

## “Where was the Battle of Ajaigarh? Ballad and History in late 18th-century Bundelkhand”

This paper examines historiographical uncertainty concerning various details of a battle fought in 1792 that determined the fate of Bundelkhand and, arguably, northern India and the British Empire. The battle was won by Himmat Bahādur Anūpgirī Gosain, a warlord-commander nominally in the service of the Maratha Alī Bahādur. Though various locations have been given for the battle, two Brajbhāṣā poems composed soon after the conflict provide unambiguous evidence that the battle was fought at and near the fortress of Ajaigarh (the sister fort of the more famous Kālanjar), north of Pannā. Subsequent historiographical uncertainty concerning the location of the battle is connected to controversy over the killing of the opposing army’s commander, the Pāṇwar Rājput Arjun Singh. Both poems—one by Padmākar, the other by Mān Kavi—conclude with the decapitation of Arjun at the hands of Anūpgirī. However, rumors have long circulated throughout eastern Bundelkhand that Arjun was assassinated by his Pāṇwar clan relatives, presumably in the service of Anūpgirī, while on tour in a neighboring territory. A recent visit to Ajaigarh by the author in 2014 seemed to confirm these rumors, but also prompted questions about why the poets may have chosen to depict the death of Arjun in the way they did, as well as whether and how landscape and architecture contain traces of the disappearing gosain past in the region. The way the poems record this key moment in the history of Bundelkhand, a region on the margin of world history but not inconsequential to it, has implications for our understanding of literature, history, and historicity in India.