

Memory, History and Materiality: Seventy-two Horse Riding Deities of Kutch

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In the dry and deserted landscape of Kutch in Gujarat there exists on hilltops temples dedicated to Jakh. Jakh refers to seventy-two horse riding deities, seventy-one men and one woman their sister Sayari. The oral tradition in Kutch states that the sea brought these foreigners to Kutch. They soon attracted the attention of the local people because of their medicinal and martial skills and said to have slayed the evil king Jam Punvro, bringing peace to the land.

As a historian studying the art, history, temples and memory of Jakh in Kutch interesting dichotomies appeared between materiality and memory associated with the sacred landscape of Jakh.

My paper will explore two aspects associated with materiality first, the question of need of materiality in order to sanctify or provide evidence for a sacred memory or an oral tradition. The material in case of Jakh is the temple building on a hilltop and presence of horse riding sculptures. Secondly how the material itself can be used/misused, reinterpreted/misinterpreted by different religious communities to claim the sacred landscape as their own. In case of Jakh the local Sanghar community worships the horse riding deities as foreign gods who saved them from the evil king but recently, the Jaina and Hindu community in Kutch by bringing alteration in dialect have started calling the gods Yakshas and pray to them as ancient demi-gods. What is common in both cases is the presence of temple on a hill and horse riding deities.

Key Words: Jaina, Jakh, Kutch, Yaksha