

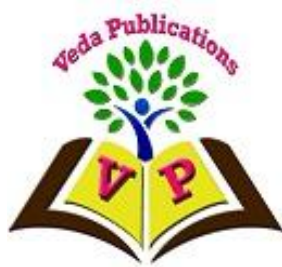


## LEGENDS, LORE AND LOCAL LOYALTIES OF KUTCH: REVISITING L.F.R. WILLIAMS'S *THE BLACK HILLS*

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### ABSTRACT



Kachchh was a relatively large Indian Princely State during British Rule. It covered north of the Gulf of Kachchh, and the area bordered by Sind in the North. During British Rule it was a part of the Cutch Agency and later Western Indian States Agency within the Bombay Presidency. Kachchh was founded around 1147 by Lakho Jadani of the Samma tribe who had arrived from Sind. Kachchh was formerly a Rajput state. L. F. Rushbrook Williams, who officiated in Kachchh for about twenty years during the rule of Maharao, writes his historical memoir '*The Black Hills: Kutch in History and Legend: A Study in Indian Local Loyalties*'. In its first part, he briefly describes the geography, demography and economy of Kachchh and gives a rambling account of the changes he observed during his visit. He makes a point that the modernization of Kachchh region is because the British ruled that part. In the second part, he narrates the history of Kachchh from Indus Valley civilization till the integration of the region in the Indian Union in 1948. The bulk of the historical narratives are based on unpublished compilations placed at his disposal by the Maharao, and on the oral history of the bards. Nevertheless, the author does not demonstrate by careful examination of evidence how exactly the oral legends fit into the standard sources of history, and he rarely cites the sources of evidence. This is a history book without notes, references, or bibliography. Professor Williams describes the political system only at the level of the Maharao and the heads of the Bhayyat estates. He does not tell us much about the relation between the Maharao and his subjects in the court, about the interrelations among the Bhayyats, or about the internal administrative system of a Bhayyat estate. Also, he uses the terminology of European feudalism without explaining the similarity between the Rajput system and European feudalism. The content and composition of the book, however, raises some questions.

**Keywords:** *Bhayyat, British rule, European feudalism, Historicity, Area study.*

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Kachchh, a nondescript piece of real estate, is now famous for tourist spots and widely known for its wild asses, culture, arts and crafts, mud work, Kutchi dresses and brine-soaked badlands outside Gujarat.

Kachchh was a relatively large India Princely State during British Rule. It covered the present day Kachchh region of Gujarat, north of the Gulf of Kachchh, bordered by Sind in the north. During British Rule it was a part of the Cutch Agency and later Western India States Agency within the Bombay Presidency. Kachchh was founded around C. E. 1147 by LakhoJadani of the Samma Community who had arrived from Sind. He was adopted by Jam Jada and hence known as LakhoJadani. Khengarji Rao I CE 1548 is noted as the founder of Cutch State, who united eastern, central and western Kachchh.

This vast expanse of region, often referred to as 'obscure wasteland' by the British officials in their topical accounts, has been a subject for political, historical and cultural reasons in the works of early European writers who had been to this part. The physical extremities of Kachchh are well defined. In the north and east are the Great Rann and the Little Rann of Kachchh. In the south the Gulf of Kachchh, in the west the Arabian Sea and the tidal marshes and creeks, some of them are the part of the Indus delta system. It is almost like an island and before the road entrance at Surajbari was made it was a boat ride connection to Kathiawar. Inside Kachchh were the other semi-islands of Pancham, Khadir and Bela, now connected by permanent roads. What make Kachchh so interesting are the large variety of lands and water-plain and hill, desert and fertile land. All this has resulted in a variety of eco-systems snuggling close to each other like the Banni grassland and the Dhand marshes to the south of it, Kala Dungar (Black Hill) in Pancham, the spectacular Great Rann, the open plains of Lakhpat and Jakhau, the mangrove swamps off Koteswar and Mundra, and the Gulf of Kachchh with its coral reefs and creeks. British came to Kachchh with gusto in the beginning of the nineteenth century. They even annexed the eastern part of Kachchh, having a Collector at Anjar, in addition to a Resident at Bhuj, Captain MacMurdo who described Bhuj as '...a number of white buildings, mosques, and pagodas,

interspersed with plantation of date tress.' However, what Kachchh had to offer to British were birds, salt and cattle and not bulk of income or treasure.

L. F. Rushbrook Williams, a Raj-era civil servant and an academic of British origin, spent his twenty years in this region, during the rule of Maharajas. He visited it again in 1957-58. He attempts to revive his image of Kachchh and its history from the oblivion to which it had been consigned, in his somewhat obscure book 'The Black Hills: Kutch in History and Legend: A Study in India Local Loyalties'. The first part of the book briefly describes the geography, demography and economy of Kachchh and gives a rambling account of the changes the writer observed during his visit.

And he adds to his observation by making a point that the modernization of Kachchh region happened because the British ruled that part and goes to the extent of saying that this modernization is a result of their great personal sacrifices and loses. And that but for them, there was no possibility of India as a nation (as we know it today). In the second part, he narrates the history of Kachchh from Indus Valley civilization to the integration of the region in the India Union in 1948. The bulk of the historical narratives are based on unpublished compilations placed at his disposal by the Maharajas, and on the oral history of the bards. Nevertheless, the author does not demonstrate by careful examination of evidence as to how exactly the oral legends fit into the standard sources of history, and he rarely cites the sources of evidence. Although the work is categorized as history, it seriously lacks in the historiographical apparatus that would help substantiate his posits. In the absence of notes, references and bibliography verity of the argument or interpretation becomes untenable.

He does speak of Kachchh for its history, geography, legends, culture and industries, its bards and minstrels, its skilful seamen, its visionary and progressive rulers and its energetic and capable bania merchant community. Despite his best efforts, however, Rushbrook Williams's narrative ends up reinforcing the feeling of timeless monotony.

The most significant part of the historical narrative begins with the foundation of the Jadeja Rajput kingdom in the twelfth century. The history of



Kachchh from this time to the end of the Jadeja kingdom in 1948 is divided into three periods. About five hundred years, from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, it was marked by a feudal political system. The Maharaja of Kachchh was the head of the state as well as of the Jadeja clan. The other members of the clan were called the 'Bhayyats' (Brotherhood). Kachchh was divided almost equally into the durbar (court) territory, which was under the direct jurisdiction of the Maharaja, and territory of the Bhayyats estates. When, according to the rule of primogeniture, the eldest son of the Maharaja succeeded to the throne, he had to provide landed estate to his younger brothers as patrimony. The Bhayyat was independent within his estate and derived his own revenues. The Maharaja was little more than the accepted chief and leader of the Bhayyats, whose powers were almost as great as his own.

Kachchh was formerly a Rajput state and for centuries, the history of Kachchh was described only as Rajput knights swaggering around and feuding bitterly with one another or with the neighbouring kingdoms of Sind and Saurashtra, behaving more like gangsters than royalty. It was a fairly standard feudal set up, with a Maharaja in charge, recognized by a group of hereditary feudal barons called Bhayyat, who owned and administered their own lands, and contributed fighting men to participate in the King's martial exertions. Even their disputes and intrigues were not out of the ordinary! However, Rushbrook describes the political system only at the level of the Maharajas and the heads of the Bhayyat estates. He does not tell us much about the relation between the Maharaja and his subjects in the court, about the interrelations among the Bhayyats, or about the internal system of a Bhayyat estate. Also, he uses the terminology of European feudalism without explaining the similarity between the Rajput system and European feudalism.

The great maritime traditions of Kachchh, if properly explored, might have yielded scores of great stories relating to the trade with Mocha, Muscat and Mombasa, and this could have saved the book from utter blank over, but these exploits are barely mentioned.

The next period in the history of Kachchh, from about 1700 to about 1815, was marked by the Maharaja's attempts to increase their authority over the Bhayyats. They tried to do this first by developing agriculture, trade, and arts and crafts in the Durbar, thus increasing the revenues. They employed members of the merchant clans as their Diwans to administer the economic affairs of the state, a phenomenon quite common in Rajput states in Gujarat and Saurashtra. Secondly, the Maharajas organized mercenary troops of non-Rajputs, such as Muslims and the Siddis. Thus the merchants and the mercenaries became powerful groups in Kachchh. But with the passage of time the merchants and the mercenaries turned against the Maharaja, and to defeat these mercenaries the maharajas started seeking the help of the British. So, on 15th December 1815, the army of kingdom of Kachchh was defeated near Bhadreswar, Kachchh by the combined armies of the British and the Gaekwads of Baroda State. The army of the British was led by Colonel East. The nearest major fortified the town of Anjar and Port of Tuna thus came under the British occupation on 25th December 1815. This led to the negotiation between rulers of Kachchh and British Agency. The Jadeja rulers of Kachchh accepted the British suzerainty in 1819 and Captain James MacMurdo was posted as British Political Resident stationed at Bhuj. During this period the affairs of the state were managed by Council of Regency, which was composed of Jadeja chiefs and headed by Captain MacMurdo.

From the perspective of macro-history, or the history of broad trends as against the history of events, personalities and coincidences, one finds that the inferences drawn and explanations offered by Rushbrook are closer to the truth. But micro-history has readability and human interest drama on its side; it can hold and move its audience, and this is a powerful consideration, for no historian wants to author an unreadable book of unimpeachable truth. Rushbrook talks about the history of a small, well-defined group or community, incorporating an analysis of the political, social, economical and other factors as pertaining to the group under consideration. This is macro-history in microcosm, and on this scale, it is possible to enjoy the best of



both worlds – to get the full benefits of the explanatory powers of macro-history, while retaining the emotional power of narrative history.

In this case, unfortunately, the narrative is not particularly captivating. But having studied the histories of Kachchh and its surrounding areas and of the lands of the Marathas and the Rajput chiefs, one can understand the exact process by which the British colonized India, little by little, treaty by treaty, and clause by clause, to the utter bemusement of the ingenuous locals. By comparing these histories to the history of medieval Europe, it is derived that a general theory of political evolution and eventual demise of feudal structures has to be formed. We have to know how the King and the barons lived in uneasy equilibrium for centuries until the escalating sophistication of capital markets and transportation technology made it impossibly complex to administer the kingdom. We have to decide as to how they brought about the need for professional, non-hereditary legislators and bureaucrats drawn largely from the bourgeoisie. The kings began to share their power with this professional administrator class, to the detriment of that of the landed aristocracy. And it is here, where the narratives diverge: in Europe, this eventually led to the democratization of government, while in India; the British took advantage of the fluid situation and seized control of the administration. But either way, the landed aristocracy was, history, and royalty itself was not too far behind.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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