause of the Lord, even at the cost of his own life. Always serves with uprightness; such a man is truly worthy of being the chief.[18]

Jān Kavi's *kathā*s feature a recurring character, the *pradhān*, whom he portrays as second only to the emperor in status but equal to him in noble virtues and kingly attributes. A loyal *pradhān* and an enlightened and benevolent emperor appear as model figures in the "prologues," or introductory sections of Jān Kavi's tales, first as historical personae and then as archetypes in the main body of his narratives. For the historical model, Jān Kavi identifies a long tradition of the emperor-*pradhān* ideal in the Islamicate world, drawing parallels with the Mughal imperial ideal. The historical emperor-*pradhān* models appearing in the prologues represent examples from across various traditions: the Sassanid kingdom of the pre-Islamic Persia, the time of the Prophet Muhammad (with the four caliphs as *pradhān*s to the *Emperor* Prophet Muhammad), at Mahmud of Ghazni's court, and later in the courts of Mughal emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

Following the prologue, Jān Kavi moves beyond this historic emperor-*pradhān* duo to depict them as archetypical figures in the main body of his tales. Often set in mythical times, the *pradhān*s in these narratives serve as confidants who understand the emperor's or princes' agony of love and accompany them on their quests for divine beauty. The *pradhān* is depicted as a loyal (*svām* or *svāmī dharmī*) servant to the emperors, also a friend and counsellor, as well as custodian of tradition and diverse knowledge systems. He is a fellow traveller and close comrade-in-arms of the princes.

A clear parallel exists between Jān Kavi's portrayal of the *pradhān* in his *kathā*s and the courtly chronicle, the *khyāt*, composed between 1637 and 1666, by the 17th-century Marwar historian Muṁhatā Naiṇsī.

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[18] काम संवारे स्वाम के, गनै न ज्यौं की हानि ।
सूधे मन सेवा करै, सो कीजै परधान ।। (Kavi 2005: 227).

Naiṇsī's chronicle played a pivotal role in constructing exalted genealogies and historical accounts of the Rajputs, highlighting their rise to dominance in various parts of modern-day Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. Central to Naiṇsī's chronicle is the *pradhān*—a chief diplomat and military leader—who ascends from being a small landholder to becoming a *ṭhākur* or *dhaṇī* of their respective principalities, and eventually a *raja* or *mansabdār* under the Mughal emperors. While the role of the *pradhān* was widespread in the socio-political world of Rajput rulers, both Jān Kavi in his *kathā*s and Naiṇsī in his *khyāt* emphasize the continuum of this figure, tracing their trajectory from village chiefs to rajas and Mughal *mansabdār*s.[19]

Yet, where Naiṇsī composed his works in Rajasthani for a supraregional audience, Jān Kavi universalized the socio-political world and ideals of Rajput society by writing in the widely circulating Braj Bhasha. Furthermore, Jān Kavi portrayed his own Kyāmkhānī kings as *dīvān*s or *pradhān*s to Mughal emperors, thus creating a direct historical parallel to the *pradhān* of his tales. Thus, Jān Kavi's *kathā*s should be read in the context of the Rajput chiefs' ascent to power during the Mughal era and their socio-political aspirations in an evolving cultural milieu.

Take for example Jān Kavi's inaugural work *Kathā kaṁvalāvatī* (1614, *The Tale of Princess Lotus-Bodied*), in which he presents the emperor-*pradhān* ideal that is both historical and universal. The prologue establishes the code of reception and the potential audience for the tale by highlighting its courtly and religious context. Here, the Prophet Muhammad is depicted as the emperor, and his four caliphs serve as his *pradhān*s and their path leads to the liberation of humanity:

> Where emperors stand as noble as the Prophet (*nabī*) and chiefs (*pradhān*) of such noble stature [as the four caliphs].
> Jān says, following their path—why wouldn't it bring bliss to souls?[20]

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[19] Saran and Ziegler (2001) is a study of Naiṇsī's *khyāt.*

[20] जहाँ नबी से छत्रपति, औ ऐसे परधान ।।
तिंह मग गौने जान कहि, क्यौं न होइ सुख प्रान ।। (Kavi 2005: 8).

After introducing the historical and faith-based emperor-*pradhān* pair in the prologue, Jān Kavi transitions to the main story. The narrative begins in a courtly setting, where emperors and their *pradhān*s reappear. This becomes a recurring theme in many of his later tales where princes, accompanied by their *pradhān*s, embark on quests for divine beauty. The bond between the prince and his *pradhān* companion is defined by the latter's unwavering vigilance in serving his lord, matched by the lord's deep affection and absolute trust in his servant. This theme is further echoed in the prologue of Jān Kavi's second work, *Kathā kanakāvatī* (1618, *The Tale of the Golden-one*):

> Only a life lived with truth and alertness is truly well-lived.
> Many praises to that servant, says Jān, who is dear to his overlord.[21]

The emperor and the *pradhān* ideal, historical in the prologue and imaginary in the main story, is strikingly juxtaposed in Jān Kavi's *Kathā ratnāvatī* (1634, *The Tale of the Jewel-Bodied*). The tale is about the quest for the divine beauty, Ratnāvatī, where the prince is aided by the son of his royal father's *pradhān* (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). During the quest, the prince and his companion are separated but eventually reunite in Siṁhaldīp—a place celebrated in Hindavi tales such as Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* as the birthplace of divine beauties. The prince succeeds in obtaining Ratnāvatī, while his companion wins another beauty, Padmāvatī. Along with this, the companion earns the trust and deep friendship of the prince, who ultimately appoints him as his *pradhān*.

Jān Kavi recounts how he came to know this tale, which apparently had travelled from the court of Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 998–1030) to that of Jahangir, where the poet first became aware of it. Drawing on several tropes from the *Arabian Nights* (particularly the story of Prophet Solomon) and themes from the pre-Mughal Hindavi tales and the folk epics of Rajasthan, Jān Kavi weaves a compelling narrative. The emperor-*pradhān* model is amply developed in the prologue,

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[21] वाही कौ जीवन सुफल, साचौ वहै सुचेत ।।
धन धन सेवक 'जान' कहि, जासौ साहब हेत ।। (Kavi 2004: 3).

where Jān Kavi praises Mahmud of Ghazni, known for his love of great stories and his penchant for challenging his courtiers to bring him the world's most enchanting tales. His vizier, Hasan (likely either Abu'l Ḥasan Esfarā'eni or Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan Maymandī, both of whom played pivotal role in consolidating Mahmud's empire during its early and later phases), rises to the occasion by presenting him with this tale. The story pleases the emperor immensely, and, as Jān Kavi writes, Mahmud elevates Hasan to the highest rank of *pradhān* in recognition of his achievement:

> Once there was Emperor Mahmud of Ghazni, who had a heart for listening to tales.
> Pandits and well-versed men graced his company; day and night they shared entertaining tales.
> The *Shāhnāma* was created for him, a work renowned across the entire world.
> One day, one of the well-versed men brought a new tale; that impressed the emperor deeply.
> Greatly pleased by the tale he had heard, the emperor gifted ten thousand gold coins.
> In his joy, he proclaimed to the court, "There is no tale greater than this one in this world."
> [Hearing this], his *pradhān* Hasan replied, "The world is filled with tales far greater still."
> The emperor, intrigued, turned to him and said,
> "Bring me such a tale, if that be your will. If it pleases me more than this masterpiece, I shall grant you whatever you desire.
> And if it truly surpasses this tale, I shall make you the *pradhān*."[22]

[22] हो महिमद् गजनवी साहि । कथा सुनन सुं बोह चित ताहि ।
पंडित गुनी रहैत बोह संग । दिन दिन कहैत कथा बोह रंग ।
साहिनामों उन्ह ही कै नाव । परगट है जग मै सब ठांव ।
काहु गुनी कथा ईक आंनी । पातिसाहि कै मन मै मांनी ।
कीनी बहुत कथा की चाहि । दस हज़ार मुहरे दी ताहि ।
कह्यो छत्रपति आनंद होइ । ऐसी कथा न जग मै कोइ ।
बोल्यौ तबहि हसन परधांन । सब बातन संपूर जहांन ।
पातिसाह को बाढ्यौ चाव । ----------
यातें नीकी आनि सुनावहि । तो तू मांगहि सो पावहि ।
यातै भलीन करै बखांन । तोकौं नां करौं परधांन । (Manuscript no. 37902, ff. 4–5).

Jān Kavi recounts that Hasan, the *pradhān*, sent the well-versed men on the mission to acquire the most enchanting tale, which Hasan's men eventually found in Rome. They purchased the tale for a thousand gold coins and brought it back to Mahmud of Ghazni's court. The tale, narrated in *nazm-o-nasr* ('poetry and prose'), greatly pleased the emperor. Mahmud of Ghazni rewarded the men with forty thousand coins and elevated Hasan to a high-ranking *pradhān* in his court.

From there, the tale travelled to the court of Mughal emperor Jahangir, where Jān Kavi first became aware of it. Jān Kavi states that he adapted the story, replacing Turkish names with Indian ones and transforming emperors into kings, while rendering the tale in the vernacular (*bhākhā*).

Jān Kavi demonstrates through his narratives the rise of the Mughal imperial model rooted not only in previous courtly formations, the Sassanids and the Ghaznavids, but also in a "universal" one, that of the Prophet Muhammad. This prepares the ground for the courtly and mystical interpretations of his tales. Mughal court's cultural dynamics, where storytelling and illustration, highly valued especially since Akbar's reign, became the hallmarks of royal pleasure and prestige. Moreover, Jān Kavi's *kathā*s highlight how the participation of the gentry class in the life of the Mughal court helped disseminate Persianate literary culture to more localized regions like Fatehpur where the poet had his base. Over and above, the story illustrates the economics of storytelling and the value placed on the storytellers—the prologue of *Kathā ratnāvatī* shows that a tale's worthiness increased significantly when it was tailored to and presented before a discerning audience, such as an emperor.

The social and political world of the *pradhān*, however, was far more fraught with contest than the idealized version depicted in Jān Kavi's *kathā*s. Ziegler points out that while the Rajputs experienced significant social conflict over questions of rights to land, loyalty, honour, and precedence—both in individual cases and as broader social phenomena—their support for the Mughal throne remained an enduring feature of this period (1998: 276–277). This support persisted as long as it aligned with the Rajputs' sense of social identity, local

customs, symbols, and myths. Jān Kavi's focus on social and political values, derived from Rajput traditions, translated effectively into local customs and bonds, as exemplified in his *kathā*s through the *pradhān*'s unwavering service to the emperor.

The *pradhān* in Naiṇsī's chronicle

The fact that Jān Kavi derived the *pradhān* ideal from the Rajput milieu while adapting it to the Mughal context becomes evident when we compare it with Muṁhatā Naiṇsī's 17th-century Rajasthani chronicle. A closer look at Naiṇsī's chronicle, the *khyāt*, reveals that the *pradhān* status was an aspirational goal in the Rajputs' rise to power across various principalities during the pre-Mughal and Mughal periods. The Rajput world was rife with internal disputes over power, often involving brothers, relatives, and chiefs. Despite this, Naiṇsī's chronicle highlights the "great tradition" of the Rajputs, offering a detailed account of their lineage, valour, and the socio-political structures that shaped their identity.

In Naiṇsī's writings, a Rajput lord of any principality is referred to as *dhaṇī* or *ṭhākur*, both meaning 'lord,' or sometimes as *baḍau rājpūt*, or a Rajput of high status.[23] The endorsement of a *ṭhākur*'s power—his right to rule—was determined collectively by the Rajput chieftains. Largely based on primogeniture, a *ṭhākur* was regarded as first among equals. Wise and powerful close relatives of the *ṭhākur*, often younger brothers, chieftains, or warriors with marital ties to the family, were appointed as *pradhān*s in the Rajput hierarchy. The position of *prādhan* was one of honour and trust. A *pradhān* served as the chief diplomat, a knower of traditions, an army chief, and the caretaker of the polity in the *ṭhākur*'s absence. Naiṇsī provides several examples of *pradhān*s fulfilling these roles.

An example of the role of *pradhān*s in the decision-making process, as recorded in Naiṇsī's chronicle, is the creation of the two

[23] Naiṇsī (1984 [1960]: 18) provides a description of Rana Sanga.

principalities of Ḍūgarpur and Bāṁsvāṛā. This division was achieved by carving out Bāṁsvāṛā from Ḍūgarpur in the early 16th century. The two principalities are located at the southern tip of the modern-day Rajasthan, sharing borders with Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. *Rāval* Udai Singh, a ruler (1497–1527) from the patrilineal line of the Mewar (Udaipur) kings, governed this region. A contemporary of Rana Sanga (r. 1508–1528), *rāval* Udai Singh fought alongside him against the Mughal emperor Babur in the Battle of Khānvā (1527).

After *rāval* Udai Singh's death, his two sons vied for power. The elder son, Prithviraj (r. 1527–1549), ruling from Ḍūgarpur, faced rebellion, and his land was plundered by treacherous chiefs who aligned themselves with his younger brother, Jagmal (r. 1527–1544; Hooja 2006: 475–478). Naiṇsī's chronicle records how Prithviraj's disloyal chiefs negotiated their alignment with Jagmal through their *pradhān*s:

> These two men [Chauhan Mero and Parbat] went to the hills and set up a base two mile away from Jagmal. They sent the wise *pradhān*s of the house to Jagmal, having instructed them to say, "Your good day has arrived. If you desire land, come see us soon." The *pradhān*s conveyed this message to Jagmal. However, Jagmal replied, "I don't trust these *ṭhākur*s." He then sent his own *pradhān*s along with them, and together they returned to Chauhan Mero and Parbat. There, they swore oaths and made firm promises. After this, the *pradhān*s brought the *ṭhākur*s to Jagmal.[24]

In the passage above, the *pradhān*s of Prithviraj's rebellious chiefs are portrayed as trusted intermediaries sent to Jagmal to forge an alliance against Prithviraj. The status of rebellious chieftains is being elevated with the use of the aspirational title of *ṭhākur*. Aligning with Jagmal enabled these chiefs to gather more warriors and plunder Prithviraj's territories. Following his defeat, Prithviraj turned to his own *pradhān*s,

[24] जठै जगमाल भाखरे थो तठै ऐ दोनूं कोस एक ऊपर आय उतरिया । आपरै घर मांहे बड़ा आदमी परधांन था, सु जगमाल कनै मेलिया । कहाड़ियौ, "थांरो दिन वळियो । थांरै धरती री चाह छै तो वेगा आय म्हांसूं मिलो ।" इणांरा परधांन जगमाल कनै गया । सारी वात समझाई, कही । तरै जगमाल कहण लागो । मोनूं इणां ठाकुरांरो बेसास आवै नहीं । तद परधांनांसूं साथे कर चहुवांण मेरो परवत कनै वे पाधरा आया । सील कोल करऩा हुवै छै । तिसऩा करनै इणां ठाकुरांनै जगमाल कनै ले गया । (*ibid*.: 63–64).

admitting that he had failed to heed their earlier advice on managing the disloyal chieftains more effectively. Now, he seeks their assistance in resolving the conflict with his brother, Jagmal:

> Then Prithviraj spoke to the *pradhān*s, "Whatever has happened is in the past now. Without taking your counsel, I acted, and I am facing the dire consequences of it. Now, whatever you consider good, do it. I am unable to keep control of the land." After this, Prithviraj's *pradhān*s, having consulted among themselves and taking his word of promise, went to Jagmal, Mero, and Parbat.[25]

In the meeting, the division of Ḍũgarpur into two parts was proposed, and Prithviraj accepted the proposal. This is how the Bāṁsvāṛā tract, the land on the east side of the Mahi River, was created and given to Jagmal. Jagmal, who had previously been a *cākar* ('military retainer or servant')[26] of his elder brother and had rebelled for power by gathering support from chieftains, became a *ṭhākur* (*rāval*) himself. Later, both Ḍũgarpur and Bāṁsvāṛā aligned with the Mughals during Akbar's reign.

The *pradhān* status itself, exemplifying a continuum from a chieftain to *ṭhākur* or *dhaṇī*, is best illustrated by another account from Naiṇsī. This account concerns *rāval* Mallinath in the 14th century. Mallinath belongs to the patrilineal line of the Rathor Rajputs, who rose to dominance in much of western Rajasthan, with Marwar (Jodhpur) as their chief holding. Mallinath, also known as Maloji, rose from being a chieftain holding a single village in *jāgīr* to becoming the *pradhān* of his uncle Kanharde and eventually the *rāval* of Mahevā in Baṛmer, with the support of Delhi's Sultan, possibly Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (Bhāṭī 2001: 17–21; Jasol 2004: 3–10):

> Malo [Mallinath] served Kanharde diligently, earning his trust. Recognizing Malo's wit, Kanharde promoted him to the position of *pradhān.*

[25] तरै प्रथीराज परधानांनूं कयो – "हुई सु नीवड़ी । म्हे थानू विगर पूछियां विचार कियो, तिणरा फल म्हे रूड़ा भोगवां छां । हमै थे भलो जांणो ज्यूं करो । मोसू धरती रखे नहीं ।" तरै प्रथीराजरा परधांन रावळरै कहै वात कराय, बोलबंध ले जगमाल, मेरा, परवत कनै गया । (*ibid.*).

[26] Saran and Ziegler 2001.1: 89.

> However, other noblemen sarcastically remarked, "The *ṭhākur* who has made his brother the *pradhān* is destined to see his rule come to an end."[27]

The account highlights the fragility of Rajput sovereignty when land was distributed among brothers (*bhāī bā̃ṭ*). The uncle, who made his nephew a *pradhān,* inadvertently empowered a contender to his authority. The noblemen, possibly vying for the same position, sarcastically criticized the precariousness of the situation. Their concerns were justified, as Mallinath and his uncle were fighting against the Sultan of Delhi. Mallinath ultimately betrayed his uncle, aligning himself with the Sultan of Delhi—a shift Naiṇsī describes as *sām dharmī* ('loyalty') to the Delhi's sultan in this case (Naiṇsī 2003: 283). As a result, Kanharde's rule ended, and Mallinath rose to power in Mahevā, earning the title of *rāval* from the Sultan of Delhi.

Both examples from Naiṇsī's chronicles illustrate that the ideals of loyalty, the distribution of land among brothers, and the sovereignty of *ṭhākur*s were contested and challenged by competing power contenders in the Rajput world. The title of *pradhān* was an administrative designation for a role that individuals within the power structure assumed. This position was expected to embody certain ideals that upheld the broader framework of governance. Jān Kavi adopts the concept of the *pradhān–ṭhākur* dynamic from the Rajput world and juxtaposes it with the larger Mughal-Rajput context, portraying these ideals through the characters of the *pradhān* within an emperor-*-pradhān* model.

The fraught world of Rajput chieftaincy in Naiṇsī's chronicles is idealised in Jān Kavi's *kathā*s. The framing of the emperor-*pradhān* archetype in Jān Kavi's work is clearly rooted in his direct experience of the Mughal-Rajput imperial formation, in which his Kyāmkhānī family excelled. This is best illustrated in *Puhap variṣā* composed as a commemorative tale marking Shah Jahan's accession to the Mughal

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[27] मालो कांनड़देरी खिजमत भलीभांत करै । ताहरां कांनड़दे मालैनूं बुधवंत जांणनै प्रधांन थापियो । ताहरां अमराव कहण लागा – "जियै ठाकुरै आपरा भाई प्रधांन थापिया, तियांरी ठाकुराई जावणहारी छै ।" (Naiṇsī 2003: 282).

throne. The work celebrates Daulat Khan II, the Kyāmkhānī nawab of Fatehpur at the time, who was a Mughal *mansabdār* and *qiledār* ('fort commander') of Kāṅgṛā Fort in the Himalayas. Daulat Khan II was Jān Kavi's elder brother.

Persianate kings and the Rajput code of family honour

Juxtaposing the ideal emperor-*pradhān* model with the contemporary Mughal-Rajput one, Jān Kavi repeatedly returned to the earlier, more historically grounded emperor-*pradhān* model in his *kathā*s, including the one discussed here, which is based on the Sassanid emperor Ardashir I. Translating from Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāma* (*The Book of Kings*), Jān Kavi narrates the embeded story of Emperor Ardashir as *Kathā ardesar pātisāh kī* in 1633. Ardashir I, who lived in the early 3rd century CE, is recognized as the founder of the Sassanid Empire (224–651 CE), the last major Iranian empire before the 7th-century Arab-Islamic conquest of the region. Ardashir's reign is elaborately described in the *Shāhnāma*'s section on historical kings. In his English translation of the *Shāhnāma*, Dick Davis notes that in the poem "Ardeshir is presented as a vigorous reformer who rewrites his country's legal code, energetically puts down internal dissension, and secures the country's borders against invasion" (Ferdowsi 2006: xxix). For Ferdowsi, Ardashir's rule symbolizes justice and kingly nobility, upheld through courtly etiquette. Jān Kavi (2005: 218), who claims to have read about Emperor Ardashir in books (*jaisī bidhi granthana paḍhī*), presents his tale as a translation where the main storyline remains intact. However, as demonstrated below, by resorting to specific word choices in his translation, Jān Kavi's iteration of the tale resonates deeply with Rajput social practices and honour codes.

In a previous section of this essay, we have discussed a verse where Jān Kavi praises the *Shāhnāma* and Mahmud of Ghazni in one of his tales. This shows his high regard for the Persian text, which presented itself possibly as a model for Jān Kavi. And since there is no known vernacular precedent for the tale of Ardashir before that of Jān Kavi,

this indicates his strong familiarity with the Persian *Shāhnāma*, which likely served as his source. In this "indexical" translation—borrowing A.K. Ramanujan's term—the characters, storyline, and events closely resemble those of the Persian text, but the discourses and specific words allude to a Rajput social context (1991: 45). In other words, with Jān Kavi's *Kathā ardesar pātisāh kī*, a literary bridge is constructed in which a Persian royal household is portrayed as adhering to Rajput norms. Conversely, Rajput ideals are projected onto Persian history and universalized through Jān Kavi's narrative. The tale unfolds as follows:

> Framed by a spiritual invocation, the tale recounts how Emperor Ardashir triumphs over rivals, but is betrayed by his queen—Ardavan's daughter—who attempts to poison him at her brother Bahman's behest. Divine intervention (*dai carit*) foils the plot, and the queen is condemned, though she secretly bears Ardashir's child. A loyal minister (*pradhān*), torn between duty and morality, hides the queen, castrates himself to prove chastity, and raises the boy in secret. Years later, the gifted son, Shapur, is revealed to the grieving, childless Ardashir during a polo game (*caughān*). Reunited, Ardashir honours both mother and minister, securing his legacy and underscoring the profound bond between ruler and the minister. Jān Kavi concludes the tale describing them as two bodies but one soul. He notes that this tale was composed in 1633. (Kavi 2005: 215–234)

In retelling the story in Braj Bhasha, Jān Kavi infuses the narrative with Rajput familial, social, and personal honour codes. The first among these involves resolving a familial feud (*vair*) through vengeance for the father's murder, a foundational principle of Rajput honour.[28] In this distinct intervention, Jān Kavi transforms the Persian original's theme of avenging the brothers' plight into a pursuit rooted in filial duty. The *Shāhnāma* version depicts Bahman (Ardavan's eldest son) instructing his sister to act as a "brave queen of Persia" by killing her husband, the

[28] Turek (2024: 244–246) recently explored *vair* as "blood feud," among other keywords of the Rajput world, to understand this socio-political practice and its cultural background, as well as behavioural patterns among the community.

king, to avenge the imprisonment of her two brothers and the suffering of two others (Ferdowsi 2006: 554–555). However, Jān Kavi reframes this as an act of *vair* motivated by the loss of their father.

> No one can truly bond with the one who has killed their father.
> (…) If you avenge your father's murder, the entire world will praise you.
> "While his sons failed to resolve the feud, his daughter accomplished it with strength and determination."
> This act will be remembered for eternity—that a daughter avenged her father's death.[29]

The question may arise that those bound by marital ties could also avenge family feuds, as warring clans become *sagā* or *ginā̄yat* ('relatives by marriage') tied in marriage bond, as Ardashir is already married to the warring Ardavan's daughter.[30] Jān Kavi, however, argues that this marriage is not valid because it was not willingly offered by the daughter's parents or her brothers. What Ardashir did in marrying Ardavan's daughter was an act of his own will or brute force, a theme that is condemned in other tales, such as Jāyasī's *Padmāvat*. Jān Kavi notes:

> Your mother, father, and brother did not give you away, and you did not marry by your own choice.
> A marriage entered into under duress is not valid.
> Those coerced say nothing outwardly, but they harbour deep anger within themselves.[31]

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[29] पिता आपुनौ मार्‌यो होइ । तासौं प्रान मिलावै कोइ ।।

बैर पिता कौ जो तू लैहे । सर्व जगत तोहि जसु देहै ।।
नंदन बैर सके नहिं काढि । तनया बैर लयौ करि गाढ ।।
जुगि जुगि लै रहिहै यह बात । तनया बैर लयौ है तात ।। (Kavi 2005: 223–224).

[30] Rajpurohit (2022: 384) discusses how an early 19th-century text, which theorizes Rajasthani poetics on the principle of "settling the feud," employs the question-answer style.

[31] मात पिता भया नहीं दिनी । अप बर ही तू नाही कीनी ।
जो आपुन सौं बर करै, सो बर लागै नाहिं ।
मुख कुछु ना कहिं सकै, रिसराइ मन माहिं ।। (Kavi 2005: 223).

Upon Ardashir's order to execute his wife, the second concept introduced by Jān Kavi is that of *svāmī dharma*. This underscores the *pradhān*'s duty to protect the emperor's offspring and ensure the survival of his lineage. The *Shāhnāma* portrays the priest-vizier raising a moral argument about justice, asserting that it would be unjust to kill the queen and her unborn child, especially since Ardashir has no heir. This frames the conflict as a choice between impulsive decisions and prudence.

Jān Kavi, in contrast, focuses on the *pradhān*'s unwavering loyalty (*laun halālī*)[32] presenting the protection of the emperor's offspring as the minister's highest duty. Jān Kavi deepens the moral dilemma by emphasizing its spiritual implications: taking the life of the emperor's child would condemn the minister in both this life and the afterlife. In Jān Kavi's narrative, loyalty transcends duty to become an act of ultimate devotion, offering salvation greater than even the harshest penance could achieve.

> The one who kills their lord's children is bound to go to hell.
> Who would not love the children of the one who provides for you?
> If you fail to show love for your lord, including his children, you will surely enter hell.
> Even the world does not speak well of such a person; both in this life and the hereafter, they remain infamous, their reputation tarnished.
> If one does not remain loyal to the person who has sustained them, no salvation can be achieved, no matter how severe the penance.[33]

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[32] Loyalty to the overlord is expressed through this term, where *laun halālī* ('true to the salt') signifies the legal and moral bond between the servant and the lord. Eating someone's salt (*laun*) signifies dependence on their patronage, and being true to such a means of support is expressed by the term *laun halālī* in this context.

[33] साहिब की संतति हनै, सु तौ नारकी होइ ।।
जिनकौ होइ पेट में लौन । तिह संतति चाहत नहीं कौन ।
साहिब संतत लौ नहिं चाहै । आपहि आपु नरक में बाहै ।
ताकौ भलौ न भाखै कोइ । दूहूं जगत कारौ मुख होइ ।
देखत नाहिं लौंन की वोर । ना पहुँचे जप करै कठोर ।। (*ibid*.: 226).

The third aspect introduced by Jān Kavi is that of family and honour. The depiction of the queen being kept in the *pradhān*'s home, raises issues of impropriety both due to the queen's pregnancy and the *pradhān*'s lower socio-political status in relation to her and the emperor. This context explains Jān Kavi's espousing of the dramatic act in which the *pradhān* presents, in a coconut, his severed genitals to the emperor. In Rajput society, offering a coconut during an engagement ceremony symbolizes a marriage alliance, positioning the giver, in relation to the daughter, as lower in status because they are surrendering the upholder of family honour to someone higher in status. By presenting the coconut to the emperor, the *pradhān* symbolically reframes his action as one of honour and loyalty. In the story, since the *pradhān* must keep the queen in his home, he chooses to render himself impotent to preserve his integrity.

> The world may call me impotent, but I will still protect the emperor's house.
> Taking the coconut, he went and stood before the emperor.
> (…) Ardashir took the coconut, kept it safe, and also inscribed the date and time on it that very day.[34]

In the context of Rajput state formation in the 15th and 16th centuries, where kinship played a significant role in sharing power within the state, higher status could also be granted outside the kinship network to chiefs who rendered extraordinary service, such as serving in the military (Sreenivasan 2014b: 54–57). In this regard, the fourth aspect of the Rajput social and political world introduced by Jān Kavi in this tale is the elevation of the *pradhān*'s position. This elevation serves as a reward for his exceptional sacrifice and unwavering loyalty to the emperor.

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[34] मोहि निपुंसक ही जग कहै । पातिसाह जू कौ घर रहै ।
नालकेर लैके तब गयौ । पातिसाह ढिग ठाढ़ौ भयौ ।।

अरदेसर लै भलै रखायौ । वा दिन कौ तिथि बार लिखायौ ।। (*ibid*.: 228–229).

> The emperor elevated him above all the ministers. He was granted whatever reward he desired.
> No distinction remained between the emperor and the *pradhān*; they were united in spirit, though in two bodies.[35]

In the *Shāhnāma*, the vizier names the boy—who is to be the next Sassanid emperor after Ardashir—Shapur, whereas in Jān Kavi's tale, Ardashir himself names the boy after recognizing him as his son among a group of boys playing polo. This detail aligns with Jān Kavi's warrior narrative *Kyāmkhān rāsā,* about his own ancestor, Kyām Khān, who was named by the emperor rather than by a minister. In Jān Kavi's framework, receiving one's name and identity directly from the emperor signifies elevated status and greater honour. Jān Kavi concludes by emphasizing the equal status of both figures, which is the tale's key message.

Conclusion

Possessing all the generic features of a typical *kathā* circulating in North India since at least the 14th century, the various *kathā*s of the Kyāmkhānī poet Jān Kavi require close reading to understand how they were composed keeping in mind the context of the Mughal and Rajput imperial framework. The prologues of Jān Kavi's tales reflect the Mughal literary and political innovations, emphasizing the centrality of chieftains as key pillars and agents of these innovations. Jān Kavi was strategically positioned to craft such narratives, as he hailed from a ruling family that served as local agents of the empire.

Jān Kavi's corpus reveals the extensive influence of Persianate culture, reaching deeply into local centres that were embedded in Rajput cultural milieu. Persianate traditions circulated locally not only in the form of empirically valued texts like the *Shāhnāma* but also through

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[35] सब मंत्रिन के ऊपर कीनौ । जो वाको भायो सो दीनौ ।।
बीच न रह्यो साहि परधान । हैं घट दोइ येक ही प्रान ।। (Kavi 2005: 234).

*qissā*s. However, Jān Kavi's works demonstrate that these Persianate themes resonated with him only insofar as they were adapted into local symbols and myths.

While the ruling family's service to the Mughals paralleled the emperor-*pradhān* (emperor-chief) model historically, Jān Kavi's *kathā*s transformed this framework into an archetypal narrative of an enlightened emperor and a loyal chief. The generic features of *kathā*s are articulated through the emperor and chief's shared quest for love. The Rajasthani chronicle of Muṁhatā Naiṇsī provides examples of the rise of Rajput monarchy in relation to the Mughals as well as localized political formations. Jān Kavi's *kathā*s reflect a socio-political world similar to that presented in Naiṇsī's chronicle. However, Jān Kavi projects this world onto the Mughal-Rajput framework, giving it a broader resonance—a universal, so to speak—expressed in Braj Bhasha, a language whose geographical contours were increasingly expanding during Jān Kavi's time.

Jān Kavi's tales retain all the generic features of the earlier *kathā* traditions but expand the genre to include themes not typically found in such narratives. These new themes include: stories centred on women who are honoured for their chastity, with the state punishing those who violate it; characters such as Balūqiyā, known in Islamic tradition as a figure who embarked on a quest in search of the Prophet Muhammad; and panegyrics dedicated to Mughal noblemen, reflecting the theme of praising nobility itself.

Additionally, Jān Kavi's works feature elements that showcase the expanding Mughal geography, territorial reach, and associated figures. However, his most innovative contribution lies in situating the *kathā*s within a specific social context. This context deeply resonates with the Rajput world, particularly themes of cross-clan Rajput alliances, questions of loyalty, family, and self-honour, which reflect the contemporary processes of Rajputization.

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