

**Chandra, Y. (2021). The Tale of the Horse: A History of India  
On Horseback: Picador India. 336 pp. Rs. 464.**

Chandra's work brings a breath of fresh air in the field of Indian history writing. It deals with Indian history making horse the pivot around which everything else revolves. She talks about the role of the horse in Indian culture and mythology. She attributes the introduction of horses in India to the Indo-Aryans who migrated to the subcontinent from the North and the West in waves from circa 1500 BCE. The book is divided into three parts and nine chapters. The first part of the book deals with cultic importance of the horse in different religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. It then tells us about the sea and caravan trade in horses. The author informs us about 'droves after droves' of horses reaching the court of Akbar from Central Asia and Iran. Infact horses from Central Asia including Khorasan and northern Afghanistan, constituted the chief item of import in the overland trade until the seventeenth century (p.37).

The Mughal rulers supported the trading activities. Caravanserais were set up on trade routes for the traders to provide shelter to them. These caravanserais contained quarters for caretakers and stores. They also had separate place for the animals brought by the traders. The author provides the example of a caravanserai called Nur Mahal near Jalandhar in Punjab. Named after its patron Nur Jahan. Different activities took place at these caravanserais and the author is successful in painting a picture which almost takes one in the middle of the hustle and bustle of these past day motels. We find that farriers selling horseshoes, sellers of grass and hay, cloth sellers, musicians, dancing boys and girls, barbers, tailors, washer men and prostitutes all gave their services to the traders and travelers at the serais.

Horses were also brought to India through sea. They were transported from the ports of Persian gulf and the Red Sea. The author empathetically brings out the ordeal faced by horses on these journeys. They were bled before the journey 'to render them extremely tame and without any vice', forced to stand throughout, secured with straps (p.57). For the rulers of Deccan and South India sea trade in horses was a better way to obtain horses than getting them from overland routes. Traveller and horse trader Athanasius Nikitin, described the port of Dabhol on the Konkan coast as a bustling meeting point for horses from Central Asia as well as the Middle East. The two main powers of the south, the

Bahamani and Vijayanagara rulers, competed to buy up the shipments of Arab-Persian horses. The sea trade in horses between the Middle East and South India lasted nearly a millennium since about the eleventh century until the twentieth.

The book provides us important information about the native breed of horses in India. Abul Fazl himself records that ‘Hindustan was breeding horses of its own by the late sixteenth century’ (p.81). The author argues that horses could be bred in India and it was well established by thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as against the views held by many foreign travelers and writers. Indeed as author says horses reared in the subcontinent were better suited and easily adapted to its climate. In the Mughal army too 30 to 40 percent of horses were homegrown. An important argument is made by the author about how colonial rule proved detrimental to native horse breeds. Breeding of native breeds such as the Kathiawari was sidelined (p.56).

This work goes beyond the trade and warfare paradigm in relation to horses. It gives us a multifaceted picture of the horse in Indian history. Everyday information such as foreign travelers spending a night in cowshed and surviving on peacock meat is given. How the popular hindi idiom ‘Ghoda Bech ke Soya’ is related to a horse’s sale by a trader is explained by the author in terms of the hard journey that horse traders undertook to sell their horses.

The second part of the book talks about Rajputs and the role of horse in their history, culture, evolution, and power. The Rajputs were devoid of the supply of horses until the Delhi Sultanate ruled but from the sixteenth century it changed. The author brings out the symbolic importance of horse in the Rajput culture. She as many others have done recently identifies that Rajputs became a closed caste group only in the fifteenth-sixteenth century and their ascent to this position was based on performing services and establishing marital relations with older and established lineages. The author describes the role of Colonel Tod and his work *‘Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan’* in the making of the Rajput identity as the warrior on horseback.

Horse played an important role in establishing the Rajput power and identity. The book also gives us details about horse breeding in Rajasthan. An interesting point brought to light by the author is that in Rajasthan along with stallions, mares too were given similar status. We get information about past sports such as ‘chaugan’ (polo) being played

by the Mughal emperor and his close aides. It became a way to exercise the tactics of the battlefield. It made them better riders. Matches were organized in the night too with the help of Masaals.

The author not only shares the pain of the warriors on the battlefield but that of war animals too. The author shows through paintings that women of elite Rajput households knew the art of riding and practised equestrianism within the confinement of purdah. Three paintings from Jodhpur are cited as example that show women playing polo (p.184). The book mentions Shalihotra and its role in the maintenance and keeping of horses in India. The horses are divided in this particular text on the basis of castes such as ‘the horse that emits sweat as sweet smelling as flowers through the different seasons is considered of the Brahmin caste’. However Shalihotra does give contain relevant information such as training and managing of horses, advice on examining horses and telling their age by scrutinizing their teeth and about different diseases that can affect a horse.

The third part of the book gives us information about horse fairs and role of marginalized groups in the history of horses. The people who were appointed as caretakers and stable hands never quite get the attention of a scholar. The author tries to fill that lacuna. However a better reading of various bahis (revenue registers) of eighteenth century Jodhpur state would have made the work more holistic. We find information about the organization and payment given to different classes of non-combatants that served the Jodhpur state. But the author is successful in conveying to the reader that history of Rajasthan is not just history of Rajputs but also includes history of various communities that inhabited the land and contributed to its culture and magnanimity. The detailing about horses from its feed to its tack (bridle, saddle, bit etc.) shows the mastery of the writer over her craft. In the end it can be said that its time to shed the colonial mindset that looked down upon the colonies and write histories of the subcontinent by moving beyond the Eurocentric view.

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