This set of essays on the social and economic history of the western Indian province of Rajasthan is a festschrift for Professor Dilbagh Singh, who taught for several decades at the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The volume contains sixteen chapters, most of which are by his former students. That in itself is testament to his mentorship of doctoral students over the years. Since the book was published by Primus Books in New Delhi, its distribution in the Euro-American academy is perforce likely to be more limited than works published or distributed by global publishing corporations or university presses outside South Asia. This review hopes to persuade readers that the book deserves wide circulation for the insights it provides into one arid and semi-arid zone at multiple crucial conjunctures.

In their introduction the editors, Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj, R. P. Bahuguna, and Mayank Kumar, provide a summary of Dilbagh Singh’s research and a useful survey of the historiography of Rajasthan. As with many other subfields of South Asian history, rigorous work continues to be produced and published within the region; however, many of these scholars are typically ignored in metropolitan, anglophone scholarship. Dilbagh Singh’s work in the 1970s and 1980s explored the workings of credit in the agrarian economy of eighteenth-century Rajasthan. In so doing, it helped to dismantle entrenched perceptions of village society in South Asia as unchanging and highly stratified. He also published on the state’s regulation of the domestic sphere in the later eighteenth century. As was true of his own work, the chapters in this festschrift display an enviable mastery over the voluminous records from the seventeenth century that are now housed at the Rajasthan State Archives in Bikaner.

Word limits prevent me from doing more than highlighting some of the many important essays in this volume. Yogendra Singh provides an overview of the social sciences in India after it obtained independence from colonial rule in 1947 to the present. He suggests that in the first two decades, the social sciences rested on axiomatic assumptions about the possibility of socioeconomic and political consensus among the citizens of the new, Indian nation-state. In more recent decades, he suggests, the emphasis has shifted yet again, “towards multi-directional theoretical choices” (p. 15). In parallel, he argues that we are currently witnessing a deeper structural as well as ideological crisis in the social sciences, triggered by the new asymmetries of globalization and the information revolution.

G. S. L. Devra attempts to connect the contemporary Central Asian ethnonym “Sart”—Turkic-
speaking town-dwellers and settled agriculturists—to *sarthavahas* from early India. His chapter attempts to discern how the term “Sart” evolved from describing an occupational group to becoming something of an ethnonym by the early second millennium. B. L. Bhadani correlates the textual and archival evidence for Jaina mercantile activities from the second millennium CE on the one hand, with material evidence of Jaina religious activity on the other: the construction of buildings and shrines for religious activity, as well as the number of idols in various metals and alloys. He shows how, in the fifteenth century, a period of expanded economic activity is correlated in the available record with a dramatic increase in the number of metal sculptures and idols. He thus suggests that the expansion of Jaina monastic networks was closely tied to the rising fortunes of Jaina merchant networks and groups. Both chapters bring unusual sources together to outline a social history of merchant groups in Rajasthan over the *longue durée*, c. 800-1800 CE. And both authors suggest close links between mercantile activity and expanded monastic networks. However, evidence between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries is telescoped indiscriminately without regard to the relative chronology of the sources. In that sense, both authors have missed an opportunity to trace more subtle shifts in trade, its sociology, and its geography, and the correlation of any or all of these with monastic activity.

Shashi Arora Devra’s “Forms of Remarriages in the Marginal Sections of Societies of Rural Rajasthan (c. 1700-1800)” is one of the empirically richest chapters. She explores the sociology and economics of how women from peasant cultivator castes and artisan castes were routinely remarried. The varied nature of these practices is apparent even from the multiple terms denoting kinds of remarriage: *nata, palle lagana, and ghar men dalna* to cite just three distinct kinds of practice. The chapter presents striking case histories, and lends itself to being used in undergraduate classrooms because of its use of the archival evidence, richly footnoted. For instance, we see a widow’s in-laws agreeing to release her to be remarried so long as the bride price they paid at the time of the original wedding is returned to them. They then issue a formal declaration freeing the widow. Widows had rights over their husbands’ property; and neither the in-laws nor the natal family could remarry the widow against her will. During periods of severe drought in this arid-zone region, a deserted woman could move to someone else’s house without the document from her in-laws. However, if her husband returned, she was required to return as well, a heavy penalty being levied otherwise on her new husband or in-laws. In many such kinds of remarriage, both the village council and Marwar state received fees; the state also levied an additional tax.

It is worth pointing out the echoes in Arora’s work of Lucy Carroll’s older research on marriage, divorce, and inheritance patterns among lower-caste women in colonial north India.[1] What is also remarkable is the entirely contractual nature of these marriages was openly acknowledged by all parties. We see in this history, densely rooted in the archive, none of the sacralization and huge symbolic investment in monogamy that even professional historians typically assume from today’s perspective to have been always normative for all “Hindu” women in the past. What Arora is helping us to comprehend is how such assumptions can rest unchallenged only through ignorance of, or erasure of, the practices of occupational groups of supposedly lower status in the past.

Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj’s chapter on the challenges of tax farming (*ijara*) in eighteenth-century Mewat is based on village- and district-level revenue records. The extraordinarily rich detail apparent in the footnotes points to the potential for a dense economic and social history for this entire region. The chapter is also exemplary as an instance of historical method: the meticulous footnotes mean that it is possible for a skilled reader to reach differing conclusions from the same evid-
ence. For example, as Bhardwaj outlines tensions between older residents of Mewat villages and new cultivators brought in under *ijara* contracts, we realize that most of the older residents belonged to a single “community,” the Meo. It is therefore possible to infer how tensions generated by the introduction of new cultivation rights and revenue arrangements may well have been articulated as tensions between the (largely Muslim) Meo and the new cultivators (who were often non-Muslim Ahirs). Similarly, Bhardwaj documents how imperial commanders allotted tax shares in the region complained that petty Rajput landholders in the locality (*bhomnia*) created disturbances in order to extract *ijara* rights from them. He also provides evidence for the additional exactions upon traders by the new revenue farmers. As exactions increased, so did complaints. Bhardwaj therefore concludes: “As a mechanism conceived and used by the emergent regional political entities to maximally appropriate the agricultural surplus for self-aggrandizement in a short span of time, it [*ijara*] could not function as a stable institution” (p. 75).

R. P. Bahuguna considers rituals of kingship in the state of Marwar. He also argues that a culture of royal ritual prospered during times of peace and stability and not in times of war, famine, and political turmoil. Bhupinder Chaudhry contributes to the growing historiography of water management in arid-zone Marwar state by focusing on lift irrigation from wells. In her chapter on the hero cult of Goga Pir, Rajshree Dhali shows how Goga was deified in the eighteenth century. As elsewhere in South Asia, hero cults are notoriously difficult to historicize and Dhali deserves much credit for her contribution. Narayan Singh Rao’s essay on seasonal peasant migration and agrarian production draws on the rich records for Kota state (southeastern Rajasthan) between 1700 and 1900.

Mamta (who uses only one name) contributes an essay on banking and credit. It bears out what we know about eighteenth-century military fiscalism from elsewhere in the subcontinent—that loans, increasingly taken against promises of land revenue, financed the military campaigns of various rulers. Members of the same banking groups were also employed by the revenue administrations of these states. Under these fiscal pressures, revenue farming accelerated in the later eighteenth century. Rajput states were seeking stable income to buy peace from the Maratha raiders, while shifting risk from production shortfalls on to revenue farmers. The consequence was a growing state dependence upon merchant-financiers. Where Mamta’s essay goes further, however, is in the comparative evidence she provides about numerous small and large loans by various individuals, including the loans incurred to pay the Maratha raiders.

Mayank Kumar provides an example of the ingenious use of archives for environmental history. He indirectly estimates rainfall through a tabulation of harvest yields and of crops (with differing water requirements) that were actually grown each season. Tanuja Kothiyal’s essay provides us with a valuable chronology for the evolution of status hierarchies among the Rajput ruling elites of western India between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Kailash Rani’s essay on widow remarriage in eighteenth-century Marwar highlights how interdining and intermarriage (*roti aur beti*) indicated both the boundaries of the caste groups as well as their relative rank. She also points out how, contrary to widespread present-day assumptions, widow remarriage was not merely prevalent among peasant cultivators but also among upper-status groups like Brahmans, Rajputs, and trader castes.

Thus many chapters can be read individually and assigned in classrooms as stand-alone essays. The volume presents a complex picture of a region during a period of transition, the long eighteenth century. And yet, there are places where one wishes that the authors had gone further with
their evidence and its interpretation. For instance, there is a literalist fidelity to the archive that prevents the authors here, perhaps, from thinking about comparisons over time or across regions. So, in the articles on agriculture and agrarian relations, there is no mention of the copious scholarship on the Maratha Deccan for the same period, even though at least some part of that zone is ecologically similar to Rajasthan. The rigid observance of disciplinary boundaries silences echoes from beyond the discipline of history. Dhali’s essay on Goga Pir does not cite Dominique Sila Khan’s pioneering work on the hero cults of the western Indian desert and their linkages with Ismaili groups over the centuries.[2] Again, the strength of the evidence allows an informed reader to note disjunctions between different chapters—for instance, the essays by Bhardwaj and Rao, on Mewat and Kota respectively, present somewhat contradictory evidence on revenue farming, *ijara*. Are we to consider the expansion of *ijara* as deleterious for peasants because of the increased burden on cultivators in a system geared to short-term gains, as Bhardwaj suggests? Or, are we to consider the incentives given to cultivators and seasonal migrants in the expansion of cultivation that Rao points to? The editors could have pointed out these disjunctions in the introduction, highlighting the distinct nature of the archive for each “princely” state.

And finally, with the exception of the essay by Khurshid Khan, on the role played by women in the discourses and teachings of the Chishti shaikhs of the fourteenth century, no Persian materials are used. This has to do with the typical nature of language training for historians of Rajasthan, no doubt. Scholars learn to read the Marwari materials in the archive, but not Persian. This means that daily news reports in Marwari, the *haqiqat bahis*, are consulted in great detail, but not their Persian-language counterparts, the Mughal *akhbarat*. This is especially consequential in part because there are two distinct sets of daily news reports available, one in Marwari speaking from within the region, and the other in Persian, about the region and addressed to the imperial overlord. It is a comment on our field and on our training as historians that nobody has yet registered this elementary fact and sought to train in both languages. In every other way, however, this is a work of deep and rigorous scholarship that deserves the widest possible readership, and should provoke more comparative explorations.

Notes


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