

The Bohar Tribe of Cholistan: Anthropology of Cultural History

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Abstract

Cholistanis are unfortunate that after James Tod no historian paid attention to their history and culture. Some works produced by un-trained historians are available but they contain incorrect information. Cholistani tribes and castes have been ignored and no standard work is available on Cholistani Tribes. The present writer has already produced three articles on cultural Anthropology of Hindu tribe of Cholistan. In this connection an attempt has been made to produce Article on Muslim tribe of Cholistan. Bohars Rajput is an important Muslim tribe of Cholistan but no written history of this tribe has yet been appeared. Thus the present article heavily depends upon oral history. Observation, interview, and questionnaire were the main tools to collect the data. Folklorists of the Bohar tribe proved very helpful to finalize the article. Keeping in view the space religious and social life of the Bohar along with their origin has been highlighted.

Introduction

Bohar tribe is one of the Muslim tribes of Cholistan mainly residing in Lesser-Cholistan. The total area of Cholistan is 10,399 Sq. miles and is spread from East to West. It comprised mainly over Bahawalpur Division of Punjab Province. It includes 1580 Sq. miles area of Bahawalnagar

District, 6254 Sq. miles of Bahawalpur District and 2555 Sq. miles of Rahim Yar Khan District. The desert is divided into two parts: Greater Cholistan and Lesser Cholistan¹

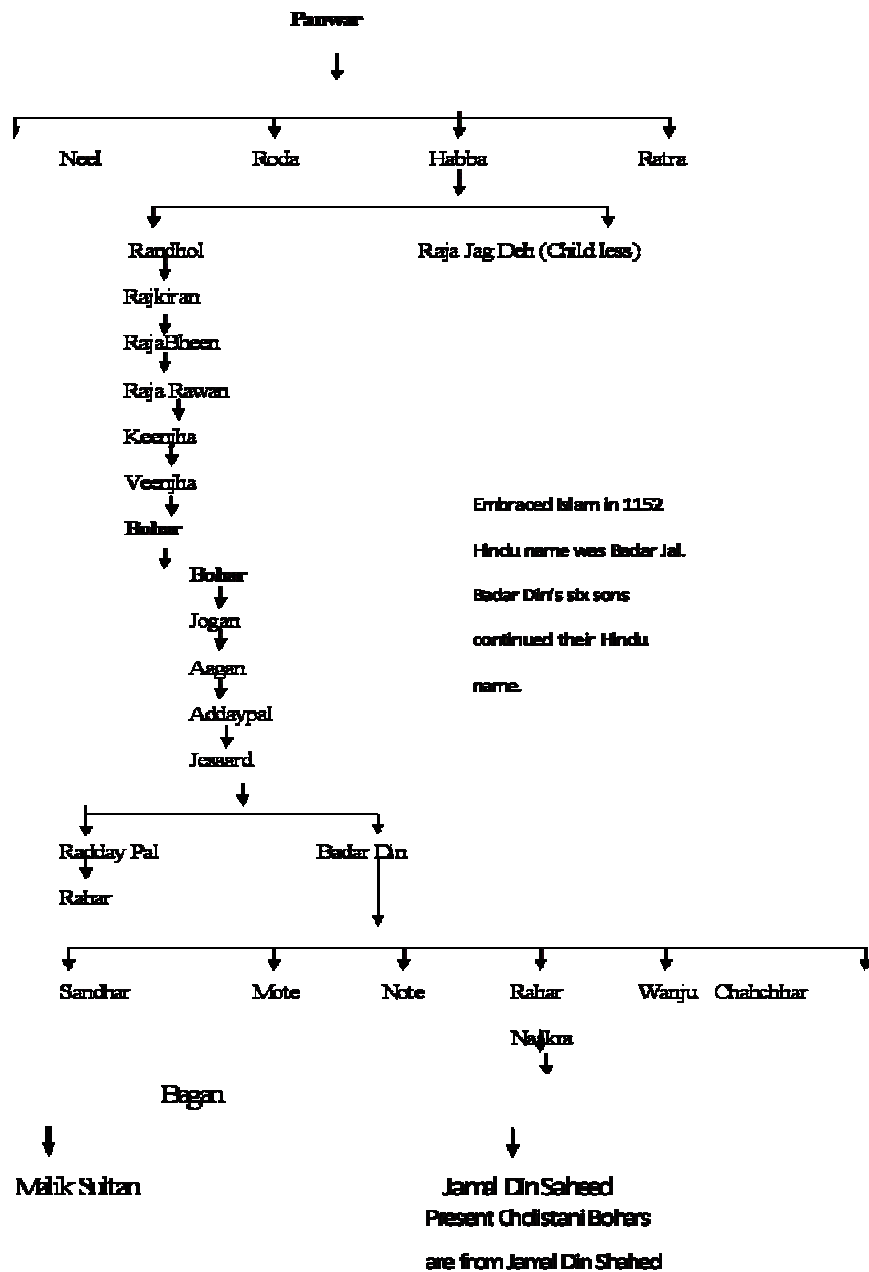
The scope of this study is limited to Lesser Cholistan where Bohar tribe is settled in abundance. Lesser Cholistan comprises an area of 3000 Sq. miles and lies in South West of the most recent course of defunct *Hakra* River and extends to the border of Indian Rajasthan. Its area starts from the Eastern edge of District Bahawalnagar and lasts at the end of District Bahawalpur. The climate of the area is arid, hot, sub-tropical and *Monsoonal*. It is characterized by great annual and daily variation in temperature and rain fall.²

Origin and Early History

Generally, Bohar tribe of Cholistan is considered as a branch of Panwar tribe of Rajput origin, but Bohars claim for themselves an independent original *Bohar identity*. They are friendly and peaceful people wandering with their livestock in the Jungle. They speak *Obheychar (Eastern)* dialect and own a Saraiki ethnic identity, like, Cholistan's Bawaria Hindu tribe of Marwari origin who claim a Persian linguistic identity. However across the Sutlej river language of the people was Multani. Some Bohars speak Punjabi dialect of Mamon Kanjan area. This is also the language of the area of Minchin Abad, Bahawalnagar and both sides of the river Sutlej.³ They name their Folklorists as *Dada* (grand-father). Their *Kammies* (servants) are always respected by them. Some of their *Kammies* have more than hundred sheep and goats in Cholistan.⁴ But Bohars are not jealous with their *Kammies*. They continuously help and support them at every occasion and whenever they needed.

As per 2015 Survey, the total population of Bohar tribe is enumerated to 20000. The origin of the tribe is not difficult to ascertain as Bohars' folklorist have kept their genealogy preserved as it was common among the Rajput tribes.

The genealogy⁵ of the Bohar is as follows:



and Jasailmir regions of Rajasthan. The exact time of Bohars migration from Bikaner to Cholistan is not known. It is believed that they took seven hundred years to establish current settlement in Cholistan. Their first known migration from Bikaner to Bahawalpur is traced back to the times of Hazrat Jalal Surkhposh Bukhari of Uch in thirteenth century A.D. However, Bohars' first documented migration to Bahawalpur was the result of famine in Bikaner in 1897-98. The decolonization of South Asia in 1947 compelled the mass scale migration from Rajasthan to Pakistan. Yet Cholistan is populated by a large number of Bohars.⁶ However, the Bahawalpuri Bohar and Bikaneri Bohar do not intermarry, rather like to marry among close relatives. They award a *Kangan* is awarded to a man of repute. Generally, the name of elder son is fixed after the name of Grandfather. At the time of dust storm the Bohar shout the slogan of self pride: '*I am Bohar, I am Bohar*'.

Belief System of Bohar Tribe of Cholistan.

Cholistani Bohars *Sunni* Muslims and follow the jurisprudence of Imam Abu Hanifa. As they are living a nomadic life, they are irregular in the observation of religious activity. However, elders living at home are more punctual in religious performance as compare to younger generation. Some of them do not even observe Eid festivity and spend time with their cattle in the desert. Most of them do not know even fundamentals of Islam although one can find some *Hafiz* and *Hajis* among them. As a nomadic tribe they were used to establish temporary places of religious activity and there is no trace of any mosque back to one hundred years at any toba (water reservoir).

The Bohars not only respect but love the *Sufis*. They are proud of the number of *Sufis* as compare to other Cholistani tribes. Dhanan Shaheed⁷, Jamal Din Shaheed⁸ Langar Shah, Rangilay Shah and Khando Shaheed⁹ are their famous *shrines*. They frequently visit these shrines and pay

offers (manoti) in the form of sacrifice of their sheep, goats and cows after fulfill their vows. However they do not like to visit the shrines of other tribes. The purpose of *Manoti* reflects the desire of health, wealth and child, etc. Even the Hindu Parhar from Chhatar Garh (India) visits the shrine of Jamal Din Shaheed at Fort Marot,¹⁰ to seek health recovery and pay offers (manoti).¹¹ Finding their desires fulfill, the Bohars also visit the shrine of Khando Shaheed on 9th of every lunar month, or Jamal Din Shaheed on 14th or the shrine of Dhanan Shaheed on 22nd. On these days, they do not sell milk but distribute it among their relatives, friends and neighbors free of cost. They vow to offer seven goats if they were blessed with son. At times of trouble, Bohar tribe offer *Laakh Darood*. For, they invite their relatives and friends to read Darood Sharif making total one Lac. Bohars also spend nine nights, called *Naon-Rata*, to solve their problems at the shrine of Jamal Din Shaheed, Khando Shaheed or Dhanan Shaheed. To steal anything from any shrine is regarded an act leading to the lost his eyes.

Like the saints, *Pir* (spiritual Guide) dominates the life of Cholistani Bohar. Each family has its own *Pir* who annually visits his followers and it is believed resolves the problems of the followers. The visit is celebrated with festivity. No *Mureed* (follower) is allowed to sit on *Charpai* in front of *Pir*.¹² The Pirs are descendants of the Prophet and often chant the slogan of *Maula Ali* and put *Kara* in their hands. *Pir* is presented with money, cloth, cow, sheep and goat etc., on his visit to Mureed's house by Mureed. Mureed seeks help of *Pir* at the time of drought, for the male issue, to perform spiritual guidance, to resolve mutual conflicts between Mureeds and such other problems.

In most of the cases Bohars are not sectarian but reflect influences of neighboring sects. They love the family of the prophet (*Ahl-e-Bait*). Superstitions are not common among Bohars, as it has been observed in other Cholistani tribes. They have no fear of sorcery and *Jinn*, perhaps they do not

believe in evil forces¹³. The Bohars are proud that Allah Ditta Bohar of *Toba Lakho Wala* and Gul Muhammad Bohar of *Toba Banna* performed Hajj when there were no modern facilities to travel. On their return they also visited the Holy Shrines in Iraq and Iran. They are proud to be the Hafiz e Quran and claim that number of *Hafiz* in their tribe is larger than any other Cholistani tribe.

In the north of Fort Marot there is an ancient graveyard of Bohar tribe. At least one dead body of each Bohar family is buried there. The shrine of Jamal Din Shaheed is also located in this graveyard along with the stone called *Shah-e-Mardan*. The Bohars visit these places in the month of Muharram.¹⁴

Generally, Bohars are fearless and have lesser level of belief in superstitions. They consider the singing of birds in the evening or at night a misfortune. The travelers being crossed by a women going for water to Ponds is also considered not good. The widow and childless women are looked upon as unfortunate. They are not allowed to attend marriage or birth ceremonies.¹⁵ Donkeys are kept away from the cattle at evening. It is mandatory for groom to go to mosque and perform Nawafil before other marriage ceremonies.

SOCIAL LIFE

The Bohars life is full of rituals and customs. Behaving prominently in front of an elder of the tribe in a gathering is badly responded by the community.¹⁶ The birth of a baby boy is prominently celebrated among the Bohars as a blessing of God against the birth of a baby girl. Number of ceremonies and rituals are performed when son is born in any Bohar family. Newly born baby is given his first diet locally known *Ghutti* by his father's younger sister. If father of a newly born baby has no sister then his first female cousin performs this ritual. In reward, the lady is usually is granted a goat or a sheep. The newly born baby wears an old shirt stitched out of clothes of his grandfather with a wish that new baby would

also enjoy a long life like his grandfather. After seven days of the birth of a baby, his head is shaved off. Hair of a baby is weighed against silver and then silver is given to the poor. This ceremony is performed by their family's barber who in turn is rewarded with money and a sheep or a goat. Shave of head and circumcision ceremony are not held on the same day. The family barber is responsible for circumcision and once again he is given something like money, cloth, goat etc. At the birth of a baby Bohar family goes to the nearest shrine to fulfill their vow. In Bohar Tribe it is the right of the grandfather, if he is alive, or an old male member of the family to decide the name of the boy. This given name is unchangeable however child is also given a nick name. This ceremony called *Shadi* is performed with great pump and show. At least two goats are sacrificed to prepare meal for the guest. Sometimes there is musical program. The newly born baby is ornamented like groom. He is offered money, cloth and gold. However, on the birth of a girl not a single goat is sacrificed nor any type of ceremony is arranged.¹⁷

Nai is a fundamental institution of Cholistan's social life, responsible to distribute and organize the invitations (Mamola) of participation in marriage ceremonies.

The first step toward marriage is *mangni* (engagement). Traditionally, the marriage was arranged before the birth of the children of two brothers. However, now this ceremony is considered the formal commitment for marriage of two children.. It is reported that some marriages were held just by putting hand on the belly of a pregnant women that whatever she had would be Ones son-in-law or daughter-in-law. The engagements are arranged by an old man of the tribe who is honored and respected by girl's side or by elder brother who is respected by younger. The parents of a boy go to the home of a girl for a short where some close family members are invited. When both sides are agreed then some family members and relatives from boy side are welcomed to the girl's home. Here yellow colored water is thrown on the guest

as token of welcome. A pair of shoes and cloth with red *Dupatta* is presented to the proposed girl. This is the sign of final commitment, often these engagements are on permanent basis and newer broken. Before the fixation of date for marriage father of groom invites all of his relatives at his home and seeks pardon if someone feels unhappy the proposed marriage. He tries to keep his relative ready to participate in the marriage. Date of marriage is never fixed unless dispute or problems are resolved. All relative contribute one or two rupees or three kg *Desi Ghee* as a token of help to the groom family. To fix the date for marriage the parents and relatives of the boy move to the girl's home and request them for the date to be fixed. Date of marriage is fixed by the mutual agreement of the both families and sweet is distributed by the boy's family. The date for marriage is fixed for thirty to forty days. During these days the boy holds an iron stick and especially ties *Gana (Red Threads)* around his wrist. The bride also holds knife and ties *Gana*. Then both boy and girl go into the state of seclusion till the day of the marriage. This ritual is locally called *Mayun*.

Before a few days of marriage, boy's mother or sister goes to the girl's house and performs a ritual called *Mehndi Khulna*. By this function marriage program begins. In the houses of boy and girl there are *Music* program in the evening and night. Singing songs and *Jhomar* (Dance) program is common among all Cholistanis. Boy and girl both are not allowed to see each other until the night of marriage. About one Hundred years ago, said Bohar Representative, there was a collective marriage tradition. Marriages of four or five couples were arranged in a Cholistan. *Busri* (Sweet bread) and *Dalya* were popular dishes. Meat and rice were not served on marriage occasion. All ceremonies were held in winter because summer season is very hot in Cholistan. Since marriages were held in winter, in this connection the role of *Mangwal* was very important. He was responsible to collect fuel from forest to save the guest from cool season. For guest there had been no *Charpai* (a bed) and no blanket. Guests

were themselves responsible to arrange their bed and other clothes to save them from winter season. However *Mangwal* provided them fuel to burn it whenever they needed. Guests were used to sit in a circle in *Dahar* and another circle was made around them. This circle of *Lana* (Fire wood) was set on fire to save the guest from cold. They spent the major part of the night by singing songs and performing *Jhomar*. *Baraati* also had a folklorist with them who sitting in the mid of the gathering had to narrate the stories of the Bohar heroes.¹⁸

Rasm-e-Mehndi is next step towards marriage. This tradition usually takes place two days before the marriage. This ceremony is reserved for women. No man can take part in *Rasm-e-Mehndi*. However male members of family are used to organize a *Jhomar* outside the house. A large amount of Hina is prepared and women of the area are invited at the groom's house. These women then sing songs especially reserved for marriage ceremonies. The next day *Mehndi* is brought by groom's parents to the bride's house. They apply *Mehndi* to the bride's hands and feet. Then these women sing songs and perform *Jhomar*.

Before the departure of the *Baraat to Bride's house* the groom's sister with other women and large water pot covered with *Chunri* goes to the well or water pond to have water for taking bath of her brother after first night of marriage. He has to break a cap of that pot which is made of clay. The father of groom then offers some money or goat to the groom's sister. After taking bath locally called *Khara*, Groom wears marriage dress and receives money from his relatives. This is called *Salami*. He has also a necklace of currency notes around his neck. Then the groom with relatives goes to the mosque and performs two *Nawafil* there. Along with groom there is another boy known as *Sar-Bala* a close relative of groom. After these activities, *Baraat*, a procession of family, relatives and friends of groom, leaves for bride's home. Mother, sisters and other women say good-bye to the *Baraat* with their

prayers. Traditionally, in case of long distance, *Baraat* departs on camels' back (the ship of desert).

Baraat is received by the bride's family and relatives. However, Baratis are not allowed to enter into bride's house without permission of the bride's sister and friends who forcefully stop them at the door. The groom's father offers them presents to get permission. After that ritual of *Nikah* is observed.

Newendra is one of the most important financial tool of customary marriage. In fact it is a customary and compulsory gift or present to the groom to share the financial burden of marriage and to establish new family. It is also conceived as a token of membership of community. The relatives either of family or of ethnicity have to pay some money to the groom. Currently, at least five hundred rupees are contributed to Newendra. The highest amount of Newendra paid in cash in Cholistan is five million of rupees.¹⁹

Watta-Satta is a tradition that binds two families to marry girls with mutual agreement. One girl and one boy from one family or their relatives are married to the boy and girl from other family or their close relatives. In case of *Watta-Satta* both families decide about dowry with mutual agreement. It is reported that in the past there was no tradition of heavy expenditures for the purchase of dowry. A sheep or a goat or a cow was given as a dowry. Almost two *Charpais*, two bed sheets and two blankets were given in dowry. But nowadays it has been observed at many marriage occasions of Bohar tribe that huge amount is spent on dowry just to show the worth of the family's status in *Biradri*. Bohar tribes of Cholistan do not like polygamy and there is no concept of divorce among Bohar families.

Bohar spent a lot of money on various ceremonies i.e. marriage ceremonies and death ceremonies. Recently, 1600 kg beef was served in the *Walima* of Malangi Bohar of Basti Bohraan, Fort Abbass. Similarly, on circumcision ceremony

they spend a lot of money by arranging dancers, singers and dinner. On such ceremonies they spend freely and courageously.

Dress

Cholistani Bohars prefer to use sharp color for their dress. Men wear *Chaadar-Chola* with a turban. Five meter cloth is used for *Chola* and equal size for turban. During the days of British India, in Rajasthan, turban was an essential part of a men's dress. Visiting someone's hut or house without wearing turban on head was disliked by all Bohars.

Women use sharp color for *Ghagra*, *Choli* and *Chunri* with embroidery work on *Choli* and *Chunri*. For hundreds of years Bohar tribes have been wearing Rajasthani dress. They were used to spend fifteen to eighteen meters of cloth on *Ghagra*. However after the creation of Pakistan their dress has also changed. Presently Bohar men wear *Dhoti* and *Qameez* with a small piece of cloth on their shoulder locally known as *Saafa* or *Patka*

Bohar groom wears *Dhoti Kurta* of white colour. Some times *Shalwar-Qamees* of white colour is also used. He also wears decorated handmade shoes called *Khussa* and white coloured *Pagri* on head. Both corner of *Pagri* and *Kurta* are used to be coloured with yellow. Groom places a *Lungi* (a coloured Cloth of *Dhoote* size) on his shoulder.

Bohar bride traditionally is used to be dressed up in *Ghagra-Choli* and *Chunri* of red colour with embroidery work. However, currently *Shalwar-Qamees* and *Dupatta* are also used by the Bride.²⁰

Jewelry makes Bohar women beautiful. All Cholistani women wear almost same ornaments. Traditionally, *Bekaneri*

Bohar women were to wear one kg silver jewelry. Married women are allowed to use all types of jewelry, bracelet is not allowed to unmarried girls. Bohar women are used to used Necklace, Anklet, *Popa* (nose stud), *Bola* (Ear Ring), *Jhomar*, *Murki* (small ear rings used by babies), and finger rings etc. They have their traditional jewelers who prepare such type of jewelry. Jewelry is generally used on marriage ceremonies.²¹

Family Structure

Bohar community in Cholistan is dominated by the male. Being a head of family, man is responsible for food, cloth and shelter. Consequently, he enjoys confidence, respect and honour by his family and community. Bohar have been living under joint family system, headed by the senior male member of the family since long. This system is like a *Lira Chal Tree*, in which head of the house is the most senior male then his son and offspring. The head of the family is responsible to make all important decisions. It is his responsibility to take care and have control on his family. The senior family member in the family is responsible to look after all the house hold affairs. Though those Bohar resided in towns gets separate but 90% Cholistani Bohar like joint family system. The head of the family is also responsible to keep unite the family members. If there is any dispute at any matter the decision of the head of the family is considered final words²².

Education

Bohar are least interested in the formal modern education of their children. They prefer to have more livestock. If someone has hundred sheep he has a keen desire to increase their number. So economy comes first and education comes next in their preference. Statistics of education and literacy provided by Malik Muhammad Din in the Gazetteer of the Bahawalpur State, 1904 makes it very clear that local Cholistani population was least interest in

education. Currently, the Government of the Punjab has set up schools in Cholistan and has appointed teacher but very few students have been enrolled in different schools. It is difficult for them to send their children to schools because they do not know when they will have to move to Cholistan with bag and baggage. In the rainy days no one is left behind and the whole family moves to inner Cholistan. However, now we can find some educated Bohars around the Cholistan in the cities settlements.²³

Death Ceremonies

Bohar buries their dead according to the Islamic tradition. After bath white colour *Coffin* is used for both men and women. *Kumhar* is responsible to Dig out grave for the dead. After funeral prayers, Bohar prefer to bury their dead in an old graveyard of Jamal Din Shaheed at Fort Marot or another graveyard at Phulra near Fort Abbass. They do not bury any article, food, ornaments etc with their dead. After forty days a large gathering is invited and huge money is spent on the name of alms. Guests are served with delicious food²⁴.

Conclusion

In the history of Rajasthan the Panwar tribe played an important role but their sub-caste Bohar has been not well known. They did not establish any state and had not played an influential and active role of warriors. The history of Bohars is based upon Folklore and one cannot find a written record of the tribe. However, they possess the qualities of pure Cholistanis such as simplicity, truthfulness, keeping promises and are unknown to any type of hypocrisy or treachery. They are used to move from one shrine to another to have blessings of the saints and to fulfill their desires. A systematic concept of religion is alien to Bohar tribes. Some of them are even unaware with the basic teaching of Islamic Shariah. The method of ablutions and praying five times *Namaz* is known to a few Bohars. However, their strength appear to be in the social conduct. They are known in the Cholistan for their

loyalty and true friendship.²⁵ For they even are used to defy tribal ties and class differences. They are peace loving and less criminal than other tribes.

They are native peoples of Cholistan (Rajasthan) living in this area from many centuries, but they are divided into local and migrant ethnicity since 1947. However they share their history and culture with the Parhar tribe of Cholistan. Yet they have maintained political and administrative supremacy and control on Fort Phulra and Fort Mauj Garh since centuries and have demonstrated their unity and political strength at the time of elections.

References

¹ Ahmad Ghazali, Cholistan (Islam Abad: Lok Virsa publishers, 1987), p.36

² Ibid.

³ Interview with Bashir Ahmad, 16-May-2015, Toba Janan Wala.

⁴ In lesser Cholistan among all the tribes, Bohars have large number of sheep, goats and cows. Shema Bohar is known Cholistani Bohar whose livestock reaches to the number of one thousand. It has been observed having large number of livestock Bohars are not proud of their property. But they are proud of their heroes. They claim that they have large number of martyrs (*Shaheed*) and Sufis as compare to other Cholistani tribes.

⁵ Interview with Mushtaq Ahmad s/o Jind Wada, 26-March-2014, Fort Marot.

⁶ Interview with Hafiz Arif, 13-Jan-2015, Fort Marot.

⁷ The Shrine of Hazrat Dhanan Shaheed is situated at Phulra near Fort Abbas.

⁸ The Shrine of Jamal Din Shaheed is situated at Fort Marot.

⁹ The Shrine of Hazrat Khando Shaheed is situated at Tibba Tami Wali in the west of Khairpur.

¹⁰ The Fort of Marot lies on the southern bank of the Hakra. It is built of mud and is of considerable antiquity.

¹¹ Interview with Malik Nazir Muhammad s/o Muhib Ali, 13-Jan-2015, Fort Mauj Garh.

¹² Interview with Muhammad Akbar, Chak No. 341/H.R Marot.

¹³ Interview with Haji Allah Bachaya s/o Qadir Bukhsh, 24-Feb-2014, Toba Shah Hussain, Maroot.

¹⁴ Interview with Muhammad Sadiq, 23-April-2015, Yazman.

¹⁵ Interview with Ghulam Fareed s/o Malik Allah Yar, 11-April-2015, Fort Mauj Garh.

¹⁶ Interview with Malik Sabir, 13-July-2015, Kudwala.

¹⁷ Interview with Atta Muhammad, 29-March-2015, Hasilpur.

¹⁸ Interview with Hafiz Nawaz, 8-July-2015, Fort Phulra.

¹⁹ Interview with Muhammad Ramzan, 9-Oct-2015, Chak No. 424/H.R Marot.

²⁰ Interview with Faiz Bukhsh s/o Jan Bukhsh, 1-March-2014, Fort Marot.

²¹ Interview with Altaf Ahmad, 5-May-2014, Fort Mauj Garh.

²² Interview with Noor Muhammad s/o Jamal Din, 2-April-2015, Khairpur.

²³ Interview with Shah Din s/o Mehngy Khan, 23-Jan-2015, Khairpur.

²⁴ Interview with Muhammad Hafeez, 25-Feb-2015, Fort Mauj Garh.

²⁵ In the areas of Cholistan a true story of Shado Khan, Bohar of Bisti BohraanWali Fort Abbas, is known to all Cholistanis; The story runs thus: Some years ago a friend of Shado Khan Bohar died with natural death at Ada 86/H.R Fort Abbas. When Shado Khan Bohar came to attend the funeral prayer, he was asked by someone that your friend has been died but you are still alive. By hearing this Shado Khan took his last breath and he died there.