

EPILOGUE

As the eighteenth century came to a close, circumstances in Marwar changed quite rapidly. The Rathors had suffered a crushing defeat against the Marathas in 1791, bringing new demands for tributary payments. Internal schisms within the polity escalated. These developments took on increasing momentum through the reigns of Vijai Singh's successors, Bhim Singh and Man Singh, lasting well into the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The *Jodhpur Sanad Parwāna Bahīs* become slimmer from the early years of the nineteenth century, containing far fewer orders than before. It appears that Jodhpur was too mired in conflict in the first quarter of the nineteenth century for the central authorities to respond to local cases and individual petitions—or at least to copy and collect them all systematically at the chancery—in the manner that they had managed through most of Vijai Singh and Bhim Singh's reigns. The establishment of English East India Company paramountcy over Jodhpur in 1818 also introduced an entirely different kind of government.¹ It is for all of these reasons that I terminate my study at this point in Marwari history, but the political and ethical shifts that I have traced had consequences far beyond the geographical and temporal limits of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Marwar. The activities of Vijai Singh and his merchant and brahman officers and subjects built upon wider changes underway not only in the region but also at transregional and global scales. Yet, at the same time, the developments in Marwar that I have traced in this book are important for a fuller appreciation of the precolonial lineages of the transformations in caste and community and the imaginations of the nation, of the body, and of “Hinduism” in the colonial era.

I have argued that merchants built on the dominance they had gained in the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries over state and society in Marwar to play a key role in reordering the region's localized caste orders. They worked through the state and its Krishna-devotee king to elevate their caste practices such as Krishna-centric devotion, an adherence to nonharm and vegetarianism, and bodily austerity to be read as markers of high social rank. In this process, ritual, space, diet, and sexuality became sites for the reconfiguration of elite status. The ethical codes of some became normalized through law as virtuous. Merchants, unlike rajputs, could not base their claims to elite rank in the land or in descent. Nor, unlike brahmans, could they turn to brahmanical prescriptions to justify claims to fullest inclusion among the caste elite. What they could wield was an adherence to a "virtuous" life. This became the grounds upon which they claimed inclusion in the latter half of the eighteenth century among the region's elite and engineered the required shift in the regional caste order.

The elite identity that they remade with state help designated itself "Hindu." A key ingredient of this success, also connected to the growing dependence of kings upon moneylenders, was the Vaishnav affiliation of Maharaja Vijai Singh, the king who ruled Marwar through the bulk of the latter half of the eighteenth century. This precolonial Hindu identity that emerged in eighteenth-century Marwar was defined not in opposition to the Muslim alone, as it came to be in the colonial period, but rather against the figure of the Untouchable. The mobilities and interdependencies that the arid ecology of Marwar generated could not completely hold off efforts across its towns and villages to create a more polarized caste order. Nonetheless, the very existence of these records is a testament to the resistance against this effort, whether through petitions, evasion, or noncompliance. Law, an arena of struggle, was both the ground upon and the means through which this shift played out. Ethics and normative values, in turn rooted in the caste and sectarian cultures of the region's elite, displaced the primacy of custom as a guide to administering social life. Instead, the Rathor state passed universal laws, applicable to all subjects, though in practice these remained differentially applied. This quest for a Hindu body politic played out through a legal vocabulary and practice rooted in a long and deep immersion of the Marwar region in Islamic law.

LEGACIES OF THE VAISHNAV PUBLIC

Was the ethical orientation of the Rathor state in the latter half of the eighteenth century a fleeting chapter in the history of Marwar, one with no lasting effect after the death of Bhim Singh in 1803? Did the Vaishnav-Jain ethos that seemed ascendant in the reign of Vijai Singh simply recede into the domestic lives of the castes and families that were Vaishnav or Jain? On the surface, the record might look quite different because the accession of Man Singh to the throne in 1803 appears to mark a rupture from the precedents set by Vijai Singh and continued by Bhim

Singh. Most notably, Man Singh was not a Vaishnav. Instead, he showered the Nath Yogis of Marwar with the state's largesse. His munificence and protection facilitated the proliferation of new and prominent Nath sites, largely temples and monastic complexes across the kingdom.² Man Singh is said to have sponsored the construction of around ninety Nath temples in Marwar, with five of these being in the capital Jodhpur alone.³ He also built a Nath temple within Mehrangarh Fort, bringing the Nath Yogis into the very heart of Rathor power.⁴ And yet, even as the Vallabhite order in particular and Vaishnavism more generally became displaced as the primary beneficiaries of the Rathor court's patronage in the nineteenth century, they continued to be powerful loci of religious life in Marwar, retaining their following especially among merchants but also among artisans and peasants. In important ways, the decades of Vijai Singh and Bhim Singh's reigns along with the rise to regional power of the mahajans had reshaped the ethical landscape of Marwar fundamentally despite the royal orientation in the first half of the nineteenth century toward Nath Yogis. Vaishnavism's enduring hold in Marwar was in no small part due to the generosity and care that kings Vijai Singh and Bhim Singh had showered on the religious community of *bhakt*s since the mid-eighteenth century.

Maharaja Man Singh also played a part in this, by taking standards set by the elite Vaishnav *bhakti* of Vijai Singh's reign and applying them to the Nath. As soon as Man Singh acceded to the Rathor throne in 1803, prior to the colonial conquest of the region, he began efforts to cleanse the diffuse Nath Yogi community of elements that in his eyes or those of his newly influential Nath mentors were unsavory. Monika Horstmann's study of asceticism in Rajasthan in the early modern period suggests a tension between two tendencies among the region's Nath Yogis. While some adhered to more "transgressive" tantric practices, others preferred to hew closer to the message preached by *bhakti* poets like Kabir, which emphasized vegetarianism and nonharm.⁵ Patton Burchett also has shown the many entanglements among *bhakti*, tantra, and Sufism all through the early modern period.⁶ What role did fifty years of the elevation of *bhakti* and of Vaishnav-Jain ethics play in changing the interaction within the Nath Yogis between these different orientations toward *bhakti* ethics? In November–December of 1803, the very month Man Singh came to the throne, the crown dispatched an order to all its districts (*bhelā parganā*) commanding that, of the many members of the Kundapanth order of Nath in Marwar, only those who worshipped "with sincerity" (*man chit sun karai*) should be allowed to continue their religious practice. The order commanded the governors of all the districts to slowly whittle down the numbers of those Kundapanthis who were behaving in an increasingly "disorderly" way (*badhto phitūr karai*).⁷

Dominique-Sila Khan describes the Kundapanth as a "secret" order whose interpretation of the tantric/yogic path is said to have emphasized sexual intercourse and sexual fluids. It had little regard for caste injunctions and hierarchies



FIGURE 7: Jalandarnath Worship at Mahamandir, by Raso and Shivdas Bhatti, 1812, RJS 2005. ©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.

and rejected social norms. In Rajasthan, these ritual practices were associated by the twentieth century with disciples of localized orders, possibly of a medieval and forgotten Nizari Shi'a origin, that were dominated by "untouchable" communities such as the leatherworking *meghvāls*.⁸ Read in the context of the dominant Vaishnav-Jain ethos in Vijai Singh's reign that this book has shown, this order to reshape an "errant" yogic order from Man Singh's reign points to new avenues for research on the role of the Rathor state in reshaping the Nath "family" toward a "Hindu"-ized form, one that was more in consonance with an emerging elite-caste identity steeped in a Vaishnav-Jain ethos that identified as "Hindu."⁹

MARWARIS AND THE HINDU BODY

At the same time, merchants of Marwari origin gained renown for their pivotal role in a number of arenas outside of Marwar, most central of which was the economy. "Marwari" (meaning "of Marwar") came to be used as a label for a transcaste community of merchants outside of Rajasthan, a community that included a number of merchant families that did not trace their roots to places within the boundaries of the Rathor kingdom of Marwar. Anne Hardgrove argues that the "Marwar" evoked by the caste label "Marwari" in places like Calcutta was straightforwardly an imagined one, bearing only an abstract relationship with the Marwar of the Rathor polity. In many senses, this seems true. In geographical terms, as Hardgrove correctly observes, many of the most prominent "Marwaris" of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century India came from places just outside the borders of the Rathor kingdom. Shekhawati, just northeast of but overlapping with Rathor territory, in particular produced a large number of merchants who went on to make massive fortunes in Calcutta, Bombay, and central India, such as the Birlas, the Goenkas, the Singhania, the Bajajs, the Poddars, and the Dalmias. Shekhawati also gave rise to many men engaged in trade and moneylending who were smaller players in regional and local markets across most of South Asia. The Bikaner and Jaipur regions, contiguous with Rathor territory, also were home to many families who went on to achieve great business success, such as the Mittals and the Pittys, the latter of whom made their fortune as bankers to the Nizams of Hyderabad.¹⁰

That said, it would be untenable to argue that the "Marwar" conjured by diasporic Marwaris and their interlocutors had so little to do with Rathor territories or the region called Marwar that "there is an imagined Marwar that does not exist."¹¹ First, Rathor territories were not fixed and kept shifting over time, and the idea of Marwar geographically never was entirely contiguous with Rathor state boundaries. This makes it difficult to draw a hard line separating localities just outside Rathor borders from those within as being in or out of Marwar. Second, Rathor territories also were a source in the early modern and modern periods of business families pursuing trade, brokerage, speculation, banking, and moneylending outside of Marwar. Some, such as the Jagat Seth family originally from Nagaur,

the Dadhas of Phalodhi, and the Bangurs of Didwana, built highly successful businesses in places such as Patna, Murshidabad, Madras, and Calcutta.¹² Of these, the Jagat Seth family of bankers, discussed also in chapter 1, are notable for their role as powerful financiers in eighteenth-century Bengal. The Mughal state relied on them since the early eighteenth century for its fiscal operations and they became in the mid-eighteenth century primary brokers for the English East India Company.¹³ Third, as Hardgrove herself points out, there is evidence of the appellation “Marwari” being used to denote diasporic trading groups even prior to the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Thus, an association with Marwar did indeed characterize at least some traders active in the Indian subcontinent and beyond in the early modern period and cannot be attributed only to the dynamics triggered by the colonial setting.

Still, what was it that caused the term “Marwari” to have the currency it did in India’s colonial economy? One explanation could be the social and religious significance of sites in Rathor Marwar—such as the town of Bhinmal (earlier known as Shrimal) and the village of Osian near Jodhpur—to the larger Jain diaspora that had already spread into the Gangetic plain by the seventeenth century and which was active in banking and trade. The eighteenth-century processes that I have traced in this book, particularly the combination of capital and governmental power that the merchants of Marwar came to enjoy, contributed to their business success outside of Marwar. We know that merchants of Marwari origin strengthened their grasp over local markets in eastern India and expressed their “arrival” by adopting an aristocratic air. They made their way through town in lavish processions that the partisans of the old order saw as a marker of *inqilāb*, or an upturning of the ideal social order.¹⁵

Back in Rajasthan, porous territorial boundaries meant that bonds of marriage and businesses partnership linked mahajans from Rathor Marwar with their caste fellows from neighboring territories. “Marwari,” when applied to the diasporic mercantile community from Rajasthan, did have roots and connections with Rathor Marwar even as the area it denoted exceeded this kingdom. The political and social standing that the mercantile, Vaishnav-Jain castes achieved in the Rathor polity in the decades that I have studied bestowed on the idea of Marwari origin a particular status and honor that were legible to the wider mercantile diaspora from north and western India. Putative Marwari origin—bringing together diasporic traders of mahajan castes from the wider Rajasthan region—aided cohesion and mutual support within this demographic. The geographic associations of “Marwari” came to be shorthand for caste and ethical codes and helped merchants band together in distant lands, even as their wives and children remained back home in Rajasthan. The label may have provided these diasporic men with the resolve and infrastructure needed to maintain the diet and other lifestyle requirements of their caste.

How the historical experiences of mahajans in eighteenth-century Marwar shaped this history is a question that this book opens up. Marwari merchants had

been successful in deploying collective power—in the form of their caste groups or working cooperatively across mercantile castes and with brahmins—to win state support for their political struggles within Marwar. They were able, in the eighteenth century, to discipline members of their own caste bodies, to redraw social boundaries to exclude the “lowly” and to distance from “Untouchables,” and to have their ethical stances imposed as law on all others. Could this history shed new light on how merchants of Marwari origin who were scattered across South Asia became vectors of the caste “Hindu” ethos that I traced in this book? As they adapted to the plethora of changes in virtually every arena of life unleashed by colonial domination, did these merchants carry with them the drive to work collectively and through the state to enforce their own ethical visions on the wider social order? Did the recent experience and memory of the fruits of mercantile influence in Marwar impart to Marwari origin a certain purchase and a value?

The Marwari diaspora in north Indian towns played an indispensable role in the nineteenth-century construction of Hindi as a language and of the generation of a new Hindi literature, both of which served as vehicles for the construction of a Hindu community.¹⁶ Bharatendu Harishchandra, an Agrawal of the Marwari mercantile diaspora in Banaras, born into a Vallabhite family and later known as the “father of Hindi,” led the way in crafting a new genre of theater that drew upon existing popular traditions but excised from them such “debased” features as unchaste female characters and the use of Persian-origin words.¹⁷ The removal of Persian-origin words was part of the ongoing effort by men among whom Harishchandra was a pioneer to create a new language to accompany the reimagination and reinvigoration of a Hindu community, whose emergence required both reform to meet the challenges of modern times and colonial domination as well as a shedding of “extraneous” elements introduced by “Muslim rule.”¹⁸

Notably, Harishchandra’s recasting of theater was to limit its performance to a select audience of elite patrons and to direct it toward moral edification.¹⁹ This was very much in line with the delineation of the Hindu domain in eighteenth-century Marwar as one in which only caste elites were welcome. Harishchandra also positioned himself as a “spokesman of the emergent middle class, advocating thrift, caution, and career planning,”²⁰ reflecting the projection of mercantile caste ethos as a means of upward mobility for all. Marwaris also contributed in other ways to the “flowering” of Hindi. They were patrons and participants in the growing field of Hindi journalism. The oldest Hindi newspaper in India, *Udant Martand*, began publication in Calcutta in 1826 with Marwari support. There were over twenty Hindi newspapers in India financed by Marwari traders by the end of the nineteenth century, including *Marwari Bapari*, *Burra Bazaar Gazette*, *Marwari*, and *Bharat Mitra*, all of which reported on local economic matters and legal developments.²¹ If the new Hindi was the vehicle for the imagination of modern India and a Hindu India, Marwaris played a leading role in its birth.

The Marwari mercantile diaspora also played an active role at the forefront of the *sanātān dharma* or “eternal religion” movement, which projected an unchanged

spiritual unity, dating back to an ancient past, as underlying the heart of the many *sampradāys* and orders of South Asia. This “revivalist” movement of socially conservative and “high”-caste men confronted the “reformist” agenda of groups such as the Arya Samaj of north India and the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal. On the reformist side, the Arya Samaj rejected the worship of images and the hereditary nature of caste (even as it did not seek to do away with caste entirely). Philip Lutgendorf has argued that the *sanātan dharmīs* tended to define themselves in opposition to “others.” For them, reformist projects such as widow remarriage among “high” castes, the initiation of “untouchables” into elite religious orders, and abandonment of image worship were decidedly incompatible with Hindu identity.²²

At the same time, the *sanātanīs* needed practices and texts to unite them. The text that met this need was the *Ramcharitmānas*, “a *bhakti* work that still preached reverence for cows and Brahmins, claimed to be in accord with a comfortably undefined ‘Veda,’ offered a satisfying synthesis of Vaishnavism and Shaivism, and in the minds of many devotees, stood at one and the same time for fervent devotional egalitarianism, the maintenance of the social status quo, and even a kind of nationalism in that it countered the British colonial ethos with an idealized vision of a powerful and harmonious Hindu state.”²³ The *Rāmcharitmānas* was a vernacular, premodern Hindi rendering of the story of Ram, originally in Sanskrit. The brahman poet Tulsidas (1532–1623) had originally composed it to make the story of the Vaishnav avatar Ram and devotion to him more accessible to women and “low” castes. By the nineteenth century, caste elites, particularly merchants, in the Awadh region had come around to sponsoring recitations and exegesis of this text in private gatherings. The aim was to foster ideals such as virtuous womanhood, ideal kingship, loyal service, and martial glory that were at the heart of the epic of Ram.

To win more followers and unite those already in the fold, the *sanātanī* movement needed funds. Marwari members and sympathizers stepped up. These donors and patrons were galvanized by a sense of belonging to the community of “Marwari” merchants and traders. This Marwari network, in local contexts as well as transregionally, gave generous grants to *sanātanī* initiatives. One important avenue for this support was the Marwari investment in printing presses as a means of spreading their religio-social ideals. For instance, Ganga Vishnu Bajaj and Krishnadas Bajaj of Churu in Bikaner kingdom set up Shri Venkateshwar Printing Press in Bombay in 1871. Beginning with the *Hanumān Chālīsā* and the *Viśṇu Sahasranām*, the press went on to publish thousands of titles spanning religion, spiritualism, philosophy, culture, and history.²⁴ Marwari businessmen also sponsored the publication of magazines meant to promote internal introspection and moral “uplift” among their own caste fellows. Whether as individuals or through formalized associations, Marwaris brought out journals such as *Marwari Gazette* (1890), *Marwari Sudhar* (1921), and *Marwari Agarwal* (1923) in order to “revitalize” the community.

The journal *Kalyāṇ*, and the creation of the Gita Press in Gorakhpur (modern-day Uttar Pradesh) in 1923 as the publisher of this monthly, were both funded by Marwari money. Hanuman Prasad Poddar of Shekhawati and Jaidayal Goyandka of Churu, both of whom were active in diasporic organizations of Marwaris like the Shri Marwari Agrawal Mahasabha, were leaders of the Gita Press enterprise.²⁵ The foundation of the Gita Press marked a turning point in the effort to unite and mobilize not only Marwaris but also a larger Hindu nation with Marwari mercantile castes at its forefront.²⁶ *Kalyāṇ* saw *sanātan dharma*, a return to the imagined ideals of a pure Hindu religion of the ancient past, as the only savior of Marwaris and all other Hindus.²⁷ Until the early 1970s, according to Paul Arney, it had the highest circulation of any Indian periodical and, until the early 1990s, retained the highest circulation of any Hindi monthly periodical.²⁸

Apart from publishing this popular monthly, the Gita Press also played a key role in making the *Rāmcharitmānas* even more accessible to the wider Hindi-reading public. In this, it met with immense success. By 1983, the Gita Press had sold 5.7 million copies of the *Rāmcharitmānas*.²⁹ Even as the journal *Kalyāṇ* openly supported untouchability, some of its activities made Hindu devotion accessible to all, at least anyone who could afford a copy or buy a printed image of God.³⁰ To that extent, the steadfast adherence of Marwari merchants to image worship—central to the Vallabh Sampraday of which many of them were part—in the face of Arya Samaj and other reformist calls for a “return” to a Vedic religion devoid of image worship, played a part in creating a new print-based visual culture of devotion.³¹

Another important avenue for the galvanizing of a unified Hindu body that benefitted from Marwari mercantile support was the cow protection movement, particularly from the early twentieth century onward. *Gaurakṣiṇī sabhās* or cow-protecting councils began to pop up across the United Provinces and the region’s Marwaris funded them.³² The appearance of these bodies was in an atmosphere of increasingly strained relations in the United Provinces between Hindus and Muslims, with *prabhāt pherīs* (delegations of devotees on early morning rounds) that played loud music in front of mosques and “reconversion” to Hinduism or *śuddhi* (“purification”) becoming tools of Hindu community mobilization and expansion against a Muslim “other.” The cow-protectionist impulse also singled out leatherworkers, *chamārs*, and landless, vagrant groups such as *naṭs* (entertainers) and *bañjārās* as complicit in the slaughter of cows.³³ The similarity on this point between the protection of nonhuman lives, and not just cows, in general on the one hand and the persecution of Muslims, butchers, and landless vagrants on the other in eighteenth-century Marwar is hard to miss. Since the protection of cows derived from the particularly sacred nature of this animal in Hindu belief and practice across sects and castes, it could appeal across a vast cross-section of castes in regions like the United Provinces where the Vaishnav-Jain ethos of western Indian merchants was not dominant. As in eighteenth-century Marwar with the concern of animal lives, the United Provinces in the late nineteenth

century saw the use of “the cow to separate from upper caste culture these low caste ‘outsiders.’”³⁴

Arney and Akshay Mukul have noted that at moments when tensions between Hindus and Muslims escalated on a national or regional scale, mouthpieces for the *sanātānīs* among Marwaris, such as the Gita Press’s *Kalyān*, came down firmly and clearly on the side of the perception that Hindus, particularly Hindu women, were in danger and needed defense from “others.”³⁵ Were these same moments also times when tensions between “high”-caste Hindus and those they deemed peripheral if not external to the caste order escalated? What *sanātānī* politics on the ground made clear was that the “others” who were a threat to Hindu religion also included such “Untouchables” as *chamārs*, *naṭs*, butchers, and *bañjārās*.

As with any other community, the *sanātānī* path was not the only response of Marwaris to colonial modernity. Some were drawn to the Arya Samaj, though despite all the differences between the “revivalists” and the “reformists,” there was also much that votaries of these two approaches to Hindu practice agreed and overlapped on. Ritu Birla has shown other convergences between the reformists and traditionalists among the Marwaris, in particular their shared investment in the joint family as a social institution and their opposition as a result to the extension of civil law of contract into marriage.³⁶ By the twentieth century, some Marwaris questioned the conservatism of their community, with prominent members of the community like Jamnalal Bajaj and G. D. Birla supporting widow remarriage, a raising of the age of consent, and de-emphasizing caste, particularly within the broader Marwari community.³⁷

Marwari participation was only one among a whole complex of factors that contributed to the crafting for the first time of “Hinduism” and to visions of a Hindu nation. Still, the role of Marwari leadership in the articulation of the Hindu nation and the proselytization of this idea at the translocal and local levels was significant. Merchants of Marwari origin carried into this vision of the Hindu community and the Hindu nation some of the caste politics and modes of pursuing it that they had developed in eighteenth-century Marwar. To their role as sponsors, leaders, and committed supporters of the conservative vision of the emergent ideal of the Hindu nation and of the “eternal religion” of Hinduism, Marwaris brought not just their financial might but also their precolonial history of effectively organizing under transcaste banners to act as pressure groups upon the authorities.

Unlike in precolonial Marwar, the mercantile diaspora in colonial South Asia found itself shut out of governmental offices. No longer having the option to be part of the state, the Marwari mercantile diaspora reorganized to craft a new public sphere of print, devotional assemblies, and associational politics to mobilize a collective body, create and energize transregional networks, and lobby the government. They pressured the government not only on matters pertaining to business and representation but also in defense of their caste and ethical ideals. The dominant conservative section among the Marwari mercantile community also worked

to propagate beyond their own caste and in alliance with other elite castes, particularly brahmins, their vision of what it meant to be “Hindu.” The active involvement of the Marwari mercantile community in the Hindu nationalist parties and organizations continues into the present.

But what does the precolonial, eighteenth-century history of Marwar have to do with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marwari activism in defense of a particular vision of the Hindu community and Hindu ideals? Despite the message of unity, the collaboration on the ground with such “lower” castes as pastoralists, oilpressers, and sweetmakers, and the effort to make Hindu ideology accessible to the “masses” through cheap printed works, the “Hindu” vision of the mercantile diaspora and its elite caste allies ultimately remains unstable into the present. For the elite castes at the helm of the Hindu nationalist project and in control of the bulk of India’s resources, caste hierarchy and difference remain core values that are at odds with a message of broad “Hindu” inclusivity.

Going back to the nineteenth century, the Marwari diaspora did indeed cherish a Hindu identity grounded in caste. As I argued in this book, this was an elite caste identity that took on shape in opposition to the specter of the Untouchable, which in turn subsumed the Muslim. Colonial forms of knowledge transformed caste itself into something “far more pervasive, far more totalizing, and far more uniform” than it had ever been and also defined it as an order rooted in religion.³⁸ The *sanātani* agenda—against the reform of caste and gender orders and defending practices, ostensibly emerging from “religion,” from encroachment by state legislation—then was an expression of the caste anxiety of the Marwari mercantile diaspora, which in turn had only recently made its way into the very highest echelons of the social order. The creation of distance and the articulation of an embodied distinction from the mass below was hard-won by the merchants, the new middle classes of South Asia, and needed to be defended. The diffusion of Marwari merchants across South Asia in the nineteenth century meant that the political strategies and ethical visions that emerged in eighteenth-century Marwar were dispersed throughout the subcontinent.

Rather than being spokespersons for a premade “conservatism,” the mercantile diaspora in the nineteenth century promoted the pursuit of a vision of Hindu India that was shot through with caste and in which they sought to enshrine their caste privilege. This was incompatible with electoral politics, success in which demanded the agglomeration of as large a voting bloc as possible. Neither was this vision of Hindu India compatible with a scenario in which the weight of a representative’s words depended on the size of their constituency. This tension continues to run through contemporary Indian democracy that pays lip service to the full inclusion of all while refusing to dismantle the structures that underpin caste discrimination and stigma. Coming into the modern, colonial era, one of India’s most powerful mercantile communities, the Marwaris, had an investment in the defense of caste hierarchy and markers of caste distinction as a defining traits

of Hindu-ness. A recognition of this is essential for a full understanding of South Asia's colonial and postcolonial modernities.

DISGUST AND CASTE ETHICS

The emphasis on bodily austerity, the sublimation of base desires, and the pursuit of temperance, vegetarianism, and chastity that were features of the historical recasting of Hindu-ness in eighteenth-century Marwar only took on momentum, even as they were inflected by colonial modernity, as both Hindu identity and caste were remade in the colonial era. Anthropological studies of untouchability have noted the affective dimension of caste in the form of disgust or *ghrṇā/ghin* that those higher up in the caste order are socialized to feel in response to the presence of an “Untouchable.”³⁹ Ambedkar too observed “Hindu dispositions toward ‘untouchables’ as governed by ‘odium and avoidance.’”⁴⁰ An ethnographic study of the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, located just south of Marwar, noted:

The themes of animal sacrifice, butchering, and meat eating continually recurred in the Gujarati discourse on Muslims. They formed an important part of the imaginary grid of the pogrom and allowed for the mobilization of strong collective resentment. Hindu-identified individuals seemed more eager to be explicit in their discussions with me about their quotidian associations and idiomatic expressions concerning meat. Vegetarian arguments emerged when all other arguments for the legitimacy of violence seemed no longer reasonable and the speaker needed to hold on to a distinction in relation to Muslims.⁴¹

Here too disgust, particularly at the sight and smell of meat and by extension by proximity to those who ate it, played a powerful role in stimulating affective responses among caste Hindus toward Muslims.⁴² A notable feature of the posture of aversion toward meat is that the “vice” of meateating generally was bundled alongside other “bad” habits such as drinking, smoking, and illicit sex.⁴³ The evocation of disgust, its association with excessive bodily appetites for the flesh, whether as meat or as sex, and of a defiling body, reverberates through popular representations of the Muslim as “other” in literature and film into the present.⁴⁴ Reinforced through everyday disputes over odor, hygiene, and sensibilities in office dining spaces, school lunch breaks, and residential spaces, the “vegetarian” has become a euphemism for the high-caste Hindu.⁴⁵ Caste operates as an embodied form of difference, and it is through these diffuse and everyday practices rooted in somatic and sensory engagements that the difference, hierarchy, and exclusion of caste are produced and reproduced in India today. Even as modernity has caused the visual markers of caste—of dress, of speech, of bodily adornment—that made caste easily legible in the premodern past to be less reliable, one premodern manifestation of caste, food practice, continues to remain a crucial clue in “discreet” forensics of modern-day caste identification.⁴⁶

Balmurli Natarajan argues that in recent decades elite-caste Indians and the Indian diaspora in the West have recast caste as “culture.” In this representation of caste, practices that form the grounds for the assertion of distinction and the attribution of marginality appear only as cultural variety and not as hierarchy or discrimination. The “culturization” of caste then allows practices heavily laden with prejudice to be presented as “diversity” and “preference,” which in turn is an obstacle to the anticaste project.⁴⁷ Vegetarianism, rather than being a matter of cultural or ethical preference alone, is in the South Asian context imbricated with caste ideology and caste practice. This, I have argued, has a deep history dating back to the early modern era.

The project to annihilate caste then demands a recognition of its quotidian forms, of the centrality of touchability/untouchability, and of the deep history that lies behind present-day attachments to bodily ethics that are an expression of caste. Rather than a vague and unhistoricized “tradition” or timeless brahmanical texts, a history of political struggle and of the emergence of new social groups in the early modern age played a significant role in the fusing of vegetarianism with “elite” caste identity beyond solely brahmans. The slow and diffuse birth of a global capitalist order in the course of the early modern period led to a reformulation of caste through nonviolence and vegetarianism as added attributes of caste “purity.” The leadership and activity of mercantile groups played a key role in engineering this shift, demonstrating that caste ideology could be reshaped by nonbrahmans too. Even as the early modern age permitted the geographical circulations, flows, and encounters that recent scholarship on the early modern era has highlighted, it also intensified social fixity for those at the receiving end of local power structures.