

Painted merchant chhatris of the Shekhawati region, Rajasthan

Saumya Agarwal 

Chhatris or cenotaphs, commonly associated with the Rajput nobility, were extensively commissioned by merchants in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan from around 1830 to 1950. A study of these chhatris allows an insight into how the chhatri, as a mortuary monument, along with other painted buildings from the region, reflected and consolidated the identity of the merchant community after their engagement and prosperity in the colonial economy. This article discusses one of the most celebrated merchant chhatris from the Shekhawati region, the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri (1872 CE) from Ramgarh. Through an analysis of the chhatri's paintings and inscriptional evidence, while situating its commissioning within the history of a quintessential merchant town, this article sheds light on how these mortuary monuments established the nouveau elite status of merchants by referencing established mythological themes like the avatars of Vishnu, and markers of 'taste' like the ragamala paintings. Also discussed are motifs that become markers of merchant identity, such as the image of the saint Dadu Dayal, as well as depictions of merchant ships protected by divinities like Rama.

Keywords: Shekhawati, Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, ragamala, rasamandala, Dadu Dayal, Ramayana

I

Introduction: The chhatri in a quintessential merchant town

Chhatris are funerary monuments usually constructed to honour a deceased patriarch. Initially, these were symbols of kingship in Rajasthan, traditionally commissioned by the heir of a ruler to legitimise a successor's claim to the throne. Among the Rajput nobility, the construction of chhatris was an 'invented tradition', in an imitation

Saumya Agarwal is at OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat, Haryana, India.
E-mail: saumya.agarwal@jgu.edu.in

Contributions to Indian Sociology 59, 1–2 (2025): 160–186
Sage Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC/
Melbourne
DOI: 10.1177/00699659261438656

Figure 1

The painted interior of the central dome of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri.



Source: The author.

of the Mughal tomb as a symbol of royal authority.¹ The merchant chhatris of Shekhawati extended this appropriation, although without any claims of the associated political succession. When commissioned by a merchant in the Shekhawati region, these commemorative structures were linked with prestige and a conspicuous display of success.²

The Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri in Ramgarh—a town in the Sikar district of Rajasthan's Shekhawati region—dated 1872 CE,³ is iconic because of its intricate murals. It has a main dome, surrounded by 16 subsidiary domes, a Shiva temple in the basement and two *kirti stambh* (memorial steles/*devali*) on its premises. The murals in the central dome primarily depict episodes from the Ramayana (Figure 1). Below this is a

¹ For an elaboration on this, see Shokoohy and Shokoohy (2001), Belli Bose (2015: 14–19), Mishra (1990: 24).

² By the term 'merchant', I primarily mean the Hindu Baniya and Jain merchants. Later, as these men and groups moved out of Shekhawati to centres like Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Bombay (now Mumbai), they started being described as Marwaris. According to Anne Hardgrove, this was a 19th-century neologism which often had pejorative connotations associated with it (2004: 5).

³ Based on inscriptions on the memorial steles, Ilay Cooper has dated this chhatri as 1872 CE. See Cooper (1987: R 87). For a detailed design map of the chhatri, along with the adjoining well, see the survey by Ilay Cooper (*ibid.*).

rasamandala, which is a circular depiction of Krishna dancing with the *gopis* (cowherd women from Vrindavan). There are also 32 framed niches with the *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu and other divine and historical subjects. The subsidiary domes are decorated with labelled imagery associated with classical music known as the *ragamala* series, along with the *barahmasa* (12 seasons/months) depictions. Several of these aspects will be discussed in this article, particularly in the context of how the structure of the chhatri and its decorative imagery, reifies the status of the Poddar merchants.

Part of the significance of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri comes from the fact that it is situated in Ramgarh. Ramgarh can be considered a quintessential merchant town from the region, and a brief insight into its history allows us to understand how several towns of Shekhawati were spaces where the merchant community had both political clout and significant social status. The town was settled by Rao of Sikar, Devi Singh, in 1790 CE.⁴ As per Lt. Col. Lockett, an East India Company agent who was surveying the region in 1831, Ramgarh was settled with the intention of making it a ‘great mart’ and had been carved out of the Fatehpur region, intending it to be the capital of a new *purganah*.⁵ A new town allowed taxes to be levied every time cargo and people passed through. These towns thus became sources of revenue while also making the route attractive for trade caravans.⁶ The settling of such towns was important for the local Rajput nobility. Furthermore, a thriving merchant community was required to settle such towns.

Ramgarh was settled after the influential Poddars of Churu moved to the territory of Sikar following a dispute with Shiv Singh, the Thakur of Churu.⁷ The Poddar merchant, Chaturbhuj Poddar’s business interests were in Bhatinda and involved bringing Pashmina from Baluchistan and

⁴ Lt. Col. A. Lockett. 1831. ‘Narrative of a Journey From Busawan in Bhurtpore Territory to a Part in North West States (Ajmer), April–June 1831.’ Foreign 1831 DE, Vol. No. 272, p. 235. National Archives of India.

⁵ Ibid.; Purganah is an administrative and revenue collection unit.

⁶ For a discussion on the history of the caravans and how the region became popular on the trade route, and its eventual decline, see Cooper (2009: 33–36).

⁷ This caused the Thakur much harm, since in the later battles between the ruler of Bikaner and the Thakur of Churu, these same merchants are said to have supported Bikaner substantially. For more information see Agrawal (1974: 238–40). Churu, as a town, has a much longer history than Ramgarh as a town; yet the two are connected. The prosperity of

sending it to different places, including Churu. This trade was taxed heavily by the Thakur, causing a rift; Chaturbhuj agreed to move at the behest of Devi Singh, the ruler of Sikar (Bharadwaj 2003: 51). Several incentives and protections were given to the merchants to settle in Ramgarh. As the historian Jhabarmall Sharma has noted, the Poddar merchants that settled in Ramgarh were respected; this is why it was called Ramgarh of the Seths, that is, Ramgarh Sethan (2015 [1922]: 56).⁸ Lt A. H. E. Boileau, an engineer for the Great Trigonometrical Survey, who visited the region for the second time in 1835 CE, writes how Ramgarh was a flourishing frontier town:

...neatly fortified and filled with the mansions of wealthy bankers, whose fleeces have as yet suffered little from the generally unsparing shears of the Shekhawuts. The Seekur authorities seem to have found out, that levying heavy fines upon the merchants of Ramgurh, would cause them speedily to vacate that place, and thus kill the goose which laid the golden eggs in their country. (1837: 10)

The merchants were not unduly harassed by the Rajput overlords for money given that they could leave and settle elsewhere, leading to a complete loss of revenue. Boileau also mentions that these merchants held the title of '*Foujdar*, a singular appellation...' (1837: 10). In the same vein, Lockett, writing in 1831, mentioned that the merchants enjoyed certain privileges, like using the name of the Rao Raja when needed during negotiations.⁹

The merchants not only settled in Ramgarh, but in the process, also *settled* Ramgarh. It is possibly because of this reason that the built environment is linked to merchant identity here in far more prominent ways than in a town like Churu. In fact, although the links between the built environment and merchant identity are evident throughout Shekhawati, they are particularly prominent in Ramgarh. The status of a merchant

one led to the downfall of the other, another indication of the clout the merchant communities had in the region.

⁸ For further information on how when this town was settled it was known as 'Sethon ka Ramgarh', see Agrawal (1974: 239–40).

⁹ Lt. Col. A. Lockett. 1831. 'Narrative of a Journey From Busawan in Bhurtpore Territory to a Part in North West States (Ajmer), April–June 1831.' Foreign 1831 DE, Vol. No. 272, p. 235. National Archives of India.

family here was measured through the number of painted structures they had commissioned in the 19th and 20th centuries. In Ramgarh, for a family to be acknowledged as the household of a *seth*— that is, a merchant of established renown and wealth, the patriarch and the family were expected to have financed the building of a *haveli* (mansion), a well, a temple, a *dharamshala* (guest house) and a cenotaph dedicated to the merchant patriarch's father (Cooper 2013: 33). To be acknowledged as a *seth* was a matter of some prestige for the merchants.¹⁰ This also meant that not all merchants were considered *seths*, and this distinction was significant. Paintings and painted buildings, thus, became important markers of success.¹¹ From an interview with the matriarch of the Oonthwalia family in Ramgarh, who was around 85 years old at the time of the conversation, I gained a sense of what Ramgarh was like before the 1950s. While she herself belonged to a merchant family and lived in a painted *haveli*, she was clear about who the *seths* were, and how her family, though Banias, were not *seths*. The *seths*, for her, were the Poddars and the Ruias primarily as they built grand structures, elaborately painted houses and had close connections with the rulers of Sikar.¹²

The settling of Ramgarh as a merchant town, though, did not immediately lead to the commissioning of elaborately painted buildings. Ilay Cooper links the commissioning of painted buildings in Shekhawati to the relative safety which the region experienced once marauding was brought under control in the 1830s (2009: 36). It was also linked to the immense wealth that the merchants made from their involvement in colonial trading activities outside Shekhawati (*ibid.*: 36, 48). During this period, the balance of power between the merchants and the Rajput nobility shifted, and the merchants became an even more formidable influence in the region. This shift, I argue, allowed the merchant community to take on the symbols associated with Rajput nobility, such as commissioning the *chhatris* as a mortuary monument.

Some of the oldest *chhatris* in Ramgarh are the Poddar *Chhatris*. The earliest recorded example of a *chhatri* in Ramgarh, according to Ilay Cooper's survey, is a triple-domed Poddar *chhatri* with a date of c.1827

¹⁰ The term 'seth' comes from the Sanskrit word *shreshthin*, which means chief. See Laidlaw (1995: 89).

¹¹ For a reference to the significance of commissioning a *haveli* for the Marwari community in a fictional work, see Saraogi (2022 [1998]: 32–33).

¹² Personal conversation, 28 March 2014.

Figure 2

Inscription in the chhatri for Syoji Ramji Poddar. This inscription was on a small stone tablet set in the plaster of the dome's rim. It has now been removed.



Source: Ilay Cooper.

(Cooper 1987: R 91).¹³ In 1833, a chhatri was built for Syoji Ramji Poddar (ibid.: R 85).¹⁴ The inscription on this chhatri, though now removed, is accessible through an old photograph taken by Cooper (Figure 2).

Following these early chhatris, the Poddar and other merchants in Shekhawati began commissioning mortuary monuments to memorialise deceased patriarchs. Studying chhatris in this context provides an interesting insight into how these memorialising monuments became markers of these towns as merchant spaces.

¹³ There is a kirti stambh in this chhatri as well, as told to me by Ilay Cooper. Personal communication via email, 7 August 2025.

¹⁴ According to Ilay Cooper, this has a strong resemblance to a chhatri in Churu. Personal communication via email, 7 August 2025.

II

Merchant chhatris as mortuary monuments

As commemorative structures, merchant chhatris were linked with prestige and not political succession. A new trend amongst the merchant community in the 19th century, these nonetheless had elements in common with existing practices of memorialisation in Rajasthan. While the domed cupola chhatris and the idea of mortuary monuments might have been a result of Indo-Islamic interactions, practices of memorialisation are widespread in Rajasthan.¹⁵ For instance, memorial shrines (*deval*) and stone steles (*devali*) are found all over the state. Small memorial shrines to fallen warriors are particularly popular. One cannot immediately correlate this practice to the building of elaborate mortuary monuments for ancestors, though this may be significant to understand the changes in the ways in which the Islamicate tomb was adopted by the Rajputs and the merchants.

The ritual significance of the chhatri is evident from the fact that they were constructed in a cluster in the designated cremation ground, usually marking the space where the deceased had been cremated.¹⁶ However, this was not always the case; in several instances, chhatris were constructed where space was available. Quite often, there would be a Shiva temple underneath the chhatri. In the case of the Poddar chhatris particularly, the *devali*/*kirti* stambh/stone stele seems to be an important feature carrying inscriptional information about the building of the chhatri and the person being memorialised. The iconography of this is, though, markedly different from the kind of *devali* constructed for Rajputs who were killed in battle.

Another point to note is that this materialisation of memory through chhatris was significantly different from the rituals through which ancestors were, and still are, honoured in most households in the region. Apart from

¹⁵ As historian Ratan Lal Mishra (1990: 24) has described:

In medieval times there was a practice to raise a memorial in shape of a cenotaph over the remains of the dead. The Mughals, and before them, the Pathans, Tugluqs, Khiljis had a system of which the mortuary monuments were an important element. The Rajputs also followed this practice of building cenotaphs over the dead. As a result of this craze every ruling family had its own crematorium which was studded with cenotaphs. The mercantile community also raised gorgeous structures in the shape of cenotaphs of various sizes and forms which attract attention and prove the building zeal of the people.

¹⁶ For instance, the Gaitor chhatris in Jaipur are built in the royal cremation ground of the rulers of Amber and Jaipur.

the appointed time of *shradh*, a period which is marked for honouring the ancestors through donations and abstinences, there are other distinctive local practices. In the design of most havelis, a narrow room known as the *parinda* is constructed next to the kitchen. Various offerings of food and water are kept in this room to honour the ancestors collectively. In some homes, there is a niche in the walls of the inner courtyard; this is also a dedicated space for the worship of ancestors.

The merchants of Shekhawati started commissioning chhatris from the 1830s onwards and did so till the middle of the 20th century. This corresponds with the painted building trend in Shekhawati in general, post the involvement of the merchants in the colonial economy.¹⁷ The commissioning of the chhatri can be understood as an agentive marking of the region as a homeland by creating a strong sense of the past through ancestor worship and ideas of the sacred.¹⁸ The paintings in these chhatris are integral to the larger dynamics by which the merchants' powerful status in these towns was established. For instance, the mythological themes painted on the chhatris served to apotheosise the ancestor. The sonic and celebratory elements of the ragamala and the rasamandala imagery in the chhatri, and their association with mortuary monuments, are explored further through the decorative paradigm of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri. These motifs are common to the Rajput and the merchant chhatris and, as I will argue, are linked to the merchant community appropriating markers associated with Rajasthani nobility.

The merchants appropriated not only structural and iconographic markers associated with Rajput nobility but also the idea of philanthropy, when they began commissioning the building and painting activity. While commemorative chhatris were built to honour patriarchs, they served

¹⁷ While here I explore chhatris primarily in the context of Shekhawati, and I do believe that the dense proliferation of chhatris in the region is a unique phenomenon linked to the consolidation of identity by the merchant community after they travelled out of the region to port cities such as Bombay and Calcutta, but as art historian Maria Cimino has suggested, 19th-century Jaipur also saw a spurt in a number of chhatris commissioned by 'the well-to-do or even rich middle class' (2001: 101). This resulted in Jaipur being dotted with chhatris, particularly in the Raja Bagh area. A comparison between Jaipur and Shekhawati chhatris would be an important study, though currently beyond the scope of this article. To understand how the chhatri could be linked to the anxieties and the prejudice faced by the merchants in colonial trading centres such as Calcutta, see Agarwal (2025).

¹⁸ For a brief elaboration of this, see Agarwal (2025: 6–8).

multiple purposes. Melia Belli Bose has described the elaborate surroundings of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, which include a garden, a dharamshala and a well. Belli Bose links this to the sense of philanthropy associated with the commissioning of built forms by the merchant community (2015: 131–34). Furthermore, the commissioning of elaborate paintings on these structures also became a form of supporting the arts. Such patronage was often linked to the idea of the ideal ruler in Rajasthan (Haynes 1994).

III

The Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri

The name of the chhatri, ‘Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri’, gives us interesting insights into its history. A general trend I have found is that the merchant chhatris, even as they memorialise a patriarch, were named after the merchant who commissioned the chhatri. This has much to do with the fact that the very act of such memorialisation was linked to displaying the success of the merchant commissioning the structure. However, with the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, this is more complicated. The chhatri was commissioned by Ram Gopal Poddar’s father, Bansidhar Poddar, for *his* father, Ram Vilas Poddar.¹⁹ While the inscription on the stele at the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri has faded, one can corroborate some of this information from the kirti stambh of another Poddar chhatri, also dated 1872 CE (Cooper 1987: R 77). There are also several stylistic similarities between the two chhatris, suggesting that both were possibly

¹⁹ This has been confirmed by Ilay Cooper, email communication, 4 July 2025. Ilay Cooper first saw the chhatri in 1975. He has also mentioned the name of the person being memorialised as ‘Vilasraiji’ (email communication, 25 February 2026). The information about Bansidhar Poddar and Ram Vilas Poddar has also been confirmed by Usha Poddar, a descendant of the Poddar family (personal communication, 3 July 2025). Unfortunately, the carvings on the memorial stone are not clear enough, otherwise this fact could have been checked with the inscription. Ilay Cooper, though, has based this information on the same memorial stone which had clearer inscriptions in the 1980s. While I have been unable to decipher the two inscribed stone stele on the premises of the chhatri, some other scholar’s engagement with these inscriptions might yield important information in this regard. I am grateful to Atul Khanna for sharing images of the steles with me.

I, unfortunately, do not know when the chhatri started being referred to as Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri. In the INTACH survey, Ilay Cooper has mentioned that the chhatri is known as the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri (1987: R 87).

Figure 3

Inscription on the kirti stambh for IC No. R 77.



Source: Ilay Cooper.

commissioned together, and by the same person/family. The inscription on the lower half of the kirti stambh mentions both Kishan Dutt Ji (Ram Vilas Poddar's father) and his grandson Bansidhar (Figure 3). Given the similarities between the two chhatris, it could be that Bansidhar Poddar's success resulted in him commissioning both chhatris—one for his grandfather, and another, more elaborate one, for his father.

In the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, the main dome has a lotus motif in the centre, with a circular ring around it which is decorated with floral arabesque patterns. Below this starts the first band of figural paintings, which primarily depict scenes from the Ramayana (Figure 1). A large part of the circular space is taken up by the depiction of the battle scene between Rama and Ravana's armies. This would correspond with the *Yuddhakanda* of Valmiki's Ramayana, and has several scenes from the

battle, including a depiction of Kumbhakaran devouring the monkey soldiers from Rama and Sugriva's army (*Vanar Sena*). One end of the battle scene is marked by the waterbody which the army had to cross to reach Lanka. The depiction of Rama on his chariot is closer to this end of the scene. The other end is demarcated through the walled palace/city of Lanka (Figure 5). This has a red boundary wall around it, with roughly delineated canons on the ramparts. This would suggest a fortified city, which is in keeping with literary descriptions of Lanka as well. The architecture within is depicted as predominantly white. Here, Ravana is not shown as presiding over his court. He is on the battlefield, on his chariot, outside the walls of Lanka, while his palace is under siege with the monkeys invading the *zenana* (women's part of the palace) (Figure 5). This space also shows the Ashok Vatika, where Sita is kept prisoner and is meeting Rama's messenger, Hanuman. The figure of Hanuman is repeated, in a synoptic narrative fashion, to show him observing Sita from the tree, giving Sita Rama's message and destroying the Ashok Vatika. The space between the palace and the Ashok Vatika has been demarcated with the use of two different shades of blue—a lighter shade and another darker, ultramarine shade.²⁰ The negotiations between these two types of blues help to demarcate several spaces in the chhatri.

In the circular dome of the chhatri, Ravana's palace is separated from Rama's court through a depiction of Krishna holding aloft on his finger, Mount Govardhan, to protect the inhabitants of Braj from the rains—a manifestation of Indra's wrath. Apart from this scene from the Krishna narrative, the murals on the central dome comprise only depictions from the Ramayana. The insertion of the Krishna scene almost protects the space of Ayodhya from proximity to the depiction of Lanka. A proximity between these two spaces might be inimical to the order represented by Ayodhya at the time of Rama's coronation (Figure 4). This is in direct contrast to the chaos in Lanka, with the *Vanar Sena* invading and the king, Ravana, not being in his court.

²⁰ By this time, chemical colours were making their way into Shekhawati, particularly colours that were produced in places like Germany. Even though any assertion is difficult to make without chemical analysis, the ultramarine blue is what Ilay Cooper associates with the red and blue phase which lasted from c.1860–c.1910. See Cooper (2009: 81–82).

Figure 4
Rama's coronation.



Source: The author.

The murals in the central dome seem to be arranged according to geographical space, more than narrative sequencing.²¹ The spaces depicted include Ayodhya at the moment of Rama's coronation after his return from Lanka (Figure 4). This would be from the end of the *Yudhakanda* of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.²² This is a flattened view of a four-walled palace with multiple arched windows, domes and *bangaldar* eaves (curved roof above a window). Ayodhya appears markedly different from the palace at Lanka, since there is no fortification around Ayodhya. The *tibari*, that is, triple-arched spaces, also seem to be a mix of red, blue and white, while Lanka is depicted as predominantly white. The view into the palace at Ayodhya focuses on the court with Rama and Sita sitting on a raised throne with a *gaddi*; Rama is being anointed by Sage Vashistha, while demigods and other sages are in attendance. Also attending are important

²¹ This is a feature common to *padh* (cloth scrolls) paintings as well as the 1750 Sardul Singh's chhatra in Parsurampura.

²² The specific section would be Sarga 116. See Lefeber (1984: 487–94).

Figure 5
Ravana's court under siege.



Source: The author.

personages from the Vanar Sena, including Hanuman. Sitting in front of Hanuman is a person who is not quite painted like a sage. There are several mentions of the merchants of Ayodhya as being part of the retinue to welcome and consecrate Rama in the *Yudhakanda* (Lefebvre 1984: 491, 483). In that sense, it is possible that this figure is a stand-in for a Poddar merchant, though this is speculative.²³ Another, more significant reference to merchants, though, is incorporated in the river running beneath Ayodhya (Figure 4).²⁴ Since this river is filled with aquatic creatures and multiple boats, with some being steered by men wearing exotic head gears, which could be akin to 'firangis',²⁵ this stretch of water could then represent the prosperous transcontinental trade under an ideal state (*Ram Rajya*), thus a reference to the mercantile interests of the Poddars, as well as a possible

²³ This figure has some similarities with the figure of Ved Vyas who is painted in the series of niches in the chhatris as one of the 24 avatars of Vishnu.

²⁴ This could be the Saryu River.

²⁵ Firangis would be generic figures of foreigners, mostly recognisable as such because of their hat-like headgear.

reference to rulers of Jaipur and Sikar who must maintain the peace for trade to flourish.

The painting from the chhatri could also be showing the restoration of order in Ayodhya after Rama has been anointed as the ruler. Since Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri is a merchant's chhatri, the ships signify the prosperous overseas trade that flourished in times of peace. This stands in contrast with the chaos depicted in Ravana's court. As art historian Cathleen Cummings has pointed out, the artist Sahibdin from the court of Jagat Singh of Udaipur employs the idea of Ayodhya representing social stability and cosmic balance in his illustrations in the *Ayodhyakanda* in a 1649 illustrated manuscript of the Ramayana (2011: 166–67).²⁶ Furthermore, the depiction of Ayodhya at the banks of a river can also be found in other paintings of the city. This is evident in the miniature paintings illustrating the *Kanchana Chitra Ramayana*, or the golden illustrated Ramayana of Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, which was patronised by the royal court of Banaras between 1796 and 1814.²⁷ In the *Kanchana Chitra Ramayana*'s illustrations from the *Uttarakanda*, one sees vistas of Rama's court, with the river in the foreground. This might have much to do with the nature of Banaras itself, being a city where *ghats* (riverbanks) play a prominent role. There are, however, no 'foreign ships' in the river depicted in the *Kanchana Chitra Ramayana*.

The other court depicted in the chhatri is Sugriva's court. This could be a reference to the section of the palace that Rama had allocated to Sugriva at the end of the *Yudhakanda*. It could also be Sugriva's court in Kishkinda. Here, Rama is depicted anointing Sugriva. This could work as an allegory for the hierarchies between Jaipur and Sikar, though this is mostly speculation.

This realm of paintings of the Ramayana is separated from the next band of rasamandala by a strip of diminutive architectural forms. This band depicts white buildings interspersed with red. These could be a depiction of marble and red sandstone structures. Such use of buildings as decorative motifs is novel. The rasamandala depicts the figure of Krishna

²⁶ Sheldon Pollock also discusses this idea in conjunction with notions of kingship and the space of Ayodhya in his introduction to the *Ayodhyakanda*. See Pollock (1986: 9–19).

²⁷ See <https://map-india.org/exhibition/book-of-gold-the-kanchana-chitra-ramayana-of-banaras/>. Accessed on 18 December 2025.

Figure 6
Rasamandala.



Source: The author.

multiplied numerous times, dancing with each of the gopis in a circular formation (Figure 6).

Below the rasamandala is a band of arabesque decorative patterning, beneath which is a thin strip of horizontal chevron patterning,²⁸ followed by another set of mural decorations. These are niches created through painted decorative patterns, rather than architectonic elements. These are 32 in number, corresponding to the architrave created by the lintels of the 16 pillars. One can begin reading these from the figure of Ganesh, which serves as the starting point from which to view the mural programme painted in circular structures like the chhatris. The imagery in these painted niches includes 24 avatars of Vishnu,²⁹ along with eight other images. If one moves clockwise from the image of Ganesh, we get the following framed images:

²⁸ This kind of a chevron patterning is visible in several Poddar chhatris.

²⁹ Avatar, in this context, is an incarnation of Vishnu, manifesting in the earthly realm to restore the balance between good and evil.

1. Ganesh
2. Matsya avatar
3. Varaha avatar
4. Kurma avatar
5. Narsingh avatar
6. Vaman avatar
7. Parsuram avatar
8. Rama avatar
9. Krishna avatar
10. The three main deities of Jagannath Puri Temple
11. Kalki avatar
12. Ved Vyasa, also considered a part of the 24 avatars of Vishnu
13. Prithu chasing Dharti
14. Gajendra Moksh (The salvation of the elephant Gajendra through an intervention by Garuda and Vishnu)
15. Hamsa avatar, that is, the swan/goose avatar
16. This is an image of a bearded Rajput, sitting on a throne with a halo encircling his head. He seems to be giving injunctions to two other men in front of him. I have been unable to recognise which avatar this could be.
17. Yagna avatar
18. Rishabha Nath or Buddha avatar. Both figures are part of the 24 avatars of Vishnu and share certain iconographic details, thus making it difficult to ascertain which one is depicted here.
19. Hayagriva avatar
20. Dhruv avatar
21. Dhanvantri avatar
22. Pilgrims at a shrine, possibly Badrinath
23. Dattatreya avatar
24. Kapila avatar
25. Four Kumaras are sages who roam the earth as children. In the *Ramacharitmanas*, the four visit Rama along with Hanuman. This is what is depicted in the chhatri.
26. Next to this is another shrine, with three goddesses. These could be ancestral guardian deities.
27. Shiva Family
28. Dadu Dayal with followers (Figure 7).
29. Krishna's Daan Leela, where he playfully collects toll from the milkmaids of Vrindavan.

30. Durga on a lion with her two attendants, Kala and Gora Bhairav.
31. Rajput on a well-decorated horse, with his retinue made up of British soldiers and holding his sigel. This could be a historical figure from the region, possibly the Rao Raja of Sikar.
32. Krishna stealing the clothes of the gopis, that is, *cheerharan*.

The painted frames seem to be a mix of mythological and historical personages, including saints. Amongst these, there are some figures that are more linked to the merchant community. In Figure 7, the white clothes and the cap appear to correspond to images commonly associated with Dadu Dayal (1544–1603), who becomes an important link between the Bhakti traditions of the long 19th century and merchant identity.³⁰ According to Tyler Williams (2022), hagiographic works on Dadu Dayal establish a connection between him and the merchant community. Praying to Dadu Dayal in moments when a merchant's cargo on a ship is about to be lost was believed to lead to a miraculous rescue. Such instances allow Dadu Dayal to almost become a patron saint who can provide miraculous protection for the goods of merchants, particularly on boats (Williams 2022: 310).³¹

³⁰ Dadu Dayal was a poet-saint belonging to the Muslim cotton-carder caste. The difference in the appearance of Dadu Dayal between Figures 7 and 8 is intriguing. In Figure 7, Dadu Dayal's appearance is in keeping with how he has been depicted in manuscripts from the 18th century (Rajpurohit 2022: 115). In Figure 8, however, he appears to be bearded. According to Ilay Cooper, such bearded and turbaned images of Dadu Dayal were common in the wall paintings and often labelled (personal communication via email, 28 February 2026). Dalpat Raj Purohit has offered a possible explanation of such imagery being linked to the increase in Rajput followers of Dadu Dayal, which could have resulted in images where he was depicted more as a bearded man, than a clean-shaven saint, though no known visual reference to this exists in any manuscript. Personal communication via WhatsApp, 1 March 2026.

³¹ Tyler Williams highlights how instances of similar protection on the marauder-filled highways were also mentioned in the hagiographies but were associated more with another saint, Haridas Niranjani (2022: 317). One of the reasons why Haridas Niranjani is not depicted in the chhatri could be because marauders on highways were no longer a major threat, and especially since most of the overseas trade was through boats, highway robbery did not affect the fortunes of the merchants in significant ways in the late 19th century. For a historical perspective on the links between the merchant community of Rajasthan and Dadupanthis, see Rajpurohit (2022: 101–08).

Figure 7

Dadu Dayal in Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri.

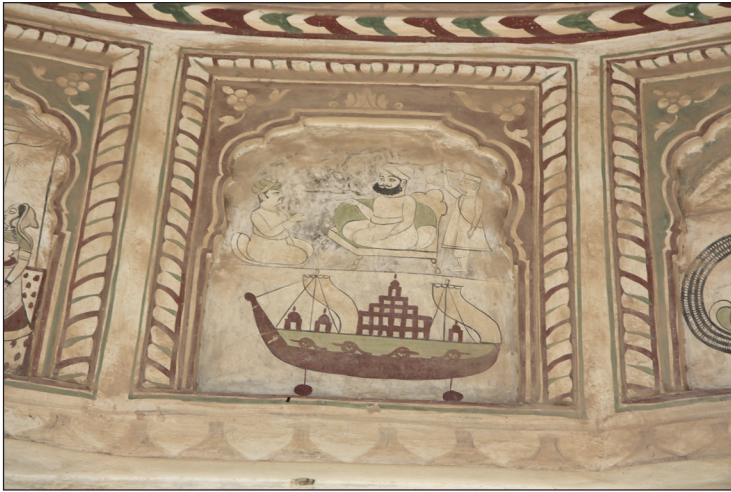


Source: The author.

There are images of Dadu Dayal in earlier Poddar chhatris as well (Figure 8),³² which link him directly with the protection of ships.³³ Figure 8 shows him sitting on a gaddi, giving injunctions to a merchant. A ship is painted in the same frame, suggesting that the interaction is a blessing for overseas trade. However, this motif is conspicuously absent from the mural programme of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri. Instead, here, Dadu Dayal is portrayed as a saint occupying his gaddi (Figure 7). It is possible

³² This has been recognised by Ilay Cooper, through labelled instances, as Dadu Dayal (personal communication via email, 11 July 2023). Ilay Cooper notes that the Poddars were dedicated to Dadu Dayal, and many of their account books open with a request for his blessings. He also highlights the links between the insurance business that the Poddars were investing in as being linked to invoking Dadu Dayal to watch over their laden ships. Personal communication via email, 28 February 2026.

³³ This is a reference to a legend found in the Dadu Janm Lila (Williams 2022: 310) which also has strong spiritual undercurrents. The idea of saving a drowning ship can have a spiritual reference of finding salvation for the soul (*ibid.*). This was also the way that devotion to saints allowed the merchants/householders to attain salvation, while being connected to the material world (*ibid.*: 318).

Figure 8*Dadu Dayal imagery from an older Poddar Chhatri in Ramgarh.***Source:** The author.

that by the 1870s, the focus had shifted, and he was associated more with his Durbar in Naraina. As Tyler Williams highlights, while Dadu Dayal himself had been peripatetic, his son Garib Das directed the monastic order from his 'gaddi' in Naraina (2022: 314). Such a depiction of Dadu Dayal sitting on a gaddi could be a reference to the monastic complex. In that sense, the scribe painted prominently in the image could be a reference to Mohandas Daftari, Dadu's scribe, or Sundar Das, a prominent disciple (Figure 7). Sundar Das had established a monastery of Dadupanthi saints in the town of Fatehpur, which was also part of the Sikar district (Williams 2022: 322). However, while Dadu Dayal may have been acknowledged in the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, the task of protecting the ships is also linked to the Vaishnav God Rama. Similar to the depiction of the river beneath Rama's court at Ayodhya, in the band of images below the painted niches, one of the depictions shows Rama and Lakshman protecting a *yagna* (ritual chanting around a sacred fire) from demons, under the supervision of Guru Vishwamitra (Figure 9). On one end of this scene, there is a river which has a ship/boat that seems similar to the ones in

Figure 9

Rama and Lakshman protecting a river, and consequently a merchant ship, from demons.



Source: The author.

the water below the Ayodhya scene. The figures of Rama and Lakshman are repeated here, and it would seem that they are protecting not only the sage's yagna but also the merchant's trade interests (Figure 9).

The next sequence presents 16 sunken niches and 16 protruding niches. This is the lowest band; the protruding niches are populated by generic figures holding flowers. This includes firangi paintings. The fact that these have been incorporated in the lowest bands might suggest a similarity with the paintings in the Badal Mahal in Bundi, as well as the more profane character of such generic portraits of men and women.³⁴ The sunken niches, on the other hand, are also decorated with narrative depictions. The most compelling amongst these is that of Bhishma from the Mahabharata, lying on a bed of arrows, as Arjun creates a fountain of water with his arrow to quench the former's thirst.

IV

Ragamala and rasamandala iconography

Another aspect of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri shows the opulence of the Poddar merchants who commissioned it. Two sets of pillars in the chhatri create 16 subsidiary domes, which could be a more ornate reference to the *panchratna* dome style of Mughal tombs with subsidiary domes arranged around the central dome. These subsidiary domes in the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri contain labelled ragamala imagery

³⁴ Ilay Cooper (2014) has traced early depictions of agents of the East India Company on the walls of Shekhawati.

Figure 10

Subsidiary dome with a labelled depiction of Ragini Padmavati.



Source: The author.

(Figure 10), along with other paintings like the barahmasa (12 months/moods of the seasons) and love stories popular in the region.

The presence of the ragamala paintings and the rasamandala, along with the use of the chhatri to memorialise an ancestor, firmly places the merchants in a framework that allowed them to appropriate the structures and iconography of the Rajput nobility. In the case of the ragamala paintings, it is the idea of ‘taste’ as a marker of class and refinement which gets evoked. As art historian Molly Emma Aitken states, by the mid-16th century, when the ragamala paintings were being extensively illustrated, these were not so much about musicians referencing these to perform music. Rather, ‘the Ragamala’s poetic and pictorial dimensions may have been valued, instead, primarily as a form of elite knowledge, a sign of the courtier’s taste for music, and an attribute of the gentleman patron’ (2013: 37). The ragamala, as per Ed Rothfarb, is ‘arguably the most distinctive aspect of Rajput iconography...associated with Rajput as well as elite Hindu patrons’ (2012: 137).

An early example of imagery from the ragamala being used in a Rajput cenotaph comes from Raja Man Singh Kachwaha's cenotaph at Amber (c. 1614).³⁵ The only inclusion here, though, seems to be of Todi Ragini, evinced from the presence of the two deer along with a woman (Cimino 2001: 24). A similar figure, that may be associated with the Todi Ragini, is also present in Sardul Singh Chhatri (1750) in Parsurampura. In the central dome of the chhatri in Parsurampura, there are multiple winged figures in a circular formation, holding musical instruments. Some of these figures hold stringed instruments such as a double-chested fiddle, also known as a *surando*. There are deer painted next to such figures, which could be a reference to the Todi Ragini, while the wings make them celestial beings such as angels. As per Cimino, such flying creatures are associated with the myth of Solomon, and the Mughal emperors, particularly Jahangir, were keen on comparing themselves with this mythical king (ibid.: 16).³⁶ This established motif of kingship was widely adopted by the Rajput kings. Discussing the depiction of dancing figures and musicians in chhatris of the Kachwaha rulers of Jaipur, the art historian Melia Belli Bose notes that these refer to the traditional responsibilities of kings, which included supporting the arts such as 'music, dancing, acting and the courtesan's craft' (2015: 58–59).³⁷ In the merchant chhatris of Shekhawati, this imagery, thus, references the cenotaphs of Rajput nobility, as well as the acquisition of royal responsibilities by the merchant community, in the context of the towns of Shekhawati.

Another set of 'musical' motifs in the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri is the rasamandala, which features painted figures of Krishna and the gopis in side-profile (Figure 6). Here, Krishna has been painted multiple times so that he is seen dancing with each gopi. The gopis are dressed in the fashion of Rajasthani miniatures, while Krishna wears a flared *jama* (upper garment) tied around his waist. The backdrop includes a carpeted surface and a boundary, giving it the appearance of a circumscribed garden. It provides a foreground and a background for the figures in

³⁵ For more details, see Rothfarb (2012: 137) and Cimino (2001: 24).

³⁶ For a further elaboration of ideas of Mughal kingship associated with such figures, see Koch (2015).

³⁷ For an elaboration of this, see Haynes (1994). One can also associate the fresco painting tradition as linked to a similar patronage of the arts.

the rasamandala, creating a sense of depth and recession as if the rasamandala were projecting outwards towards the viewer standing below.

The art historian Ed Rothfarb (2012) observes that one of the earliest extant architectural representations of the rasamandala in relief in a Rajput building is the 17th-century depiction on the ceiling of a suite in Govind Mahal in Datia, patronised by the ruler Bir Singh Dev. Rothfarb traces the adoption of Vaishnavite imagery in Rajput architecture and the translation of such image from paper to the decorative framework of walls to the growth of the Vaishnav Bhakti movement at the turn of the 15th century (ibid.: 134–35). Both the ragamala and the rasamandala are common as palatine decorations. The most prominent example of both these motifs in the context of wall paintings comes from Bundi. Some of the earliest murals on these themes are evident in the Badal Mahal.³⁸ The two rasamandalas at Bundi, one from c.1620 in the Badal Mahal and another from c.1630 in the Ratan Mahal, provide interesting insights about these motifs within palatine decorative mural schemes. While there is some disagreement about whether the Badal Mahal was indeed a bedchamber or not,³⁹ if indeed it was, it would give a particular meaning to the rasamandala motif. The evocation of the night in the Badal Mahal rasamandala is distinctive. The lotus in its centre becomes a moon, and the dancers are in a lush outdoor setting. The scene is illuminated by painted winged figures depicted as holding candles. It is watched by the deities and avatars of Vishnu, painted in parts of the squinch net that surround the rasamandala. Ed Rothfarb notes that this theme from the *Bhagavatapurana* was well established as a palatine decoration by this time (2012: 135).

The meanings of the rasamandala and ragamala are constituted by the kind of architectural spaces they decorate.⁴⁰ In the context of the chhatri, while the appropriation of motifs and decorative art associated with royalty reifies the status of the merchants in the same way as the structure of the chhatri does, the rasamandala and ragamala are also connected to the sonics of apotheosising the ancestor. The figural paintings

³⁸ For research on the paintings in the Badal Mahal in Bundi, see Bautze (2002) and Beach (2008).

³⁹ Rothfarb says that Badal Mahal was a bed chamber (2012: 135).

⁴⁰ When depicted in the zenana of a haveli, along with the train, the rasamandala becomes a motif that elevates the experience of separation from the beloved. See Agarwal (2025).

in the 17th- and 18th-century tombs of Larkana district in Sindh, constructed during the rule of the Kalhoro rulers, become important sources in this regard and yield insights into the significance of images of dance, music and folk tales in sepulchral architecture. The ethno-musicologist Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro associates the presence of such images with the traditions of performance in the Sindh region, highlighting how such imagery is commonly found in the Mughal, Rajput, Pahari and Deccani paintings as well (2010: 202).⁴¹

The meanings produced of and by paintings in a manuscript or palatine architecture, *vis-à-vis* wall paintings in a merchant haveli or mortuary monument, might be linked but remain significantly different. For instance, the rasamandala motif, when depicted in the inner courtyard of a haveli, in conjunction with a motif of mobility such as the train, creates a narrative of separation and reunion (Agarwal 2025: 14–18). This motif might have a slightly different significance in memorialising architectural spaces. For instance, it could represent a celebratory tone for the person memorialised ascending to a heavenly realm, while also evoking ideas of separation from those left behind, again evoking ideas of separation (from the earthly) and union (with the divine). This is closely linked to the rasamandala imagery and Bhakti traditions. The rasamandala is a popular motif in the chhatris of Shekhawati,⁴² possibly also because of how it lends itself well, aesthetically, to the circular structure of the dome.

V

Conclusion

This brief examination of the mural programme of the Ramgopal Poddar Chhatri highlights how patronage of the arts and the commissioning of painted structures were linked to the wealth and importance of the merchant community in the Shekhawati region in the 19th century. Much of this conspicuous display of wealth was premised upon appropriating structures and iconography associated with the Rajput nobility of the region. Nonetheless, an exploration of motifs such as ships and Dadupanthi saints

⁴¹ For the depiction of the folk tale Leela-Chanesar, which could have parallels with the depictions of the Raas Leela in Vaishnavite contexts, see Kalhoro (2010: 203).

⁴² This includes Sardul Singh's chhatri, as well as the Taknet Chhatri and the Taenwalon ki Chhatri from Churu, amongst several others.

allows one to read an incorporation of imagery associated with the merchant community into this framework as well. The 1872 CE Ramgopal Poddar Chhatri forms interesting links and divergences with the iconography in earlier chhatris, particularly that of the 1750 chhatri of Sardul Singh, which uses imagery linked to Rajasthani scroll paintings to commemorate the Thakur of Jhunjhunu. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, chhatris started borrowing imagery from mechanically reproduced sources such as prints and photographs. A different idiom of merchant self-assertion emerges from the study of these later chhatris. The Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, thus, remains an important point of reference to understand these developments in iconography.

There is also a political import to this investigation into the history and iconography of the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri. Recently, there have been attempts to rename the chhatri as ‘Ramayan Chhatri’. I have been doing fieldwork in the Shekhawati region since 2013. It was only around 2018 that I began hearing about the Ramayan Chhatri in Ramgarh. On checking with Ilay Cooper, who surveyed the region in the 1980s, naming each building as it was known then, he also found this renaming incorrect.⁴³ In Cooper’s survey, the chhatri is named as Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri. I can confidently say that Ramayan Chhatri is a new name being used for the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri, linked to a simplification that sometimes accompanies tourism and heritage practices. While the central dome of the chhatri indeed has several scenes from the Ramayana, the chhatri itself has several other paintings, such as the ragamala, rasamandala, barahmasa, scenes from the Mahabharata, as well as the avatars of Vishnu, as has been discussed in this article. Furthermore, 19th-century sketches and stencils collected from Shekhawati—presently in the collection of MAP Museum in Bengaluru—establish that paintings depicting episodes from the Ramayana were a common theme among chhatri murals.⁴⁴ Renaming a specific chhatri as the Ramayan Chhatri breaks the historical links that the Ram Gopal Poddar Chhatri has with the other Poddar chhatris, as well as reducing its complex paintings to one subject. I am hopeful that further research into the wall paintings of Shekhawati will counter such trends, which can hardly be considered politically neutral.

⁴³ Personal communication via email. 21 June 2025.

⁴⁴ For a preliminary exploration of this, see <https://criticalcollective.in/ArtHistoryListing.aspx?id=4>. Accessed on 18 December 2025.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Ilay Cooper and the anonymous reviewers for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article. I would also like to thank Dalpat Raj Purohit for the inputs regarding the iconography of Dadu Dayal.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Saumya Agarwal  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1787-0592>

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, Saumya. 2025. 'Pauses and Mobilities: The Dichotomies of Place-Making Explored Through the Painted Buildings of Shekhawati, Rajasthan (c. 1850–1940).' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 48 (6): 1432–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2025.2576410>
- Agrawal, Govind. 1974. *Churu Mandal ka Shodhpurna Itihas*. Churu: Lok Sanskriti Shodh Sansthan, Nagar-Shri.
- Aitken, Molly Emma. 2013. 'The Laud Rāgamālā Album, Bikaner, and the Sociability of Subimperial Painting.' *Archives of Asian Art* 63 (1): 27–58.
- Bautze, Joachim. 2000. 'Early Painting at Bundi.' *Marg* 51 (3): 12–25.
- Beach, Milo Cleveland. 2008. 'Wall-Paintings at Bundi: Comments and a New Discovery.' *Artibus Asiae* 68 (1): 101–43.
- Belli Bose, Melia. 2015. *Royal Umbrellas of Stone. Memory, Politics, and Public Identity in Rajput Funerary Art*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bharadwaj, Lakshman. 2003. *Aapno Ramgarh: Ramgarh ka Tahthyapoorna, Shodhparak, Paramparik Itihaas*. Maharashtra: Lakshman Bharadwaj.
- Boileau, A. H. E. 1837. *Personal Narrative of a Tour through the Western States of Rajwara in 1835; Comprising Beekaner, Jesulmer, and Jodhpooor, with the Passage of the Great Desert and a Brief Visit to the Indus and to Buhawalpoor; Accompanied by Various Tables and Memoranda: Statistical, Philological and Geographical*. Calcutta: N. Grant Tank Square.

- Cimino, Rosa Maria. 2001. *Wall Paintings of Rajasthan: Amber and Jaipur*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.
- Cooper, Ilay. 1987. 'INTACH Survey of Shekhawati Buildings.' Unpublished archival source, INTACH Office, New Delhi.
- . 2009. *The Painted Towns of Shekhawati*. New Delhi: Prakash Books.
- . 2013. 'Shekhawati's Architecture and the Building Boom.' In *Shekhawati: Havelis of the Merchant Princes*, edited by Abha Narain Lambah, 32–43. Mumbai: The Marg Foundation.
- . 2014. *Rajasthan: Exploring Painted Shekhawati*. Delhi: Niyogi Books.
- Cummings, Cathleen. 2011. 'Composition as Narrative: Sāhībūdīn's Paintings for the Ayodhyākāṇḍa of the Jagat Singh Rāmāyaṇa.' *Ars Orientalis* 40: 162–203.
- Hardgrove, Anne. 2004. *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Haynes, Edward. S. 1994. 'Patronage for the arts and the rise of Alwar State.' In *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity (Vol. 2)*, edited by Karine Schomer, Joan L. Erdman, Deryck O. Lodrick, and Lloyd I. Rudolph, 265–89. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Kalhoru, Zulfiqar Ali. 2010. 'Representations of Music and Dance in the Islamic Tombs of Sindh, Pakistan.' *Music in Art* 35 (1–2): 201–17.
- Koch, Ebba. 2015. 'Solomonic Angels in a Mughal Sky: The Wall Paintings of the Kala Burj at the Lahore Fort Revisited and Their Reception in Later South Asian and Qajar art.' In *Spirits in Transcultural Skies: Auspicious and Protective Spirits in Artefacts and Architecture Between East and West*, edited by Niels Gutschow and Katharina Weiler, 151–71. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Laidlaw, James. 1995. *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society Among the Jains*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mishra, Ratan Lal. 1990. *Epigraphical Studies of Rajasthan*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Pollock, Sheldon, tr. 1986. *Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India. Volume II, Ayodhyakanda*. Edited by Robert P. Goldman. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Rajpurohit, Dalpat. 2022. *Sundar ke Swapn: Aarambhik Aadhunika, Dadupanth aur Sundardas ki Kavita*. Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Rothfarb, Edward Leland. 2012. *Orchha and Beyond: Design at the Court of Raja Bir Singh Dev Bundela*. Mumbai: Marg Foundation.
- Saraogi, Alka. 2022 [1998]. *Kali-Katha Via Bypass*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Sharma, Jhabarmal. 2015 [1922]. *Sikar Ka Itihaas*. 2nd ed. Delhi: Rajasthan Granthagar Jodhpur.
- Shokoohy, Mehrdad, and Natalie H. Shokoohy. 2001. 'The Chatrī in Indian Architecture: Persian Wooden Canopies Materialised in Stone.' *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 15: 129–50.
- Lefebvre, Rosalind J., trans. 1984. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India: Vol. 4. Kiskindhākāṇḍa*. Edited by Robert P. Goldman. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [Original work published sometime between 800 and 600 BCE].
- Williams, Tyler W. 2022. 'Literary and Religious History from the Middle: Merchants and Bhakti in Early Modern North India.' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 59 (3): 299–34.