
Power

In the South Asian popular imagination today, Marwar is most closely identified with the Marwari, the astute businessman and moneylender found in parts of India far removed from his homeland in the dusty towns and villages on the eastern edge of the Thar Desert. When viewed as a part of the wider region that is today known as Rajasthan, the other figure that the idea of Marwar conjures is that of the princely rajput, known for his martial ethos, opulent *haveli* (mansion), “secluded” womenfolk, and vast lands. But Marwar is home, as it has been for centuries, to a diverse population immersed in an array of trades and activities. Before the separations introduced by national borders, the region was interwoven through webs of migration, conquest, and pilgrimage not only with more accessible territories such as the Gangetic Plains, Gujarat, and Punjab but also with areas across the sands of the Thar, such as Sindh, Multan, and Balochistan. These vectors, along with trade, expanded the reach of this seemingly landlocked region into parts of the world much farther afield. This chapter traces the shifts in social, political, and economic life in Marwar that emerged from the fifteenth century onward and intersected to create the conditions necessary for the transformations in “Hindu” identity and caste that unfolded in the eighteenth century.

KINGSHIP RECAST

Studies of the Mughal state on the ground have made clear that key operations of government, such as tax collection and the legal resolution of disputes, depended on the cooperation of local notables.¹ As Rathor kings too sought to strengthen their monarchical claims over other rajputs, they built out a bureaucracy to better know and more directly interface with their subjects. From the early eighteenth century, the Rathor kings of Marwar no longer had a strong Mughal state to lean on in order to prop up their monarchical assertions above the kinship- and brotherhood-based (*bhāibāṇṭ*) claims of their Rathor kin in Marwar.² Even as they

built upon the move toward monarchy set in motion by their predecessors in a century or so of stable Mughal rule, the Rathor kings of Marwar from Ajit Singh (r. 1707–24) onward worked to craft their authority in alliance with groups other than rajputs. They sought junior allies who could not articulate the blood- and caste-based claims to a share in kingship and land that all rajputs, particularly those of the Rathor clan, asserting fraternal bonds or *bhāibandh*, could.³ In the search for a counterweight to rajput claims as they shaped their monarchical order, it was the mercantile and moneylending castes of Marwar—the mahajans—to whom the Rathor kings of Marwar turned to the greatest degree.

When the Mughal state began to crumble after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Rathors faced a new set of challenges as well as possibilities. The greatest challenge before the Rathors was the rise of the Marathas from the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴ Mahadji Sindhia (1730–1794, alternative spelling “Scindia”), the general who managed the Maratha Empire’s efforts at expansion in north India, loomed large over the rajput polities of Rajasthan.⁵ The rajput states, individually and in alliance, were simply no match for Sindhia’s forces. Starting in 1756, Sindhia repeatedly routed Rathor armies. The vanquished Rathors were forced to cede formal control of the high-revenue district of Ajmer to the Marathas and to agree to the payment of large sums as war indemnity and as tribute.⁶ Over the years, Marwar paid upward of two and a half million rupees to Mahadji Sindhia, even as it managed to reassert at least a degree of administrative control over Ajmer.⁷

At the same time, for the Rathors as for all dynasts in the subcontinent, the void left behind by the much-reduced Mughal state also offered opportunity for growth.⁸ By 1740, the weakened Mughal state stopped asking the Rathor kings of Jodhpur to perform service for it outside of their home territory.⁹ For Vijai Singh, king from 1752 to 1793, this permitted more time in Marwar and allowed him to invest greater energy toward reshaping his polity and meeting internal challenges. He was an able strategist, waging a multiyear war against a rival and cousin, Ram Singh, who had used the help of the Marathas to capture half of Marwar between 1754 and 1756. Vijai Singh emerged victorious in this struggle in 1761,¹⁰ despite many of Marwar’s rajput nobles supporting his rival. After 1761, Vijai Singh mixed incentives with harsh reprisals to subdue those rajput nobles who had continued to resist his authority even after he defeated his princely rival.¹¹

Working within the constraints posed by Maratha demands and internal rebellion, Vijai Singh crafted for himself a new model of kingship. Through a mix of imitation and innovation, he departed from his Rathor predecessors in a number of significant ways. Most importantly for this book, it was in Vijai Singh’s reign that the Rathor chancery began to systematically order its records. A number of important record series, each bound together in *bahīs* or registers, in the Rathor kingdom began to be kept during the years immediately following Vijai Singh’s accession to the Rathor throne. Vijai Singh also began to maintain a standing army, a departure from his predecessors who had relied largely on troop levies from subordinate rajput lords. The army consisted of bands of soldiers recruited from Sindh as well

as from the Vaishnav and Shiva-worshipping, militarized ascetic orders such as the Nagas and the Vishnuswamis. Historians of the eighteenth century in South Asia have focused on the rise of military fiscalism—the crafting of a centralizing state taxation system to streamline finances and to develop a more disciplined and tightly controlled army—as a new development triggered by the dynamism and multipolarity of this period.¹² Certainly, Vijai Singh's Marwar experienced elements of such an effort.

Under him, the Rathors began to mint their own coins in 1780, albeit with the permission and in the name of the reigning Mughal emperor, Shah Alam II. Mints in Jodhpur, Merta, Nagaur, and Sojhat produced these coins.¹³ The Rathor crown relied on a range of taxes: land revenue (*bhog*); taxes on wells, plows, houses, grazing animals, and hearths; dues in kind from artisanal producers; and *corvée* (unremunerated labor known as *begār*). By the eighteenth century, the Rathor state had also started farming out land revenue assignments under the fixed-rate *muqāṭi* tenure, which was given on contract.¹⁴ In addition, fines on subjects for violating customary or ethical codes were a steady source of income for the Rathor crown, as the chapters ahead will show. With the acquisition of the fertile region of Godwad in the southeast through a diplomatic arrangement with Udaipur and the conquest of the Umarkot region on the west in Sindh, Vijai Singh managed to rebuild the royal treasury despite the drain caused by war against the Marathas and the cost of keeping his fractious rajput nobles in place. This enabled him to meet the many internal and external challenges that marked his reign. Vijai Singh's refashioning of Rathor kingship through new patronage practices, architectural works, and reforms were made possible, in a time of Maratha fiscal demands, by these fresh sources of income that he managed to carve out.

THE "SERVANT" KING

In his reconstitution of Rathor kingship, Vijai Singh's efforts went beyond administrative, military, and fiscal reform. Drawing perhaps upon models from neighboring rajput polities such as Kota and Kishangarh, Vijai Singh fashioned for himself the public image of a *bhakt* or devotee par excellence. He took initiation in 1765 into the Vallabh *sampradāy*, among the more popular and influential of the many *sampradāys* or sects centered on devotion toward Krishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu.¹⁵ The Vallabh sect, also known as the Pushtimarg (or "Way of Grace"), coalesced around the memory of a brahman teacher, Vallabhacharya (c. 1478–1530), from the Telangana region in peninsular India as its founder.¹⁶ Sectarian narratives assert that Vallabhacharya traveled widely across north India in the fifteenth century, preaching a message of pure and unmediated devotion or *bhakti* to Krishna.

It is worth pausing here to note that South Asianist scholars have discussed the problems generated by the terms "sect" and "sectarianism." "Sect," deriving from the Christian context, assumes a branching off from an original body or

a mainstream.¹⁷ For South Asia, this language generated in the nineteenth century the ahistorical idea of a unified and preexisting brahmanical religion under threat from dissident splinter groups, thereby painting sectarianism as an attack on the unity of brahmanism.¹⁸ In South Asia, on the other hand, “sects” often emerged independently and only later came to be organized in relation to each other, whether externally or among themselves by consensus, into an overarching category. Historians of Hinduism have pointed to this problem and use the terms “sect” and “sectarian” only after making clear the distinct meanings of these terms in the South Asian context.¹⁹ Elaine Fisher argues that sectarianism in early modern South Asia was a mode of religious engagement that, rather than generating fragmentation, in fact facilitated some of the earliest articulations of a unified religion while still asserting distinction. My usage of “sect” and “sectarian” in this book draws on this reflexive deployment of these terms among historians of South Asian religion and philosophy.

Returning to Vijai Singh’s formal initiation into the strictly vegetarian, animal sacrifice–eschewing Vaishnav community of the Vallabhite sect, this generated a significant new locus of elite rajput and kingly religiosity in Marwar, one that cut against older ritual expressions of rajput status. Vijai Singh was not the first rajput king to adopt the stance of a Krishna devotee. Nor was the rajput kings’ embrace of Krishna devotion unrelated to its rise to subcontinental prominence. The history of Vaishnav devotionism is fundamentally intertwined with that of the Mughal state and its rajput vassals, some of whom were also related by marriage to the Mughals.²⁰ The familial relationship that emerged between particular rajput clans from Rajasthan, including the Rathors of Marwar, and the Mughal royal family shaped not only Vaishnav devotion but also the social and political worlds of the Mughals as well as the rajputs.²¹ The patronage of successive Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and Jahangir (r. 1605–27), and of their rajput nobles and kin played a central role in elevating Krishna devotion to a position of prestige and prominence. Brindavan, not far from the Mughal capitals of Agra and Delhi, emerged in the mid-sixteenth century as the center of devotional activity for the Vallabhite order as well as another prominent Vaishnav order, the Gaudiya sect.²²

An embrace of Vaishnav religiosity, of which Krishna devotion was part, became in these centuries an articulation of cosmopolitan kingship among rajput lords.²³ In addition to the Kachhwahas of Jaipur, the Bundela rajput king, Madhukar Shah (r. 1552–92) of Orchha in central India also embraced Krishna devotion.²⁴ By the eighteenth century, the Sisodiyas of Udaipur, the Rathor ruling lineages in Bikaner and Kishangarh, the Hadas of Kota, and a number of smaller principalities in Rajasthan had become patrons and members of Vaishnav orders centered on Krishna. Krishna-centered Vaishnav devotionism’s association with the highest echelons of rajputs and its evocation of cosmopolitanism, prestige, and power attracted a growing number of kings and chiefs. Upstart ruling lineages, such as

the Malla kings of Bengal, spent large sums on displaying their commitment to Vaishnavism.²⁵

Some of these princely devotees were moved to compose devotional poetry. The sixteenth-century prince Prithviraj of Bikaner composed an ode to the romance of Krishna and his consort, Rukmini, *Veli Krisan Rukmani Ri*.²⁶ In Vijai Singh's own lifetime, the Rathor prince of the neighboring principality of Kishangarh, Savant Singh (1699–1764), composed verses steeped in Krishna devotion, celebrating the love of Krishna and Radha under the pen name Nagaridas.²⁷ Bhim Singh, Hada rajput king of Kota (r. 1707–20), was so deeply devoted to the Vallabhite icon of Krishna in his possession that he dedicated his entire kingdom to the deity and referred to himself as merely the *divān* or prime minister of the Lord's domain.²⁸ Some sought to rebuild their capitals in the image of Braj, the area between Delhi and Agra, in which Krishna's idealized mythical childhood and youth is believed to have unfolded. Rup Singh (r. 1643–48) of Kishangarh strove to transform his new capital, Rupnagar, into a Braj-like pastoral idyll and Bhim Singh of Kota renamed his capital Nandgaon after Krishna's childhood village.²⁹

From the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the connection between rajput courts and Vaishnav sects was further strengthened when brahman leaders of these orders decided to escort key icons out of the Braj region and settle down in the rajput kingdoms of western India. Bearing the most important icons of their respective sects, the leaders of both the Gaudiya and Vallabhite orders approached rajput courts for shelter from the instability caused in the Delhi region by *jāt* rebels against the Mughal Empire.³⁰ Sectarian accounts reflect that divisions and tensions within the orders were also a significant reason why the caretakers of different icons decided to leave Braj.³¹ New centers of Vaishnav worship and pilgrimage thus sprouted in such rajput kingdoms as Udaipur and Jaipur that offered residence to the Krishna idols and their brahman caretakers.³²

Once key Krishnaite icons became unmoored from Braj and mobile, Norbert Peabody has argued, any site in which they settled became associated, in the eyes of Krishna devotees, with ritual and affective power. By taking on the posture of a devotee-protector to a Vallabhite icon, a king communicated his possession of the tutelary and protective powers as well as the blessings of the deity immanent in the icon. The departure of the deity in turn signaled the loss of divine support. The efforts of *bhakt*-kings to communicate their close association with Vallabhite icons then had political currency in a milieu in which Vaishnav devotion held sway. Finally, the residence of a Vallabhite icon within a king's domain attracted pilgrims and their monetary donations, drew business to bazaars that enriched the kingdom's merchants, and boosted tax revenues.³³

By Vijai Singh's reign then there already were a few precedents in the kingdoms around Marwar of the devotee king. In crafting his own authority, Vijai Singh likely drew upon these examples. He took initiation into the Vallabhite order in 1765, during a trip to their ritual center in Nathdwara in the adjacent kingdom

of Udaipur.³⁴ A history of Vijai Singh's reign, *Mahārājā Śrī Vijai Singhjī rī Khyāt* (Chronicle of Maharaja Vijaisingh, henceforth "MVSK"), written at the Jodhpur court in the early nineteenth century under Maharaja Man Singh (r. 1803–48), records this development as "*mhārāj gusāyām nai mānīyā* (the Maharaja acceded to the Gusains)."³⁵ Among the Vallabhites, Gusain (*gusāim*) was a title held by descendants of Vallabhacharya, the order's founder.³⁶ They held positions of leadership in the devotional order and were treated with reverence.

The MVSK notes that the unnamed Gusains prevented Vijai Singh from visiting the *samādhi* (place of cremation or entombment) of Guru Atmaram, a preceptor of unknown spiritual affiliation of whom Vijai Singh had been a follower prior to his shift to the Vallabhite order. The Gusains are said to have called the *samādhi* a *masān* (cremation site), a less respectful term, and to have told the Maharaja that if kings went there, they would be ritually polluted ("*mhārāj hajūr ātmārāmjī ra darsan karañ nu padhāre tare gusāimjī kayo: mhārāj abe u to masān chhe. Su the rājā lok jāvo su chhot lāgai*").³⁷

In this early nineteenth-century court history, the episode was a mark of the growing influence of Vallabh sectarian leaders upon Vijai Singh, who heeded Krishnaite Gusains' advice and did not visit the teacher he had earlier so revered (*jaṭhā pachhe samād ro darsan karañ mokub kiyo nai gusāyām ro idhkār vadhiyo*). Later, this same text describes the successes of Vijai Singh's reign in words attributed to a contemporary observer, Singhvi Khubji, a courtier of a merchant caste:

A lion and a goat can be drinking water from the same bank without the lion harassing the goat. [Vijai Singh] is the crown jewel of all Hindustan (*hindusathān*). Fifty-one minor kings are in his service. The *vakils* (intercessors) of the emperor (*pātsyāh*) of Ghazni, of the emperor of Sindh, of [the Nawab of Awadh] Shuja-ud-daulah, and of Hyderabad in the Deccan, along with 105 *vakils* representing the Hindu and Muslim houses (*turkām-hinduvām rā ghar 105 ek sau pāñch*), all write reports to him of the goings-on in their masters' domains. The Lord's temples (*prabhu rā mandir*) are everywhere; their bells ring. The Lord grants a glimpse of himself at regular intervals. People discuss episodes from the Lord's life (*prabhu-kathā*). If a gold rupee falls on the ground, no one but its owner picks it up.³⁸

Written only a few decades after the end of Vijai Singh's reign, this passage represents the king's success in terms that emphasize not only his attainments in the world of politics and as the upholder of justice but also his achievements in furthering the Vaishnav faith in Marwar. The measure of his success is also material and moral: the passage has an allusion to the profusion of money, both in the form of currency and as wealth, in Vijai Singh's Marwar.³⁹ Was gold so plentiful that its falling on the ground would not entice onlookers to grab it? Or had Vijai Singh managed to cultivate such contentment and virtue among his subjects that theft had no place in his kingdom? Perhaps this representation of his reign evoked all of these ideas.

Prominent in the passage is the celebration of Vijai Singh's Marwar as a land pervaded with holiness. *Prabhu* or "the Lord" spoken of here is likely Krishna. A play on words is also possible with a secondary but only suggested allusion to the king himself as "the Lord."⁴⁰ And indeed, Vijai Singh did build a number of new temples dedicated to Krishna. Records from his reign attest that he lavished as grants thousands of rupees upon Vaishnav temples and sectarian leaders and supported many Vaishnav devotees in Brindavan.⁴¹ He sponsored the construction of new Vaishnav temples in Marwar, including a Vallabhite shrine to Krishna (Murli-manoharji) inside the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur in 1759.⁴² He commissioned, for the first time in Marwar, beautifully illustrated manuscripts of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, an account of Krishna, and of the *Rāmcharitmānas*, a Hindi telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the epic of the Ram avatar of Vishnu.⁴³ The *Rāmcharitmānas* told the story of Ram in a devotional mode, originally composed more than a century earlier by the poet Tulsidas. Vijai Singh also commissioned illustrated manuscripts of the *Gajendra Mokṣa* (The Prayer of the Elephant King) and the *Durgā Charit*, also known as the *Devī Mahātmya* (recounting the victories of the Goddess). The continuing significance of the Goddess in a set of otherwise Vaishnav texts points to the persistence of other loci of devotion even after Vijai Singh's initiation into and elevation of the Vallabhite order.

Still, the image of devotee par excellence was prominent in his self-fashioning. Around 1770, Vijai Singh commissioned at least three different portraits depicting him in prayer before Vallabhite icons of Krishna as "Shri Nathji."⁴⁴ In all the paintings, Vijai Singh stands in a devout posture to the right of the Vallabhite Krishna icon while a brahman priest performs *sevā* or service to the deity by ringing a small hand-held bell and rocking the icon or waving a set of lamps before it. According to Debra Diamond, the priest in one of the 1770 paintings (fig. 1) is Gusain Giridharji,⁴⁵ who served at the Vallabhite temple at Chaupasni, near Jodhpur.⁴⁶ Since his portraiture remains remarkably stable through all three paintings, it is likely that the brahman priest in the other two paintings is also Gusain Giridharji.

In each of figures 1 and 2, the painter Udairam Bhatti aligns all the figures either to the left or the right sides of the painting, creating a central axis. This leads the viewer's eye to the Krishna icon, the only figure whose eyes look back at the viewer. Despite being almost tiny in relation to the figures of the Maharaja and the priests, the icon, through the device of the engaging eyes, draws the viewer's attention. Such a visual construction, with devotees clustered either to the right or left of the icon when they would in practice have also clustered in front of it, was a typical feature of *chitra darśan* paintings.⁴⁷ In Vallabh practice, *chitra darśan* (audience through a picture) and *chitra sevā* (service to a picture) are important devotional acts. Vallabhites believe that Krishna manifests himself in his painted and sculptural representations.⁴⁸ Viewing these paintings of Vijai Singh worshipping Krishna as Shri Nathji then was in itself an act of devotion. By placing himself prominently



FIGURE 1. Maharaja Vijai Singh worshipping Krishna, by Udairam Bhatti, Jodhpur, c. 1770, 55 x 8 cm, Mehrangarh Museum Trust, RJS 2049. ©Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India, and His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur. Do not reuse or reproduce image without permission from the Mehrangarh Museum Trust.

in these paintings that also were ritual objects, Vijai Singh not only built the reputation of a dedicated devotee but also elevated himself to the divine plane.

Peabody and Nandita Sahai see rajput kings' embrace and performance of Vallabhite devotion as significant for a number of reasons. Peabody notes this to be a transition from one ethic to another in the rajput courtly milieu, from that of *chākari* or loyal service to an earthly lord to one of *sevā* or service more in the nature of devotion. In the context of eighteenth-century Kota, he sees the infantilization



FIGURE 2. Maharaja Vijai Singh worshipping Krishna, by Udairam Bhatti, Jodhpur, c. 1770, 34.7 x 30.6 cm), Mehrangarh Museum Trust, RJS 4267. ©Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India, and His Highness Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur. Do not reuse or reproduce image without permission from the Mehrangarh Museum Trust.

of the object of devotion as a powerful metaphor for the reduction of the Kota king to a puppet in the hands of his prime minister.⁴⁹ Sahai, on the other hand, sees in Vijai Singh's performance of maternal care of the Krishna icon an effort to recast his relationship with his subjects in the image of a parent-child relationship.⁵⁰ He sought to project maternalism, evoking a stance of nurturing and care toward his subjects. This image of caregiving did not displace the projection of martial valor that had been central to rajput warrior identity. To memorialize his successes on

the battlefield, Vijai Singh is said to have commissioned the *Vijay Vilās*.⁵¹ This text is focused on Vijai Singh's martial valor and does not offer insight into the changes afoot in his life or kingdom.

Vijai Singh's crafting of this kingly image was a departure in numerous ways from his Rathor predecessors. His was a formal adherence to a single devotional order as opposed to worship of a mix of deities and an emphasis on Goddess worship that prior Rathor sovereigns had adhered to. This is not to say that Vijai Singh cut off court patronage to all other deities, sects, or religious communities. Older patterns, of widely distributing patronage to a range of holy men, religious sites, and communities, mostly continued through Vijai Singh's reign.⁵² Yet, his formal initiation into the Vallabhite sect and his fashioning through practice and patronage of the image of a Krishna devotee belonging to the Vallabhite sect also marked an elevation of Krishna devotion in general and Vallabhite affiliation in particular to a higher plane among the plethora of religious paths that flourished in Marwar. This was an enduring model of self-presentation, for both of Vijai Singh's immediate successors to the throne, Bhim Singh and Man Singh, commissioned strikingly similar portraits of themselves. There is at least one painting with a similar composition depicting Bhim Singh bowing before Krishna and one of Man Singh bowing before the Yogi Jalandarnath (fig. 7).⁵³

There were other innovations in Vijai Singh's reign. A concubine or *pāsvān* named Gulab Rai, despite her marginal origin as an enslaved performer, charted an unparalleled path in Marwari history for herself.⁵⁴ From the 1770s, she played an active role in administration, having her favorites such as Singhvi Bhimraj and his son Akhairaj, both of a merchant caste, appointed to high offices such as *hākīm* (governor) of various *parganās* (districts) and the head of military affairs, *bakhṣī*. She was active in political matters for more than twenty years and, toward the end of Vijai Singh's reign, received an unprecedented honor for a concubine—a *jāgīr* (revenue assignment) of an entire district, Jalor.⁵⁵ She was a patron of Vaishnav devotion and of public works.⁵⁶ She carved out a public profile for herself not only through the marks she left on the built landscape and through her charity but also by embarking on pilgrimages outside the kingdom in which she was accompanied by grand processions of men and animals.⁵⁷

Modern histories of Vijai Singh's reign usually gloss over Gulab Rai, though recent scholarship has begun to address this lacuna.⁵⁸ Only stray references to her activities survive in the chronicles and records of the Rathor state and these are heavily inflected by how loaded her memory was to nineteenth-century memorialists of the Rathor past. Still, it is clear even from these bits of information that we cannot fully understand Vijai Singh's reign without recognizing Gulab Rai's influence upon his court. She was his beloved consort for more than twenty years and his attachment to her spanned a large chunk of his reign.⁵⁹ While we do not yet know the precise measures and administrative appointments Gulab Rai was responsible for, statements about her growing influence at court, her active role

in strategizing Marwar's resistance to the Marathas prior to the Battle of Merta in 1790, and her hand in the appointment of key administrators are discussed in early nineteenth-century Rathor court chronicles.⁶⁰ Her interventions were sufficiently "out of place" for her to be assassinated in 1792. Alas, it is difficult from the available source materials to trace her precise interventions in the administration of social life that are the subject of this book. Yet, one way in which Gulab Rai surely did shape the policies and the everyday administration of the types of petitions addressed in the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwāna Bahīs* is the hand she had in appointing particular men of merchant caste to high offices that issued commands and adjudicated disputes.

Vijai Singh then was willing to break with Rathor tradition in significant ways, whether through his cultivation of the public persona of a Krishna devotee or his willingness to allow his concubine to advise on and participate in matters at court. Under his leadership, despite a constant onslaught by Maratha forces, Marwar experienced a measure of internal stability. Vijai Singh's grandson and successor, Bhim Singh (r. 1793–1803), appears to largely have followed precedents set by Vijai Singh.⁶¹ For instance, he too projected the image of a Krishna devotee and commissioned at least one painting that recorded his public participation in Vallabhite ritual.⁶² His reign was too short, lasting only a decade, and too interrupted by internal rebellions and external threats to introduce significant policy changes. Modern historians have cast him in a negative light, likely reproducing the bias against him in accounts composed in the reign of his rival and successor, Man Singh, that are major sources of Marwar's political history.⁶³

Vijai Singh's embrace of the Vallabh order, a Krishnaite devotional community that was already immensely popular among western Indian merchants, generated a bond, in addition to the growing dependence on merchants as administrators, that brought Vijai Singh into the same spiritual and moral community as many merchants of Marwar.⁶⁴ As in eighteenth-century Kota, the entry of the rajput rulers into the Vallabhite order helped forge a king-merchant intimacy. The bonds of shared religion were also nurtured, as Peabody shows for Kota, by the role that the merchants' earnings from trade could play in providing to the kings an income source, whether through tax or credit, that offset their dependence on prebendal revenues controlled by rajput chiefs.⁶⁵ In Marwar as well devotion and debt brought the king into a closer alliance with merchants.

MERCHANT AND BRAHMAN BUREAUCRATS

Discussions of the state in early modern South Asia tend to center heavily on kings, their courts, and the nobility. By the eighteenth century, however, there were plenty of polities in early modern South Asia that were large and complex enough to have bureaucracies. Histories of politics and statecraft in early modern South Asia then need to widen the conception of "state" to include the many offices and

officers that constituted it. To an extent, this has been achieved through attention to scribes in early modern South Asia.⁶⁶ By the eighteenth century, the Rathors had developed an elaborate bureaucracy to aid the monarch in administering his territory. Alas, we do not have unbroken records with the kind of comprehensiveness that the court narratives like the *Khyāt* and *Vigat* provide for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Marwar. Decades of tumult, caused by the war of succession following the death of Emperor Shahjahan in 1658 and then by the new Emperor Aurangzeb's intervention in succession within Marwar, could explain why there is a thinner source base for this period. Instead, it is from the middle of the eighteenth century that Rathor recordkeeping picks up in density and volume. From the proliferation of offices as well as the records generated by the functioning of these offices, it becomes clear that the Rathor state had expanded and changed in the hundred years since the composition of the *Khyāt* and *Vigat*. It also becomes clear that the drive toward documentation and toward the elaboration of a complex state bureaucracy intensified in the course of Vijai Singh's reign, that is, in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

As the state expanded, it was merchant castes and, to a lesser extent, brahmins who benefitted from the new opportunities available in administration. Among merchants, likely because of shared ritual and cultural practices, economic function, professional practice, and political interest, the many different caste groups involved in trade, moneylending, and, increasingly, bureaucracy had drawn together into a cohesive social unit by the eighteenth century. They adopted the title "mahajan," literally "great man," and this is how the state's orders and decrees referred to them.

There is much that is noteworthy about this. First, it suggests that the merchant castes had sufficiently consolidated to act and be perceived as a single body. Second, it indicates that boundaries like those marked by spiritual affiliation to Jain, Vaishnav, or Shaiva orders, or those created by caste-conditioned social and kinship behavior, could be set aside in contexts that demanded unified action toward common goals. Third, it demonstrates the formation of a trans- or supra-caste identity that functioned, in relation to the state and other social groups, as a large, singular caste category akin to "brahman" or "rajput." Participation at court and in state bureaucracy no doubt became an important vector for the solidification of a larger "merchant" or mahajan caste category.⁶⁷ At the same time, the emergence of a transcaste locus of unification such as "mahajan" did not completely override distinctions of caste and faith. There were occasional instances, for example, of conflict, even violence, between merchant-caste men of different castes (such as Khandelwal and Agarwal) and different faiths (such as Vaishnav, Jain, and sub-groups within the Jains).⁶⁸

The dominance of merchants in high offices at the capital, Jodhpur, is discernible. The administrative office of *divān* was of such great significance by the eighteenth century in Marwar that it can be translated to "prime minister." Its primary

function was oversight of the kingdom's finances, but in practice it appears to have extended also into a crucial advisory role to the king and wider administrative authority over the kingdom. The king usually appointed a *divān* in consultation with trusted and influential allies. For instance, as noted earlier in this chapter, Vijai Singh offered the position of *divān* to Singhvi Bhimraj, a favorite of Gulab Rai's.⁶⁹

It was not only in Vijai Singh's reign that the position of *divān* was assigned to men largely of a mahajan background. From the early seventeenth century—that is, almost since the introduction of this office in Rathor administration, beginning with Rao Maldev (r. 1532–62) and through successive kings thereafter—it was given largely to men from the Osvāl Jain mercantile community, usually from the Bhandari, Singhvi, or Muhnot clans. From the mid-eighteenth century, these included Singhvi Fatehchand, Bhandari Bhagvandas, also known as Bhavani-das (1790–95), Bhandari Shivchand (1795–96), Singhvi Jodhraj (1796–98), Muhnot Savairam (1798–1802), Singhvi Vijairaj (1802), Bhandari Gangaram (1803), Muhnot Gynanmal (1803–5), Bhandari Gangaram (1805), Singhvi Indraraj (1805–15), Singhvi Fatehraj (1815), and Singhvi Likhmichand (1817). Jain and Vaishnav merchants monopolized other key offices at the center as well. The office of *bakhśī*, in charge of military affairs, whose work included keeping rebellious rajput feudatories under control, was held since the seventeenth century by Jain and Vaishnav mahajans such as Bhandaris and Singhvis. Another indicator of the swelling ranks of nonrajput officers in the Rathor capital is the creation of a new office, the *pyād bakhśī*, in the brief reign of Maharaja Bakhat Singh (r. 1751–52). This office specialized in matters pertaining to nonrajput officers of the state and it too was held largely by mahajans.⁷⁰ The line between Osvāl Jain and Vaishnav was a blurred one due to the cross-cutting ties of caste and marriage. To that extent, these mahajan officers were from a shared Jain-Vaishnav milieu.

To offset the growing concentration of power in mahajan hands, key offices such as *divān* and *bakhśī* would occasionally be handed out to *pañcholīs*, a *kāyasth* or scribal group.⁷¹ Even as *pañcholīs* do show up in Rathor records as authors of commands and holders of high administrative office, they were eclipsed in sheer numbers by men of mercantile castes in terms of both their total population and their participation in administration. *Pañcholīs*, unlike mahajans, did not participate in trade and remained limited to administrative functions.⁷² They also did not share, at least as observed in the late nineteenth century, in the ethical and somatic approaches of mahajans and brahmans in that they did not disapprove of the men of their caste eating meat and drinking liquor.⁷³ Their relative inactivity in the records of the Rathor state in comparison to brahmans and merchants may have been due to their comparatively small demographic presence in Marwar. What really did set them apart was their dependence, unlike brahmans and mahajans, on state employment and revenue assignments. While *pañcholīs* emerge as issuers of commands under Vijai Singh and Bhim Singh, they appeared to have acted largely as agents of the Maharaja.

Under the direct supervision of the *divān* was the royal chancery, or the *śrī hajūr rā daftar* (with “*śrī hajūr*” referring to the king). Situated at the Fatehpur Gate in Mehrangarh Fort, this office issued and maintained royal orders in consultation with the *divān* and the king. The sources upon which this study relies, the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwāna Bahīs*, were written in this office. The superintendent or *darogā* of the royal chancery was more than just a scribe. According to an eighteenth-century description of the office, the head of the chancery was expected to be well acquainted with the customs of the many places and peoples of Marwar, to keep abreast of the latest developments across the kingdom, and to exercise sound judgment on which disputes ought to be placed before the king for resolution.⁷⁴ This suggests that the head of the chancery played a significant role in the adjudication of disputes and in the shaping of the state’s response to petitions, appeals, and complaints. This office was assigned through the latter half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century largely to a mix of brahmans, Osvāls, and other mercantile castes and to the occasional *pañcholi*.⁷⁵

While some orders issued by this office, which are copied and compiled in the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwāna Bahīs*, do not name any individual or office as the issuing authority, others do. These latter orders use “with the permission of” or “*duvāyati*” followed by a name, usually merchant, brahman, or *pañcholi*. When the orders name issuing officers, they do not specify which office they held. Sometimes, the authorizing officers can be cross-checked against other records, particularly the Rathors’ officer lists compiled in *Ohdā Bahīs*, to be identified as the *divān*, the superintendent of the chancery, or a district governor.⁷⁶ For instance, a high-ranking member of Gulab Rai’s faction, Singhvi Bhimraj, comes up as the issuing authority on an order issued in 1786, when he was serving as head of military affairs in the kingdom.⁷⁷

It appears then that the orders compiled in the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwāna Bahīs* were largely issued not by the Maharaja himself but rather by officers representing him. While the orders were dispatched, likely bearing the relevant seals, to the district officers that they address, these same orders were copied at the chancery into a running ledger, a *bahī*. The orders were organized into *bahīs* by year, with commands from each year being bound into a single volume, sometimes two. Internally, each *bahī* is ordered by district. The *bahīs* are long and narrow, approximately three feet in length and a foot wide. They are bound at the top with a thick string. The pages of the *bahīs* are made of plain but strong paper, with standardized writing in Old Marwari in a neat hand and black ink. A feature of Rathor documentary culture in the eighteenth century is embodied in the form of the *bahīs*. This is the Rathor state’s shift in the course of the eighteenth century to a heavy reliance on Old Marwari language and script, at the expense of Persian, for its commands, decrees, and other administrative documents.⁷⁸ This was a change from its late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practices, and it is for this reason that my engagement with Rathor administration of political and social life relies exclusively on Marwari-language materials.

The formal qualities of the *bahī* are noteworthy. First, *bahīs* as a form were commonly associated with merchants and moneylenders who recorded their transactions in *bahīs* of their own. This innovation in Rathor recordkeeping is perhaps yet another indicator of the penetration of the state and its operation by merchant castes. Second, the plain, unadorned, standardized form of the records and their addressing of their recipients by title (*hākim*, *koṭvāl*) or office (*kachaiḍī*, *chauntrā*) rather than by name indicates a turn to a more bureaucratized and impersonal administration. Third, the keeping of copies of key orders in a central repository, the chancery, allowed for consultation in case of later disputes over those same issues. This too was an important departure and it occurred in 1765, when these records began to be maintained. This is noteworthy in comparison with the records of the Peshwa state or of the Kachhwaha kingdom of Jaipur in this same century whose orders in response to subjects' petitions consist of loose papers tied together with string or in cloth bundles. Unlike loose sheets of paper, individual entries into bound volumes could not easily be reordered or removed. The very turn to maintaining these records then marked a departure in the history of recordkeeping and administration in Marwar. Alongside, it was a departure in legal practice, for claims and counterclaims based on prior government rulings could now be tested against a centralized record ordered by date and district. This built upon the growing importance of paper in the early modern period in South Asia.⁷⁹ By the eighteenth century, in polities like Marwar, the turn to paper documentation that had occurred in prior centuries developed into centralized recordkeeping.

It was not just for writing and accounts, as a *potdār* (treasurer, vernacularization of *fotedār*) or a *muśraf* (accountant, vernacularization of *mushrif*), that Rathor kings hired merchant groups.⁸⁰ They also held most of the highest offices in the districts of the Rathor kingdom, called *parganās*, such as that of governor (*hākim*) and the many accountant, treasurer, and scribal positions in both central and district bureaucracies.⁸¹ The *hākim* was responsible for maintaining law and order within the district, which included preventing and punishing crime and banditry as well as dispensing justice in response to social or economic disputes. The governor was to keep the rajput lords in his domain obedient to the king, making sure they fulfilled their military obligations, passed on the state's share of the revenues they collected, and did not collect unjust amounts from the peasants in their estates. The *hākim*'s office was called the *kachaiḍī*, a Marwari vernacularization of *kachahrī*.⁸² The officers who held positions such as treasurer and newswriter in this office too were largely drawn from brahman, mercantile, or scribal communities.⁸³ Also under the district governor was the *sāyar*, the office in charge of nonagrarian levies. It was staffed with a superintendent (*darogā*), an *amīn* who helped assess revenue demands from the land assignments (*paṭṭās*) in the district, accountants (*mushrafs*), and treasurers (*potdārs*). Revenue officials called *kānuṅgos* were responsible for gathering on-the-ground statistics on yield and collections as well as for collecting land revenue for clusters of villages. Most of these officers in the *sāyars* were either Jain or Vaishnav merchants or brahmans.⁸⁴

Yet another important district office, albeit one directly appointed by the court in Jodhpur and not under the supervision of the district governor, was that of the magistrate of the district capital, the *koṭvāl*. The *koṭvāl* was in charge of the district capital's defense and the maintenance of law and order within it. His office was called the *koṭvālī chauntrā*.⁸⁵ While in some districts like Nagaur the position was set aside for rajputs, in other districts like Merta, it too could be held by mahajans.⁸⁶

Even as men from mahajan families dominated the administration, their proximity to political power was fraught with risk, at least until the early eighteenth century. There are several instances of mahajan *divāns* and governors being summarily fired from their posts and imprisoned on charges of graft or conspiracy. These imprisoned former ministers were only able to secure their release on the payment of huge sums of money, ranging from twenty-five thousand to several lakhs of rupees.⁸⁷ A notable and early example of this phenomenon was Mumhta Nainsi himself, the author of the mid-seventeenth-century *Khyāt* and the *Vigat* mentioned earlier in this chapter. When Nainsi fell from political favor, the Maharaja accused him of graft and threw him behind bars. Nainsi refused to accept guilt and pay the fine asked of him and eventually committed suicide in prison.⁸⁸ Some high-ranking mahajan administrators accused of conspiracy were given the death penalty while others, like Nainsi, preferred to commit suicide in prison than bear the humiliation of a large bail payment.⁸⁹ The practice of imprisoning and imposing heavy fines upon merchant bureaucrats on charges of graft or conspiracy appears to have largely disappeared by the mid-eighteenth century.⁹⁰ This may have been due to the growing dependence of the kings of Marwar upon this group.

Brahmans were perceived in this caste order as disinclined to deceit and theft. For this reason, some positions requiring the highest levels of honesty and fealty were reserved for brahmans. Superintendents of the royal treasury (*khāsā khajānā ra darogā*) and newswriters from the women's quarter (*janānī dyodhī uvākā naves*) were overwhelmingly brahmans.⁹¹ This was in addition to positions specifically created for brahmans due to their priestly and scholarly status, such as *rājguru* (also known as *purohit*, or the head priest in charge of performing the royal family's brahmanical rituals) and *vyās* (tutor and advisor to the king).⁹² The state also passed on certain collections, such as dues paid by the bride's family at the time of marriage (*chamvari*) and octroi (*chūngī*), to designated brahman families in each locality.⁹³ This was in addition to the granting of tax-free lands, *dohli* and *sāsan*, to brahmans and other ritualists. There was then a material dimension to the rise of brahmans in Marwar, one that lay in favor shown by the state.

The Rathor kings tried to maintain a balance of power among these influential demographic groups in their domain. Toward this end, one significant post at court remained reserved for rajputs, that of *pradhān*. The *pradhān* (loosely, "chief") was the head and spokesperson of the body of leading rajput lords within the kingdom. He advised the king on policy in consultation with other leading rajput chiefs in

Marwar. This office dated back to the earliest years of Rathor rule, to a more fraternal order, and the later establishment of the office of *dīvān* cut into the powers and functions of the *pradhān*. Rajputs of course continued to exercise control over a share of the revenues of the vast tracts of land that were their hereditary estates and maintained their own armed retinues. What they lacked in bureaucratic power was compensated to some extent by their command over land-based wealth, arms-based power, and blood-based prestige. Still, as this section has shown, the majority of posts in the larger emergent structure of Rathor administration were in the hands of Vaishnav-Jain mahajans and, to a lesser extent, brahmans.

MERCHANTS AND STATES IN EARLY MODERN SOUTH ASIA

The growing intermixture of trade and statecraft was not unique to Marwar. In other eighteenth-century polities, both in Rajasthan and beyond, merchants had begun to participate to varying degrees in state machinery as courtiers, bureaucrats, and scribes. They purchased temporary revenue assignments, *ijāras*, and in that way became involved in the administration of land revenue.⁹⁴ It was not only land revenue but also a number of other income-generating offices that were let out on *ijāra* contracts by eighteenth-century regimes. In Marwar, Vijai Singh ran his mints by farming out their operation and revenues on *ijāra* to the highest bidder. In one such example, a man of the mercantile community of Agrawals won a year-long contract for the mints of Jodhpur and Pali by paying 2,901 rupees to the state in 1771.⁹⁵ Merchants also formed associations that acted collectively as pressure groups upon local and regional officers. Evidence for this sort of interface between merchants and the state dates back to the late medieval period in South Asia, such as the merchant-warrior Vastupāla at the Vaghela court in thirteenth-century Gujarat. The Jain Vastupāla became deeply influential at this court and there is evidence of a Jain orientation at certain late medieval courts in Gujarat.⁹⁶ Medieval Malabar too witnessed the agency of merchants in forging Islamic practice and authority in a multifaith setting in which there was no Islamic state to appoint *qāzīs*.⁹⁷

This medieval legacy was foundational for the expansion of mercantile engagement with the state. Rich evidence of collective action survives from Mughal Gujarat and nineteenth-century Awadh.⁹⁸ Evidence for the type of formalized collective association with a designated name ("*mahājan*") in seventeenth-century Gujarati towns is absent from eighteenth-century Marwar. Still, there are plenty of episodes described in Rathor records of merchants coming together despite their internal caste barriers to lobby the Rathor government and to push for localized change collectively.

The rise of merchants to influential positions in state and local politics was a product of a number of historical processes. First, the Mughal Empire, established

in 1526, integrated into a single political unit a vast expanse of South Asia. It spanned all of the northern half of India for two centuries and subsumed most of the subcontinent for a few decades at its territorial peak in the late seventeenth century.⁹⁹ The Mughal Empire stabilized and standardized currencies, weights, and measures. Mughal demand for and success in extracting the payment of land revenues in cash as well as their incentivization of the cultivation of cash crops fueled the growth of a money economy in rural areas.¹⁰⁰ Landholders (*zamīndārs*) and revenue assignment holders (*jāgīrdārs*) frequently borrowed from moneylenders in order to meet the state's land revenue demand in years when they had overspent or not yet collected the revenue.¹⁰¹ Men of merchant castes, particularly those who moved in from western India, played a central role in the Mughal fiscal system as operators of mints, as creditors, and in the remittance of money.¹⁰² They also took employment in the Mughal bureaucracy, working as accountants, agents, and recordkeepers.¹⁰³

The period saw the rise of a new type of political entrepreneur, the "portfolio capitalist." The portfolio capitalist combined official functions such as command over military resources and a role in administration with more entrepreneurial ones such as investments in revenue farms, participation in local agricultural trade, and dabbling in long-distance, particularly Indian Ocean, trade. What distinguished portfolio capitalists in north India was their dependence on large moneylending firms, dominated by western Indian Vaishnav-Jain families, for the capital outlay they needed to manage and expand their portfolios.¹⁰⁴

The Mughal aristocracy also became an important clientele for moneylenders, and its members took loans to meet personal, military, or official expenses. Scribal and military elites in the state's employ, who held land-based revenue assignments (*jāgīrs*), frequently diversified their operations into trade. Mughal Emperors, members of the royal family, and nobles participated in the Indian Ocean trade, channeling state power to protect and promote their enterprise.¹⁰⁵ This imperial involvement in overseas trade may have peaked in Emperor Shahjahan's reign (1628–58).¹⁰⁶ To Mughal princes and other royalty raising money for such expensive undertakings as wars of succession, moneylenders would charge very high interest rates.¹⁰⁷ In the seventeenth century, these wealthy bankers had the clout to refuse to lend to Emperor Aurangzeb when he demanded a large interest-free loan to fund his expansionary campaign in peninsular India.¹⁰⁸

The significance of merchant castes, particularly those from Gujarat, in the operation of Mughal finance, imperial and local, was so great that historian Karen Leonard explains Mughal decline as rooted in a withdrawal of credit by the great banking houses of Gujarat in the late seventeenth century.¹⁰⁹ John F. Richards and, more recently, Sudev Sheth have challenged this argument on the grounds that the Mughal state was fiscally healthy and politically strong enough to not be as dependent on mercantile credit as Leonard suggests through the seventeenth century. That said, Richards notes that the eighteenth-century decline of the Mughal state did indeed allow bankers and moneylenders to emerge as a political class.¹¹⁰

The second important process fueling the blurring of the line between mercantile and state activity was the increased integration of hinterland South Asia into expanding global trade networks and new geographies of capital. This was combined with a positive balance of trade. As a result, large sums of bullion and traders from all over the world circulated through the region.¹¹¹ Moneychangers (*sarrāfs*, often Anglicized as “shroff”), brokers (*dallāls*), and bankers (*sāhukārs*, *seṭhs*, and mahajans) who loaned money and transmitted it over long distances using letters of exchange (*hundīs*) grew in number and wealth. These men were overwhelmingly drawn from the demographic pool of Vaishnav and Jain mercantile castes.

European trading companies too relied on a network of agents and brokers, frequently drawn from Hindu and Jain trading communities, in order to do business. They also borrowed heavily from bankers in market towns such as those in Gujarat, particularly in Surat.¹¹² As New World silver flowed into India and the export trade expanded, merchants channeled their profits from trade and credit services into moneylending. Deposit banking, insurance, and bottomry were other revenue streams in the banking business in seventeenth-century Gujarat.¹¹³

The merchants of western India, particularly Gujarat but also southern Rajasthan, acquired both the capital and skills needed to become bankers across South Asia in the early modern period. Origins in Gujarat, with its centuries of flourishing, transregional oceanic trade, gave merchants from the region a head-start in taking command of early modern fiscal networks across the Mughal Empire. During the heyday of Mughal rule, western Indian merchants, including those from Marwar, branched out to all the important trading marts and political centers across north India, reaching as far east as Bengal.¹¹⁴ They were able to very quickly transmit not just money but also crucial information and market intelligence across vast distances, giving them a business advantage over other mercantile groups. Men from Marwar were an important segment among the Vaishnav and Jain merchants who scattered and set up banking and other businesses across north India. Some went farther out, making inroads into peninsular India in the south and the southern fringes of the Russian Empire in the north.¹¹⁵ In the west, they ventured as far as Sindh and occasionally beyond to Iran and Central Asia.¹¹⁶

The third historical process fueling the fusion of mercantile and state power in Marwar was the intensification of trading activity, particularly in this region. Webs of commercial capital in the early modern age not only boosted the banking business but also linked Marwari consumers and producers with the wider world. This expansion in Marwar was due to its location on an arterial trade route connecting the booming ports of Gujarat, such as Surat, with inland depots such as Delhi, Agra, Burhanpur, Patna, and Lahore. One of the routes most favored by merchant caravans wound its way through the towns of Jalor and Merta in Marwar.¹¹⁷ Merchants imported horses, dried fruit, tobacco, lac, asafetida, and perfumes from Multan and Kabul; betel-nut, turmeric, rice, coconuts, and antimony from Sindh; cloth, black pepper, silk, spices, dates, sandalwood, pearls, dyes, and camphor from Gujarat; silks,

other fine cloths, sugar, elephants, and paper from the east; opium, tobacco, Chanderi cloth, sulphur, and sugar from Malwa in central India; and fine woolen fabrics and shawls from Kashmir. Marwar exported iron tools, wool, woven and printed cloth, indigo, salt, bullocks, camels, and horses.¹¹⁸ This thriving exchange within Marwar offered increased business opportunities to the region's merchants.

Fourth, the collapse of the Mughal Empire, rather than ushering in an era of decline for moneylenders, only boosted moneylenders' businesses. During the eighteenth century, merchants from Marwar were able to build on their subcontinental networks to further consolidate their hold over credit and commodity markets far beyond their homeland. In Punjab, Marwari firms were active in the local wool trade. They set up businesses (*koṭhīs*) in political and economic centers across most of India, including places like Lahore, Delhi, Banaras, Patna, Dhaka, Pune, and Hyderabad.¹¹⁹ They had deeply penetrated aspects of state functioning such as revenue collection, money changing, and minting, and they only strengthened that control to become indispensable intermediaries between landowners and peasants on the one hand and the state on the other.¹²⁰ The banking firm of merchants Fatehchand and Manekchand in Dhaka, whose ancestor Hiranand Sahu migrated from the town of Nagaur in Marwar, had such a large financial outlay that the Mughal ruler Muhammad Shah bestowed upon them the title of Jagat Seth or "Banker of the World" in 1723.¹²¹

Marwari merchants also sought to profit from the growing market for opium created by the British trade in this commodity in China. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the English East India Company decided to use its newly acquired territories in India to cultivate opium at lesser cost, which it would then use to fuel demand in China, a market that it was keen to penetrate. Merchants from Marwar invested in opium cultivation in central India, making neat profits by meeting the growing export demand for opium.¹²²

As the decline of the Mughal Empire gave rise to smaller polities, new processes of state formation, and fresh attempts at empire, Marwari merchants were able to leverage their hold over capital and credit to extend their activities from finance to gain a greater hold upon the state and political authority. They lent money to the many rulers in need of funds to finance the ceaseless demands of war and administration, as well as to European traders moving goods across the globe. The *hundī* (bill of exchange) networks of large banking firms continued to play a significant role in remitting money—profits, loans, revenues—across long distances in the eighteenth century.¹²³ Rather than weakening them, the collapse of Mughal authority strengthened the hand of merchants involved in moneylending. Men of trade rose to center-stage in the regional polities that mushroomed after the weakening of Mughal central authority during the eighteenth century. As the European companies became military and political players in the Indian subcontinent, Marwari merchants lent money to them as well.

The rise and, even more so, the decline of Mughal authority, the corresponding growth of regional polities, and European trading and political activity in the Indian subcontinent were extremely lucrative for merchants and moneylenders, and it was the merchants of Marwar, as noted by numerous historians, who seized a generous share of the generated profits. The merchants of the region retained strong familial ties with it, the women of the household remaining back home in Marwar and the men often retiring there after long careers elsewhere.¹²⁴

Within Marwar, merchants occupied a place of prominence and prosperity in the major towns of the kingdom by the mid-seventeenth century, as is indicated by a study of Muhnot Nainsi's state-commissioned survey of the region.¹²⁵ By Nainsi's reckoning, mahajans constituted roughly 30 to 40 percent of the population of three major towns of the kingdom (Sojhat, Jaitaran, and Merta).¹²⁶ In eastern Rajasthan, merchants penetrated the countryside, becoming indispensable intermediaries in the state's relationship with peasants. They were providers of agricultural loans, directly as well as through the state, to peasants.¹²⁷ By the seventeenth century, merchants were crucial buyers of the grain that the state collected as tax and commuted into cash through sale. So indispensable was their role in the local grain trade of eastern Rajasthan that it placed a limit upon the power that the state could exercise upon them.¹²⁸ G. S. L. Devra has shown the growing investment in agrarian land by merchants in the small market towns of northwestern Rajasthan by the end of the seventeenth century.¹²⁹ As Denis Vidal has pointed out, the extent of mercantile influence over the early modern economy cannot be understood with reference only to the merchants' involvement in the state's fiscal arrangements. Rather, a whole domain of mercantile moneylending activity existed outside of the state.¹³⁰ They were not just indispensable as creditors but also as important buyers of grain and manufactures from villages.¹³¹

MERCHANTS IN MARWAR

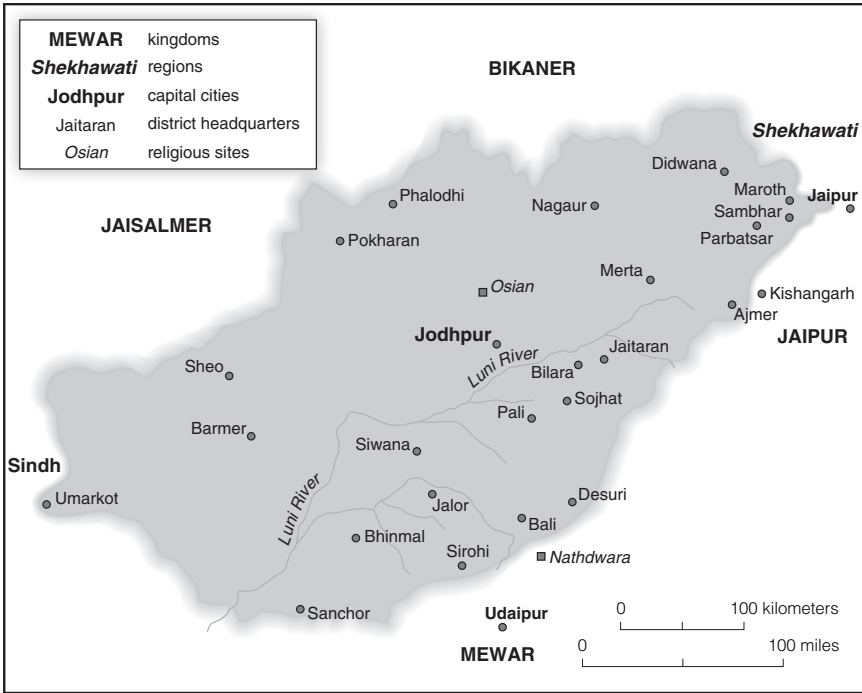
Merchants began to play an active role in local administration in Marwar, as discussed in the previous section. In addition to the many offices I have already discussed that merchants began to hold, revenue administration in Rajasthan also slipped into mahajan hands.¹³² In the early eighteenth century, they stood as surety for revenue farmers (*ijāradārs*) and, in the second half of the eighteenth century, began to bid for revenue farms themselves.¹³³ As in eastern Rajasthan, merchants in Marwar expanded their sphere of activity from trade to revenue farming in the eighteenth century.¹³⁴ Merchant moneylenders became deeply influential in local politics and economics.¹³⁵ Indebtedness to merchant moneylenders became widespread in the course of the eighteenth century not only among ruling elites but also more widely in rural Rajasthan among peasants.¹³⁶ In urban areas, mercantile castes were prominent among the ranks of property holders.¹³⁷ As merchant

moneylenders, they were able to channel the Rathor court's dependence upon them for credit to extract concessional terms to conduct trade.¹³⁸ The Rathor court allowed many a trader to conduct his business at a reduced tax rate and provided security and infrastructure to boost trade in the kingdom.¹³⁹

Artisans too borrowed from local moneylenders and small merchants in order to fund life-cycle rituals and to finance subsistence agriculture.¹⁴⁰ Textile manufacture, a sector that saw rapid growth in the eighteenth century, became subject to the growing role of the merchant-middleman.¹⁴¹ In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the artisans of Marwar found themselves "caught in the quicksand of indebtedness," even if most artisanal manufacture did not fall under the control of merchant capital as it had in coastal India in the same decades.¹⁴² It was not just peasants and landlords in the countryside and artisans in the towns but the king himself who borrowed large sums of money from the merchants, men who had the outlay to loan the sums needed and the good credit required to make large fiscal transfers to overlords.¹⁴³ Ties of kinship, business, and, increasingly, shared religious activity lent cohesiveness to localized communities of merchants.

Claude Markovits has linked the Marwari merchants' rise to subcontinental dominance over money markets, since at least the sixteenth century, with their holding high office in the Rathor state. Some merchant clans commanded political authority and access to the crown as well as to rajput nobility.¹⁴⁴ The aridness of the region and its location between the Gangetic Plains on the one hand and West and Central Asia on the other may indeed, as Markovits suggests, explain the rise of a thriving mercantile community in Marwar. Given the simultaneity of the two processes—the growing political role of Marwari merchants and their rise as bankers in and outside Marwar—it is hard to say which caused the other. And yet, for all the reasons listed above, local, subcontinental, and global, there is no doubt that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Jain and Vaishnav merchants of Marwar formed a diasporic community that commanded a large share of the banking business in South Asia.

When Vijai Singh ascended to the Rathor throne in 1752, he inherited a polity markedly different from the mobile world of his pre-Mughal ancestors. Since the sixteenth century, Marwar had experienced the slow assertion of monarchical command over an order that valorized blood-based claims to fraternal shares in political power and land; the turn to nonrajput groups, particularly merchant castes, to build out a bureaucracy to counter the kinship- and land-based power of the internal rajput rivals of the Rathor monarchy; the rise to subcontinental dominance of merchants originally from Marwar in businesses of trade and moneylending; the immense inflow of silver into South Asia due to a thriving export trade through the early modern period; and the increasing blurring of boundaries between trade, investment, and statecraft in the course of the early modern period. Marwar, like many other parts of early modern South Asia, was a node in an interlinked web of changes that drew upon shifts in and connections with



MAP 2. Marwar, c. 1780.

places near and far, local and global. By the mid-eighteenth century, merchants in Marwar, along with brahmans, wielded far more political power—localized as well as at court—than they ever had before. The geographies of commercial capital and the ebbs and flows of empire generated long-term streams of historical change, flowing at the local, subcontinental, and global scales, that converged in the latter half of the eighteenth century to produce a new elite identity.