

An Enquiry into the Origin of the Charans (The Bards of Rajputana)

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The Charans and Bhats were the castes, which enjoyed great respectability and exercised great influence in the courts of princely States of Rajputana. The specialty of these castes was that, they were devoted to the literary pursuits. In receiving gifts and composing poems and reciting genealogy, they were near to the Brahmans and in drinking wine, worshipping Shakti and participating in war, they resembled Rajputs.¹ Through their writings, we know about the glorious deeds and dynastic histories of various Rajput houses and families. It was they who wrote the various Khyats, Vaartas, Raaso and Vanshavalisand because of their writings many new facts have come to light. Though sometimes, their accounts are exaggerated, yet they are of vital importance in the determination of facts and dates about the chronological order of events. "The works of the native bard", observes Anil Chandra Banerji², "afford many valuable data in facts, incidents, religious opinions and traits of manners; many of which, being carelessly introduced are thence to be regarded as the least suspicious kind of historical evidence."

The Charans rank as the genealogists of Rajput families and are divided into three large endogamous groups³:-

(i) Maru (ii) Kachela (iii) Tiwaria. The first two are named after the places of their subsequent settlement. Those living in Marwar are called Maru Charans and those who settled in Kutch are known by the name of Kachela Charans. While the Tiwarias are named after the section of the Srimali Brahmans from whom they sprung.

They are the followers of Shakti religious sect and usually follow the manners and customs of Rajputs. They receive gifts and from the Rajputs on all feasts and marriages (even today) and held extensive lands and villages granted to them under udak or rent-free tenures.

Charans trace their ancestry to the epic age, where they figure in association with a host of other classes – the Bhats, the Magadhas, the Soots, the Nuts etc. who performed various religious duties at the royal court, on festive and joyful occasions or at coronations.⁴ They sang the glories of the ancestors of the ruling dynasties.

There are several legends, associated with the origin of Charans. One states that they were created by the Almighty God himself.⁵ The legend, passed on from generation to generation, describing them to be born by Lord Shiva. It is said that Lord Shiva, was once very much disturbed and upset, because His holy ox (Nandi) felt great difficulties in the pastures because of the fear of a lion, which was a pet animal of goddess Parvati. Lord Shiva first created the Bhat to safeguard His ox,

but the guard could not prevent the lion from terrorizing the ox of the Lord. Enraged by the audacity of the lion and the failure of the Bhat, the Lord created another guard - this time the Charan, and ordered him to take His holy ox to the pastures. The new guard, before taking the ox to the pastures, praised goddess Parvati through words and verses; which made her happy and satisfied. Pacified and satisfied by the verses of the guard, the goddess assured him that her lion would never cause any harm to the ox henceforward and blessed him that “since he had pleased her (goddess Parvati) by his politeness and poetic talents, therefore his children and family members would become proficient in the art of poetry and verse-writing, without any efforts of their own.” And from that day, the legend goes on, because that guard took the holy ox to the pastures for grazing (called charaai and charaana in Hindi), that guard and his family members came to be known as Charans. And this is why they worship Shakti and consider themselves as bards, poets and genealogists. In the words of Sir John Malcolm,⁶ “Mahadeva first created Bhats to attend to his lion and bull; but these would not prevent the former from killing the latter, which was a source of infinite vexation and trouble, so it compelled Mahadeva to create new ones. He therefore formed the Charan, equally devout as the Bhat, but of bolder spirit, and gave him in charge of those favourite animals. From that period, no bull was ever killed by the lion.” “These classes,” he further says” rank as the genealogists of proud and ignorant chiefs. It is to them that the proudest Rajput looks for solace in adversity, and for increased joy and exultation in prosperity.” John Wilson⁷ believed that the Charans got their name from the feeding and rearing of cattle.

Another sacred book considers Charans as having God like characteristics since they are well-versed in the art of poetry and are able to write verses on the spot and at the moment.⁸ Maitreyi Muni told Vidur in the Shrimad Bhagvat Purana that “those who are scholars are equal to Gods, and as such, there are eight supernatural entities, who/which are equal to Gods or which have Godly element in them.” These, according to Maitreyi Muni, were : (i) Vibudha (ii) Pitra (iii) Asur (iv) Gandharva and Apsaras (v) Yaksha and Rakshas (vi) Bhoot, Pret and Pishach (vii) Siddha, Vidyadhar and Charans (viii) and Kinnars.

Still another view is that those who praised their lords, or their patrons, through their poems, ballads, and their writings were called Charans, because they tried to spread the glory of their patrons, in all the four directions and thereby motivated the society to do good to everyone.⁹ Thus to glorify their lords and their families, they started keeping and singing genealogies of their patrons. As far as their original home-land is concerned it has been mentioned that they used to live in the Himalayas in ancient times and from there they migrated to other parts, when the Himalayas became over populated.¹⁰ They are also said to have migrated from the Gangetic Plains¹¹ towards the Deccan with their Rajput Chiefs, when the latter were over-whelmed by foreign inroads and when their internal dissensions, during the great Mahabharata war, compelled them to leave their original habitation.

The sacred position of the Charans has been depicted at many places in the Valmiki

Ramayana.¹² Similarly, in the Mahabharat,¹³ it has been mentioned that, “when the Gods saw the super-human work of the construction of bridge over the sea, at the time of the invasion of Lanka, by Lord Rama, then impressed by this majestic scene, the gods came there along with sages, siddhas and Charans and worshipped Lord Rama by sprinkling upon Him the holy water of various rivers.”

Still another legend believes that some Rajputs, in order to escape the wrath of the sage Parshuram, disguised themselves as bards and later came to be known as Charans.¹⁴ Thus by the above examples, it becomes quite clear that Charans and their sacred position has been mentioned in many works of ancient India and they were not mere 'wandering mendicants' as was thought by Lt. Col. Sutherland¹⁵ in the 19th century.

Sir John Malcolm,¹⁶ however believed that when the Rajputs migrated from the banks of the Ganges to Rajputana, their Brahman priests did not accompany them and hence the class of Charans arose and supplied their place; one section became their bards and genealogists and the other became merchants who traveled with the large convoys of goods.

The Charans were originally traders who supplied horses to the Rajputs and soon became intimate with them, because of their poetic talents.¹⁷ They became esteemed and faithful companions of the Rajputs and shared their Amal (opium) and half of their loaves in adverse situations and received their extravagant bounty in times of prosperity.¹⁸ Besides being the bards of the Rajput chiefs, they frequently helped them and their families in times of distress and the histories of the Marwar and Jaisalmer ruling families record more than one instance of their having saved the heirs to the gaddii. e. throne from destruction. And they were such faithful companions of the Rajputs, that in times of distress, the Rajputs used to leave their family members in the homes of their family Charans, and no enemy Rajput king had the courage and the guts to touch those members, since the Charans were considered at par with Brahmans and cow, and none had the courage to offend the sacred person, who was a bard and a genealogist too.¹⁹ Their chief power was derived from the superstition that it was a certain ruin to shed their blood, or that of any of their family, or to cause it to be shed. “A few years back,” observed Bishop Heber²⁰ in 1824-25, “it was usual for merchants or travelers going through Malwa and Guzerat (sic) to hire a Charan to protect them; and the sanctity of his name was generally sufficient. If robbers appeared, he stepped forward waving his long white garments and denouncing in verse, infamy and disgrace on all who should injure travelers under the protection of the holy minstrel of Shiva. If this failed he stabbed himself with his dagger, generally in the left arm, declaring that his blood was on their heads; and if all failed, he was bound in honour to stab himself to the heart, a catastrophe of which there was little danger, since the violent death of such a person was enough to devote the whole land to barrenness, and all who occasioned it, to an everlasting abode in padalon.” They used this superstition to enforce the payment of debts to themselves or to those for whom they have stood security, by threatening to wound themselves if the debt was not paid.²¹ The bond of a Charan, thus, was often preferred to that of a wealthy banker. Their reputation had

grown to such an extent that their words were considered as surety, in the business-deals, between different parties.²² And if some one turned away from his words, then that Charan, who stood as surety, used to give dharna alongwith other members of his clan, on the doors of that person, and in this way forced him to respect his words. To pressurize the people, to accept their demands they used to torture themselves as well as their family members by inflicting wounds upon their bodies, by keeping indefinite hunger-strikes, by committing suicides in various ways (such as by immolating themselves or their family members, or by jumping from some building or by the blow of a sword or dagger upon their necks or stomach). Since their position was at par with Brahmins and cow, both dear and respectable to the Rajputs, therefore everybody, feared that they would be charged of brahma-hatya or gau-hatya (i.e. the murder of a Brahmin or that of cow) and the sin would rest on their heads, if anything went wrong with that Charan or with his family. "Their sacred character", remarks Col. Tod,²³ overawes the law-less Rajput chief, and even the savage Kali and Bheel, and the plundering Sahra of the desert, dread the anathema of these singular races, who conduct the caravan through the wildest and most desolate regions."

But whatever may be their origin, the Charans remained inextricably associated with various Rajput clans and were treated with greatest respect and the highest Rajput ruler would stand up, when one of his class entered or left an assembly.²⁴ They received tazim from the chiefs and when, at a social gathering, the kasumbha or bowl of liquid opium was handed round, a Charan, if present, was always the first to receive it from the chief. Similarly, the Charan women were also much respected and some were believed to possess the power to bring woe upon any person on whom their curse may fall.²⁵ The Charans were looked by the Rajputs to enshrine their heroic deeds in songs to be handed down to the posterity. Their sarcastic references to a defeat in a battle or want of courage inflamed their passions. Many rulers, who were insouciant in the administrative matters, or who cared more for their English masters and neglected their masses, or who indulged themselves in a life of pleasure, or who sat on the royal throne after murdering their kiths and kins, were sharply and openly rebuked, criticized and humiliated by the Charans and the Bhats, without any fear of the throne.²⁶

Eminent historian G.N. Sharma²⁷ remarks that the Charan combined in himself the traits of a Brahmin and that of a Rajput; he had the literary inclination of the former and received gifts from his Rajput patron for composing songs of heroic deeds of his ancestors. He resembled Rajput as a votary of Shakti (Hinglaj Mata being his kula-devi or family deity), followed his other habits and engaged in war. During the wars, they displayed their chivalry and recited the songs in praise of their patrons, to boost-up the morale of the soldiers. The names of Charan Khemraj, Naru Charan, Sandu, Ratan Mishran etc. are famous as martyrs for the cause of their patrons.²⁸ The Achaldas Khinchi Ki Vachanika mentions the names of these Charans, who gave away their lives, while fighting against the Turkish invaders.²⁹ If traditions are to be believed, a saintly Charan woman, mother of Baru Charan, helped Rana Hammir from her own funds by supplying 500 horses to recover Chittor.³⁰

Some of the Charan sects were styled as the pol-paats (poets of the door) of the different Rajput ruling races and thus enjoyed special privileges and rights at marriage and birth ceremonies.³¹ The Sodas were the pol-paats of the Maharana of Mewar, the Rohariyas were the pol-paats of the Rathores of Marwar, Bikaner and Kishangarh and of the Kachwahas of Jaipur and Alwar, the Adas were the pol-paats of the Deora sect of the Chauhan clan of Sirohi, and the Ratnus were the pol-paats of the Bhatias of Jaisalmer.³²

The Maru Charans were divided into 120 khaamps³³ or clans and in Marwar alone, out of these 120 khaamps, 53 were existent in the 19th century³⁴ and their number was around 20,000.³⁵

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References :

1. Sharma, Gopi Nath, Social life in Medieval Rajasthan, Agra, 1968, pp.94-95. For a detailed study about the origin and the significant role of Charans in the history of Rajputana, readers are requested to consult Goswami, Sambodh, Female Infanticide and Child Marriage, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2007.
2. Banerji, Anil Chandra, Aspects of Rajput State and Society, Rajesh Publications, N. Delhi, 1983, p. 194.
3. The Tiwaria Charans were originally Shrimali Brahmins who were pressed to become Charans by Raja Kanad Deo of Jalore who assigned to them 28 villages. They fought bravely for Kanad Deo against Alauddin but were defeated and had 28 of their villages taken away from them by the emperor. Subsequently when Raja Udai Singh tried to oppress the Charans of Jodhpur they took cause with their nominal brethren and were recognized by them and had the Mataji thread placed round their necks. Cf. Census of India, 1911, p.150.
4. They claim a very remote ancestry and reference to them frequently occurs in the Mahabharata or other ancient books of Hindu mythology, where they are known under twelve different names. These names are: (i) Brahma Rao (ii) Soot (iii) Magad (iv) Bandi (v) Saraswati Putra (vi) Stuti-Pathak (vii) Badi (viii) Nandi-Kar (ix) Rai (x) Bhat (xi) Nandi (xii) Kani. Cited from (now onwards Cf.) Gahlot S.S., and Dhar, Banshi, Castes and Tribes of Rajasthan, Jodhpur, 1989, p.136.
5. Mardum Shumari, Raj Marwar (1890).
6. Gahlot, S.S. and Dhar, Banshi, op.cit., p.130.
7. Ibid.
8. Valmiki Ramayana, Cf. Gadan, Badri Dan, 'Charan Ki Utpatti,' in Ratnawat, S.S., and Sharma, K.G., Charan Sahitya Parampara (Essays on Bardic Literature), Centre for Rajasthan Studies, Jaipur, 2001, pp.59-64.

And also

“देवसर्गश्चाष्ट विधो बिबुधाः पितरोऽसुराः ।

गन्धर्वाप्सरसः सिद्धा यक्ष रक्षांसि चारणाः ॥ 27

भूत—प्रेत पिशाचाश्च विद्याघ्नाः किन्नरादयः ।

दशैते विदुरादयाताः सर्गास्ते विश्वसृक्कृताः ॥”28

Sri Mad Bhagvat Purana, Skandha 3, Chapter 10, Verse 27-28. Cf. *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar* (1890), p.330.

9. “चारयन्ति कीर्तिम इति चारणाः ।”

Cf. *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1890, p.329.

10. “अथ गत्वा तृतीयं तु वायोः पन्थानमुत्तमम् ।

नित्यं यत्र स्थिता सिद्धाश्चारणाश्च मनस्विनः ॥

दशैवतु सहस्राणि योजनानां तथैवच ॥”

(i.e. Then after Ravana went to that place, which is 10,000 *yojana* or 40,000 *kos* away from the land, and which is inhabited by the sages, Siddhas and Charans. Except Himalayas, there is no other place, which is so much above the land). Cf. *Valmiki Ramayana*, Uttar-Kand, Sarga 5, Verse No.4.

And also

“एवमुक्त्वा महातेजो गौतमौ दुष्टाचारिणीम् ।

इममा श्रममुत्सृज्य सिद्ध चारण सेविते ॥

हिमवच्छिखरे रम्ये तपस्तपे महातपाः ॥”

(i.e. After saying this, Gautam the sage, left his ill-natured wife and also his ashram, and went on Himalaya, which was being inhabited by Siddhas and Charans, for meditation). *Valmiki Ramayana*, Bal Kanda, Sarga 48, Verse No.33. Cf. *Mardum Shumari, Raj Marwar*, 1890, p.330.

11. Gahlot, S.S. and Dhar, Banshi, op.cit., pp.130-131

12. “हुंकारेण महादेवस्तम्भितोऽथ त्रिलोचनः ।

देवैस्तदा समागम्य सर्षिसिद्धः स चारणैः ॥”

(i.e. when Lord Vishnu stunned the three eyed god Mahadev, by his great roar, then at that time, sages and Charans came there and by their words and praises requested God Vishnu to calm down).

Valmiki Ramayana, Sundar Kanda, Sarga 55, Verse No.29 Cf. *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1890, p.330.

13. “तद अदभुत राघवकर्म दुष्करं समीक्ष्य, देवा सह सिद्ध चारणैः ।

उपेत्य रामं सहसा महर्षिभिः स्तम्भयषिन्चन्सुशुभैजलः पृथक ॥”

- Mahabharata, Adi Parva, Chapter 126, Verse No.111, Cf. *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1890, p.330.
14. Sharma, H.S., *Social Milieu of the Creators of Bardic Literature*, in Ratnawat, S.S., and Sharma K.G., op.cit., p.476.
15. Lt. Col. Sutherland held that Charans were wandering mendicants, who assumed a religious character to serve their own purpose. According to Sutherland, “they were perfectly illiterate and were not properly entitled to any sacred character; yet they had gained an extra-ordinary influence over the superstitious Rajputs.”
- RSAB : Ajmer Commissioner's Office, Basta No.130, File No.1493 (210), 1848 AD. 'Exactions of Charans from Rajputs and other inhabitants.' From Lt. Col. Sutherland, A.G.G. to H.M. Elliot, Esq. Secy. to G.O.I., with Gov. Gen. dated January 11,1848. For more details ,please see Goswami, Sambodh, Female Infanticide and Child Marriage, op.cit.
16. Malcolm, John, *Memoirs of Central India*, Vol.I, pp.517-18.
17. As told by Shri Shiv Charan Das, great grand son of Mahakavi Shyamal Das ,a legendary historian of the history of Rajputana .For more details ,please see Goswami, Sambodh, Female Infanticide and Child Marriage,op.cit.
18. Qanungo, K.R., *Studies in Rajput History*, S.Chand and Company, Delhi, 1960, p.39.
19. “मात पिता सह बीसरे , बंधु बीसा रेह ।
सूरा पूरा बातडी , चारण चीता रेह ।।”
And also, *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1890, p.342.
20. Heber, Bishop, op.cit.pp.104-105.Goswami, Sambodh,Female Infanticide and Child Marriage, op.cit.
21. Cf. *Census of India*, 1911, p.148.
22. *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar*, 1890, p.342.
23. Tod, Col. James, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Vol. I & II, Delhi, 1968.
24. “चारण छत्री भाइयां, जां घर खाग तियाग ।
खाग तियागां बाहिरा, जां रै लाग न बाग ।।”
Gadan, Badridan, *Charnon Ki Utpatti*, in Ratnawat, S.S. and Sharma, K.G., (ed.) op.cit., p.64.
25. Cf. *Census of India*, 1911, p.148.
26. “पत जैपर जोधाण पत, दोनूह थाप उथाप
कूरम मारयो डीकरो, कमधज मारयो बाप ।”
And also,
“बो ही दिन, बो ही बखत, बा री बा तलवार
बाप मारियो जां भुजां, भैंसा रो कांई भार ।”
And also

“चापो मत कह बखत सी, कांपे छै केकाण
अेकर फिर बापो कहयो, तो पमंग तजैलो प्राण ।”

Gadan, Badridan, *Charnon Ki Utpatti*, in Ratnawat, S.S. and Sharma, K.G., (ed.), op.cit., p.65.

27. Sharma, G.N., op.cit., pp.94-95.
28. Sharma, G.N., Structure of Society and Social Life in Rajasthan (1200-1900 A.D.)in Ratnawat, S.S. and Sharma, K.G., *History and Culture of Rajasthan from Earliest Times up to 1956 A.D.*, Jaipur, 1999, p.291.
29. Ibid.
30. Sharma, H.S., *Social Milieu of the Creators of Bardic Literature* in Ratnawat S.S. and Sharma K.G. (ed.), op.cit., p.478.
31. Gahlot, S.S. and Dhar, Banshi, op.cit., p.132.
32. Ibid. “सांडू ने सीसोदिया, रोहड ने राठौड ।
दुरसावत ने देवडा, जादव रतन जोड ।।”
33. *Mardum Shumari Raj Marwar* (1890).
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35. National Archives of India (NAI)I: Translation of a note from Rao Raja Rial Mul or Rid Mal, the Jodhpur Vakeel, to John Ludlow, Pol. Ag., Ludlow to Sutherland, June 29, 1842, Foreign & Political, Consultation No.294-295, dt. 28 Dec. 1842, (No.250 of 1842). Cf. Goswami, Sambodh, Female Infanticide and Child Marriage, op.cit.