The book studies the political experience of an important occupational group in eighteenth-century Marwar, a princely state in western India. The interest of the study is in the relationship between artisans and elites. The book makes imaginative use of new resources, such as petitions submitted by artisans and proceedings of local courts, to develop a rich and nuanced picture of the negotiations that took place between artisans and the dominant classes, including mainly officers of the state, urban rich consumers, and landowners, who were clients and patrons of artisans in the countryside. The thesis advanced here is that artisans, despite their low ritual status, were also recognized as useful to the state—indeed suppliers of a critical service in a regional state trying to consolidate its power and status. The material illustrates the ambivalent attitude of the more powerful groups toward artisans, the political space that artisan communities could carve for themselves even in a deeply hierarchical and unequal society, and the notion of just and legitimate conduct underlying routine interactions between the strong and the weak. Consumption, skill, ideology of kingship, the community as an institution of governance, and the community as a jural unit stabilized the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate.

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter provides a wide-ranging and competent review of the relevant historiography. The discussion recognizes the relevance of caste in maintaining relations of power, while also taking note of the great limitations of caste as an analytical tool. The chapter then moves to the more recent models of domination by cultural means. The second chapter develops the political and geographical context. It situates the state within the debate on the eighteenth-century transition, and observes the precarious fiscal situation in which the Rathor raj found itself in the mid-eighteenth century, making it particularly dependent on nonagricultural enterprise. The chapter also presents a rich description of the harsh semiarid environment in which the main actors lived and worked. Geographically speaking, the kingdom was divid-
ed into distinct segments: the relatively dry and poor western half and the relatively wet/irrigated eastern half. Strategic position with respect to trade routes, the fiscal weakness of the state, and the poor conditions of agriculture had made merchants and bankers prominent in the region, and therefore, gave rise to towns that consumed a lot of skill-intensive manufactures. The third chapter deals with the community-bound institutions of dispute settlement, and the autonomy that these enjoyed in the rule of law. Rural artisans were relatively less collectivized, and therefore more exposed to the arbitrary exercise of power by the landed elites. The fourth chapter deals with this segment and shows the iniquitous nature of the treatment of these people by propertied groups, and the biased way in which agents of the state often intervened in such matters. By contrast, the town artisans could employ community solidarity, and make use of the politics of legitimization somewhat more effectively, a theme explored in the fifth chapter. In the last and shortest chapter of the book, the author argues that artisans were under increasing pressure from “changing times” in the late eighteenth century.

The book claims that this new description qualifies the frameworks that historians of South Asia often employ to make sense of the “sociology of power.” Critically reviewing such categories as “exploitation,” “hegemony,” “dominance without hegemony,” “patriarchal culture” of patronage and dominance, and “pre-bourgeois hierarchical culture” that entrenched the working poor within the relationships that had made them poor and politically weak to begin with, the book presents two recent alternative perspectives: one that recognizes the divisions and differentiations within the working poor, and the other that looks for the “weapons of the weak” and forms of everyday resistance (see pp. 16-20). The aim of the book is to uncover artisans’ forms of everyday protests, acts of resistance, appeals, and negotiations as a means to protect their already vulnerable position in society. In doing so, the book uses an archival resource that is uniquely able to capture such strategies. The “subaltern” cannot speak—a member of the subaltern studies collective diagnosed some time ago.[1] In this book, the subalterns recover their voice.

Unfortunately, they do not say very much. There is a repetitive quality in the main body of evidence. The evidence is used to provide a snapshot, whereas a narrative frame remains missing throughout. The subalterns do not speak to the scholar interested in either the economic and social history of arid Rajasthan or the history of artisans more generally. Furthermore, by tying itself to the dominance-resistance analytical narrative, the book addresses a rather limited and possibly dwindling readership. Interactions between ecology, state, and the economy are not theorized adequately. The market as a factor potentially shaping and changing relationships is not given any role in the story. The distinctiveness of the artisan experience in this region compared with others within South Asia or beyond remains obscure. One wishes for a more differentiated view of the artisan groups. In this picture, differences, by skill, commodity, or organization, for example, if they are acknowledged at all, do not play a significant part.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the book represents a substantial achievement. Its use of unconventional archival sources deserves credit and wider notice. Much of the raw material makes a fascinating read. And since the subaltern studies collective has not taken much interest in the artisans who formed an important segment of the working population in South Asia, historians specializing in the dynamics of power and protest will welcome the book and its methodological critique.

Note
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