

Legitimizing Royal Authority: The Role of Sacred Symbols and Valour in the *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*

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Abstract: This article delves into the complex role of religious legitimacy in state formation and the maintenance of political authority in medieval India, with a focus on the fifteenth-century text *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*. While recent historiography has often emphasized temple construction as a key method of legitimizing royal authority, this study explores a broader, more nuanced set of legitimation practices. It highlights how rulers, as portrayed in *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*, employed sacred symbols and acts of valour not only to establish but also to sustain their political power. The research underscores that religious legitimacy was crucial not only during state formation but also as a mechanism to reinforce royal claims across generations. *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* written long after the events it narrates, exemplifies how historical accounts were shaped to legitimize the rule of later descendants, elevating biographical narratives to the level of religious texts. This elevation conferred greater authority on the narratives and endowed the actions of historical figures with divine significance, thereby strengthening the perceived divine right of their lineage to govern. The article advocates for a more comprehensive understanding of legitimation in Indian historiography, recognizing the intricate interplay between sacred symbols, valour in the construction of royal authority.

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Some Preliminaries

In recent decades, Indian historiography has undergone a significant transformation in its approach to understanding state formation. Traditionally, historical analysis emphasized the practical aspects of governance and warfare, with a prevailing belief that rulers were primarily concerned with resource mobilization and military strategies. However, beginning in the 1970s, scholars have increasingly focused on the role of legitimation processes in the formation and consolidation of political authority. This shift has revealed the complex and multi-dimensional nature of how legitimacy was constructed and maintained. Pioneering works by scholars such as Stein¹ and Spencer² introduced the concept of

“ritual sovereignty,” highlighting the crucial role of religious legitimacy in establishing and sustaining political authority. This perspective challenges the earlier notion that political legitimacy was the sole or primary means of securing rule, emphasizing instead the significant impact of religious ideas, symbols, and institutions.

The relationship between sacred centre and political authority and what was its role in state formation has been studied by various scholars. Hermann Kulke has studied how the Jagannatha cult helped in the establishing and sustenance of the political authority of first, the Gangas and later the Gajapatis.³ The same process was also active in Mewar as well. Here the cult of Ekalingaji became one of the most important bases to strengthen the Guhila political authority.⁴

In the evolving discourse on state formation in Indian historiography, the role of temples has often been emphasized as a critical component of the legitimization process. The construction and expansion of temples have been viewed as pivotal acts through which rulers sought to solidify their religious legitimacy and assert their authority. This perspective highlights the tangible ways in which rulers engaged with religious institutions to reinforce their power. However, this focus on temple-building may obscure other significant forms of religious legitimacy that rulers employed throughout history. While the establishment of temples undoubtedly played a crucial role in many cases, it is essential to recognize that this was not the only method by which rulers sought to validate their authority. In particular, there are instances where acts of religious legitimacy were undertaken after the primary process of state formation had been completed. These actions often differed from the construction or expansion of temples, reflecting alternative strategies employed by rulers and aspirants to sustain their authority. A notable example of such an alternative form of religious legitimacy can be found in *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*, a text composed by the Nāgar Brāhmaṇa Padmanābha in 1455 AD.⁵ Unlike the temple-focused legitimization strategies, *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* emphasizes the valorous deeds of the king as the primary means of securing religious legitimacy. This text provides a valuable perspective on how rulers sought to validate their authority through personal valour and heroic acts, demonstrating that religious legitimacy could be pursued through diverse and dynamic practices beyond the construction of temples.

This research aims to broaden the scope of understanding regarding the legitimization processes in state formation by exploring such alternative forms of religious legitimacy. By examining cases like *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*, this study seeks to highlight the varied strategies employed by rulers to sustain their authority and to offer a more nuanced view of the relationship between religious acts and political power.

Analysis of the Text

In the year 1299, Alā al-Din Khaljī invaded the region of Gujarat. The Delhi Sultanate army that was dispatched to bring the region under control was led by the Ulugh Khān (Habib & Nizami, 1992, 334). Anhilwara, the capital, along with other major cities of Gujarat, was sacked. The Sultanate army also targeted and destroyed the Somanātha temple. *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* describes the destruction of the temple:

“Profound calamity had fallen upon Lord Somanātha’s temple. The locks (of the doors) were broken open and the enemy rushed through the doors tumultuously, and took possession of the temple drum and *kansāla*. The *Mlechha* (*asura*) stone-breakers climbed up the *śikhara* of the temple (to take of the golden *Kalaśa*) and began to rain blows on the stone idols on all the three sides (*pāsā*) by their hammers, the stone pieces falling all around. They loosened every joint of the temple building, and then began to break the different layers (*thara*), and the sculptured elephants and horses on them by

incessant blows of their hammers. Then, amidst loud and vulgar clamour, they began to apply force from both the sides to uproot the massive idol by means of wooden beams and iron crowbars.⁶

After the destruction of the temple, the idol was loaded on a cart and sent off to Delhi.⁷ In this journey towards Delhi, the Sultanate army had to go through the territory controlled by Kānhaḍade, the Chauhan ruler who ruled the territory of Jālor in Southern Rajasthan.⁸ *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* tells us that Ulugh Khān had become so overconfident of victories that he challenged Kānhaḍade to face him in battle and free the idol of Somanātha or pay obedience to him. According to the text, on the same day, when Kānhaḍade received the message of Ulugh Khān, he also saw a dream. In this dream, Gaṅgā and Gaurī asked Kānhaḍade:

“Who gave you the kingdom?”

“Śiva,” replied Kānhaḍade.

Gauri then said :

“The Turks have made your Lord a captive! “

And Gaṅgā said :

“Wake up, O immortal one! The *Asapati* (i.e. Emperor) is taking away Somanātha through your territory (*deśa*)! Earlier also, Rāma had Rudra freed from the demons. Again, Bali, son of Virochana, displayed his intense devotion and got Śiva free. Now, on this third occasion, you come forward, O Kānhaḍadeva! O brave one, delay not in this”.⁹

The fact that Kānhaḍade answers to Gaṅgā and Gaurī that the kingdom was given to him by Lord Śiva, on the one hand, compels him to save the idol of Somanātha. But on the other hand, it also solidified Kānhaḍade position as the ruler of Jālor as it was none other than Lord Śiva who conferred onto him the rulership of Jālor.

At the end of the Canto I of *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*, the text describes how the army of Kānhaḍade rescued the idol from the Sultanate army. The idol was then taken to the city of Jālor. At this moment, the obvious thing for Kānhaḍade to do was to send the idol back to Gujarat. But Kānhaḍade does not do that. Instead, we are told, “of the Ekaliṅga, which saves one from falling into the hell and dire troubles and afflictions, five idols were carved out; there is not sixth one like the. One of these was ceremoniously installed at Sorāṭha and another at Lohasing in Vāgaḍa. One was sent to a pleasant spot on the Ābū hill for consecration, while one was installed at Jālor where the Rāi built a temple and one was sent to Saivāḍi (Jālor district)”.¹⁰

The act of rescuing and subsequently dividing the idol of Lord Somanātha into five pieces represents a multi-dimensional approach to legitimacy. Firstly, Kānhaḍade’s bravery in defeating the Sultanate army to secure the idol exemplifies his qualities as a true Kṣatriya monarch. This valorous act not only demonstrated his martial prowess but also fulfilled the divine mandate given to him by Gaṅgā and Gaurī, affirming his right to rule Jālor. In this context, the act of rescuing the idol serves as the primary basis for Kānhaḍade’s religious legitimacy, highlighting his capacity to protect sacred symbols and thereby solidify his claim to the throne. Secondly, the division of the idol into five pieces and their distribution reflects a more conventional approach to legitimization. By installing one part of the idol in a newly constructed temple at Jālor, Kānhaḍade reinforced his political authority within his realm. The placement of the remaining four pieces at various sacred locations, including Somanātha, further sanctified his rulership and expanded his influence beyond Jālor. It is significant to note that *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* emphasizes the valorous act of rescuing the idol far more than the subsequent

division and installation. The detailed account of the rescue occupies nearly half of the first canto, underscoring its central importance to Kānhaḍade's claim to legitimacy. In contrast, the description of the idol's division and its distribution is relatively brief. This emphasis indicates that, according to the text's author, Kānhaḍade's primary source of royal legitimacy was his heroic act of saving the idol, rather than the more conventional practices of temple construction and sanctification.

Despite the detailed portrayals of Kānhaḍade's valor and devotion, the primary intent of these descriptions was not to legitimize Kānhaḍade's own authority. *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*, composed by Padmanābha in 1455 AD, was created long after Kānhaḍade's reign. The text was actually intended to bolster the legitimacy of Padmanābha's patron, Akhairāja, who was the fifth descendant of Kānhaḍade. The exact circumstances of Akhairāja's position during the time of the text's composition are unclear. It is uncertain whether Akhairāja was ruling Jālor or if he was in exile; some sources suggest that Jālor had fallen under the control of the Lohāni Afghans.¹¹ Thus, while *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* prominently highlights Kānhaḍade's heroic acts, its underlying purpose was to reinforce the authority of Akhairāja, rather than Kānhaḍade himself. This context of contested authority likely motivated Padmanābha to craft *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* at Akhairāja's request.¹² By emphasizing Kānhaḍade's acts of valor, particularly the rescue of the Somanātha idol, Padmanābha aimed to demonstrate that Akhairāja's lineage had a divine and rightful claim to rule Jālor. Padmanābha's elevation of the text from a mere biographical account to a religious document reflects this intent. At the end of Canto IV, he describes his work as "pious than the Purāṇas, and capable of bestowing the same religious merit as the pilgrimage to a holy place bestows upon a pilgrim".¹³ This characterization not only enhances the authority of the text but also imbues Kānhaḍade's actions with a divine significance, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of Akhairāja's claim to the throne.

Conclusion

The examination of *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* reveals a nuanced understanding of religious legitimacy. Contrary to earlier historiographical assumptions that prioritized temple construction as the primary means of legitimizing rule, this text underscores the significance of valorous acts in securing political authority. Kānhaḍade's rescue of the Somanātha idol exemplifies how martial prowess and 'divine intervention' were pivotal in reinforcing a ruler's legitimacy. His actions not only demonstrated his martial capabilities but also underscored his divine mandate to rule, as articulated through his dream and subsequent triumph. The division and distribution of the idol pieces further illustrate how rulers employed religious symbolism to consolidate power and sanctify their reigns, extending their legitimacy beyond mere territorial conquests. The text's composition in 1455 AD by Padmanābha, aimed at legitimizing Akhairāja's claim to the throne, highlights the continued relevance of religious narratives in political legitimacy. By elevating Kānhaḍade's valorous deeds and integrating them into a broader religious framework, Padmanābha not only sought to validate his patron's authority but also imbued the narrative with a divine sanction that transcended mere historical recounting. Thus, *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* exemplifies the intricate interplay between sacred symbolism and personal valour in the complex process of legitimizing royal authority.

Notes

1. Stein, Burton, "The Segmentary State in South Indian History", in R.G. Fox (ed), *Real and Region in Traditional India*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1977.
2. Spencer, George. W. "Religious Networks and Royal Influence in Eleventh Century South India." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 12, no. 1 (1969): 42–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3595970>.

3. Kulke, Hermann. *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*. Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1993.
4. Kapur, Nandini Sinha. *State Formation in Rajasthan: Mewar During the Seventh-Fifteenth Centuries*. Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2002.
5. Bhatnagar, V.S., trans. *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* (India's Greatest Patriotic Saga of Medieval Times). New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1991, vii.
6. *Ibid.*, 10.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, vii.
9. *Ibid.*, 12.
10. *Ibid.*, 28.
11. M. S. Commissariat. *A History Of Gujarat*. Vol. 1. Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1938. 51.
12. Bhatnagar, V.S., trans. *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* (India's Greatest Patriotic Saga of Medieval Times). New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1991, vii.
13. *Ibid.*