

Introduction

“To put it simply: People who touch things that we do not touch *become* untouchable.”¹

How significant is the history of untouchability for an understanding of South Asia’s early modern past? Studies that approach early modern caste as a whole tend to represent the “untouchable” castes as being at the bottom-most rung of a graded order and untouchability as part of the larger complex of caste practices. But the exclusion and discrimination that those deemed “Untouchable” experienced was not merely a degree removed from the castes just above them. To the contrary, a chasm separated the “untouchable” castes from “caste society,” a chasm that extends into the ritual domain to the present day, with *bhaṅgīs* and *halālkhors*—groups associated in the caste imagination with clearing human waste—having their own religious practices that have little or nothing to do with those of “caste” Hindus and Muslims.² Nor do they capture how central the specter of the Untouchable was to the operation of caste. There is then a need to pay attention to untouchability in distinction from the larger caste order in early modern South Asia.³ This book offers a history of the reconstitution of the “Untouchable” in the precolonial, early modern period, a process that I argue was intertwined with the reconfiguration in this same period of the “Hindu.”

Aniket Jaaware argues, in contradistinction to sociological and anthropological approaches that privilege marriage and inter-dining in their study of caste, that the practices of touchability and untouchability operate at a deeper, more foundational level to be the markers of caste.⁴ Traces of “untouchable” things, Jaaware tells us, carry the potential to be identified with the whole of the persons who touch those “untouchable” things.⁵ This is certainly reflected in the eighteenth-century archives on which this book is based. These archives, which among other things record the experience of castes engaged in clearing human waste and working with carcasses and hides, can be observed to have played a unique and constitutive role in the creation and renewal of caste consciousness. At the same time, despite

the discursive configuration of untouchability as bodily pollution, land, labor, and debt relations too played a significant role in placing particular castes outside the pale of the social.⁶

Generations of historical research have firmly laid to rest for scholars of South Asia the conception of a timeless India lacking in history produced and nurtured by colonial administrators and historians, of which an unchanging, hereditary caste order was a key pillar.⁷ Nicholas Dirks and Sumit Guha have shown that in precolonial South Asia, kings were integral to caste politics and hierarchies, that caste orders changed over time and were not anchored in brahmanical scripture and ideals alone, and that caste was only one of many loci of identity.⁸ The picture of a timeless caste “system,” however, persists in popular discourse, albeit reborn among some quarters as a relatively benign order of occupational and “worth”-based stratification.⁹ Yet, this book argues, there was a limit to the fluidity or negotiability of caste and that limit stood at the boundary that separated the *bhaṅgī* (or *halālkhōr*)—the remover of household and bodily waste—from all others and which served to anchor the precolonial conception of the Untouchable. The figure of the *bhaṅgī* embodied in elite minds the specter of Untouchability, a living and tangible vector of it that lived and worked within caste society. The *bhaṅgī*, as the Untouchable par excellence, could be amalgamated with other castes deemed “proximate,” as I will show, to draw a line separating caste from outcaste. In the eyes of caste elites, this line was not fixed and, depending on context, could shift so far as to include almost everyone but the rajputs (landed warrior elites), brahmins (priests, scholars, and scribes), and merchants. The *bhaṅgī*, however, was indisputably and always “untouchable.”

The margins of caste society then faded from fullest inclusion to total exclusion, with the *bhaṅgī* marking the core of the always excluded. Proximity to the *bhaṅgī*, whether real or imagined, placed others at risk of being rendered beyond the pale of social inclusion. This perhaps also explains what Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana have called the “Gandhian Harijan ideology,” which represented Dalits through “the stereotype of the *bhaṅgī* (scavenger) figure and stigmatized victim in need of reform from above.”¹⁰ M. K. Gandhi, as a merchant-caste man who came of age in western India about a century after the period about which I write here came to a close, likely inherited the perspective on untouchability and its embodiment in the *bhaṅgī* that the records of the Rathor state reflect. There was, it appears, a deeper history to the reading of the *bhaṅgī* as the emblem of untouchability. This in turn makes clear that among the merchant, brahman, and other elite-caste actors who petitioned the state, concerns with ritual purity and pollution, though certainly not the only and “encompassing” principles ordering caste society and life within it,¹¹ did guide behavior and priorities. These ideas of purity and pollution were centered on the body, generating particular forms of exclusion in which touch, bodily substances, descent, and other corporeal aspects of personhood were central.

While historians have written about “untouchable” communities in the colonial and postcolonial periods, the focus of their analysis remains on the transformations wrought by modernity upon the history of these groups. Still, these studies have made preliminary efforts to understand the precolonial context preceding the changes they trace, and I build in this book on their efforts.¹² Discussions of untouchability through precolonial, early modern South Asian sources have been limited to studies of poetry composed in the voice of “untouchable” poet-saints such as Ravidas (also known as Raidas), born to a leatherworking family in Varanasi and thought to have lived in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. These studies make clear the limits of extrapolating historical information about interfaith or caste-centered conflict from poetry and literature.¹³ My reliance on state orders responding to subjects’ petitions and localized disputes allows me to offer a more granular, everyday account of the construction and practice of untouchability in the early modern period. It also makes possible a better understanding of the role of state power in caste orders in precolonial South Asia than has so far been possible by scholars working with literary, devotional, or philosophical texts.

At the same time, I do not try to recuperate the “voice” of the castes deemed untouchable or lowly, recognizing the mediation of scribal renderings and truncations upon petitions and testimonies. I do, however, seek to represent the historical experiences of eighteenth-century actors even as filtered through the “scripts of power” that are the Rathor archives. I also excavate the particular ways in which lowliness, marginality, and exclusion were engineered through law and administration in this historical setting. Understanding Hindu-ness and caste in precolonial South Asia requires a close engagement with the history of the construction and practice through law of untouchability. The state, its law, and its administrative machinery were integral to the operation of caste, not just through the distribution of honors and kingly substance as gifts,¹⁴ but also through direct interventions in favor of local elites. In this history, it was not an already-defined, textually derived set of brahmanical values that formed the axis along which localized caste orders and their exclusions occurred in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Instead, the ideals and practices of other, nonbrahman caste groups could play a role in shaping the ethical, social, and bodily requirements of elite caste rank and in constructing ideological notions of purity in precolonial South Asia.

This discussion of elites brings me to the other central concern of this book: Where is the merchant in early modern South Asian history? And where is the merchant in histories of caste? While there are many studies of mercantile activity in the domain of trade and to a lesser extent politics, merchants remain peripheral to ideas about social change in early modern South Asia. This book suggests that the eighteenth century saw South Asian merchants make the leap from participants in state machinery to leaders of political change. Joining hands with others with more tenuous claims to courtly leadership, such as brahmins, the merchants of Marwar were catalysts in the crafting through state power of a new elite identity—

the “Hindu.” When operationalized on the ground, it was defined not against the Muslim as such but rather in caste terms, against the specter of the Untouchable. The “Otherness” of the Muslim too was rendered legible through caste, with an emphasis on embodied difference. The “Untouchable,” in turn, was a social body named in these records as “*achhep*,” a term that translates to “untouchable.”

“Hindu” was a transcaste, umbrella category defined against the Untouchable. But the “Untouchable” also included the Muslim (*turak*), who in turn was collapsed into the same category as leatherworkers, landless vagrants, and castes engaged in clearing waste. Nowhere is this more clear than in the following command:

[1785] *Kāgad do koṭvālī chauntrā ūpar doḍhī rā: aprañch uṭhai saiḥar maim sārā ī nu kaih deṇo su pohar rāt bājyā pachhai doy ghaḍī tāīm śrī paramēśvar rā nām̄v rojīnai liyām karai su hinduvām nu kehjo nai turak dhedh chamār thorī bāvri halālkhōr achhep jāt huvai jīnām nu nahī kehjo nai pher chauntrā rā ādmī rojīnai saiḥar mai phir nai kayām karai su pohar rāt bājyā pachhai doy ghaḍī tāīm sadāī nām̄v levo karai śrī hajūr ro hukam chhai.*

1 nāgaur	kāsīd chalāyo huvā dai
1 meḍtai	kāsīdām rī ḍāk maim dīyo
2	duvāyatī pañcholi nandrām nu phurmāyo ¹⁶

[1785] Two documents for the front room at the magistracy: Instruct everyone in these towns to recite the name of Śrī Parameśvar (the Supreme Lord) two *ghaḍīs* into the night *pahar* (or, about a quarter of an hour past sunset) every evening. Relay this to Hindus (*hinduvām*) but not to the *achhep* (“untouchable”) castes, these being *turaks*, *chamārs*, *dhedhs*, *thorīs*, *bāvris*, and *halālkhōrs*. By the order of His Highness, men from the magistracy should roam through the town daily, announcing that the name must always be recited two *ghaḍīs* into the night *pahar*.

1 to Nagaur	a mail carrier has been dispatched
1 to Merta	has been sent with the mail carriers’ post
2	issued by Pañcholi Nandram to whom it was told

The office of the Maharaja Vijai Singh (r. 1752–93) dispatched this order to two of its provincial capitals, the towns of Nagaur and Merta, in 1785. These towns were administrative headquarters for two of the most populous of the sixteen provinces that made up Vijai Singh’s kingdom of Marwar, situated in the southern and central parts of the modern-day state of Rajasthan in western India and sometimes also known by the name of its capital, Jodhpur. Both of the towns at the heart of the order were also regional centers of trade, and Nagaur had the added trait of being a busy center of Sufi pilgrimage due to the presence there of the shrine of Saint Hamiduddin Chishti. The order states quite plainly that all the Hindus (*hinduvām*) in these two towns should recite the holy name of Śrī Parameśvar (literally, “Supreme Lord”) at a fixed time of evening each day.¹⁷ The wording of the order suggests that “Hindu” was an umbrella term that subsumed within it a number of castes. At the same time, the order makes amply clear that “Hindus” did not

include members of another transcaste body—the Untouchable (*achhep*, literally “untouchable”¹⁸). While leaving the constitution of “Hindu” vague, this state command defined clearly who exactly counted as Untouchable: Muslims (*turaks*),¹⁹ skimmers and leatherworkers (*dheḍhs* and *chamārs*, who also worked as agricultural laborers in the countryside), vagrant hunters (*thorīs* and *bāvrīs*),²⁰ and removers of human waste (*halālkhors*, also called *bhangīs* elsewhere in these records).²¹

This imagination of the local caste order can be discerned in a large number of petitions and commands inscribed in the Rathor records, making clear that this order, even if it articulated this vision in the starkest terms, was not an isolated one in terms of its import. In tracing this push for a clearer demarcation of caste boundaries in this region in eighteenth-century South Asia, I make three interventions. First, I argue that a heightened polarization of the caste order in some parts of South Asia was due to the local effects of economic shifts occurring at transregional and global scales. Second, I suggest that this emergent Hindu-ness was defined in caste terms, with the Muslim and the Untouchable reinforcing each other to make legible what the limits of Hindu-ness were. Third, I submit that the association between elite caste status and vegetarian diet on the one hand and between lowliness and eating meat on the other owes much to this chapter in South Asian history and to the rise of merchants to localized power in the early modern period. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai have called for a re-centering of the body and of everyday sensory experience in the conception of the social.²² In this book, I offer such a history of everyday and localized encounters between different sensory-ethical regimes focused on remaking social bodies. This fusing of lowliness and eating meat with being outsiders to the “Hindu” fold as defined in eighteenth-century, precolonial South Asia continues to be of significance to caste politics and everyday life in India and in the South Asian diaspora today.

CASTE AND CAPITAL

So what was it about the eighteenth century that fueled the rise of a state like that of the Rathors in Marwar, one that did not hesitate to intervene in localized patterns and caste customs in order to impose a particular vision of an ideal caste body upon its subjects? Answering this question entails attention to changes that occurred at not only the regional and subcontinental levels but also at transregional and global scales. Drawing on recent turns in global history, I suggest that shifts beyond and seemingly outside the region help explain changes that otherwise appear to be purely local in origin.²³ Transformations at multiple scales—regional, subcontinental, and global—and along different timelines then worked to generate particular changes legible in the locality. This is a particularly fruitful approach for Marwar, since the eighteenth century was one that brought an extraordinary transformation in the fortunes of merchant-moneylenders from the region who had spread out across the Indian subcontinent.

Perhaps due to their proximity to Gujarat, a coastal region with a deep history of participation in Indian Ocean trade, merchant castes from Marwar were among a slew of western Indian mercantile castes well acquainted with sophisticated accounting and banking skills that took advantage of the peace and territorial consolidation made possible by the Mughal Empire from the mid-sixteenth century onward. Mughal revenue demand in cash, the greater standardization of weights and measures, the administrative need for men trained in accounts, for credit, and for the transfer of large amounts of money from one part of the empire to another, were among the factors that benefitted western Indian merchants both as traders and as employees of the expanding Mughal state. The hereditary mercantile castes of Gujarat and Rajasthan were able to deploy networks of caste and kinship to quickly funnel funds and business intelligence across vast distances in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The line between statecraft and trade became blurred, with political functionaries, nobles, and even kings participating in trade on the one hand and merchants thriving in administrative departments on the other.²⁴ While such a close connection between trade and politics may have existed in coastal polities from the medieval period onward, the sixteenth century saw a deepening of this relationship inland as well.

As a number of historians have argued, the period encompassing the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries was an age that saw the emergence of new kinds and organizations of production in South Asia that may be characterized as early, commercial, or mercantile capitalism.²⁵ The era of commercial capital was a global one, unfolding coevally across the world from the medieval period and intensifying from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. It differed among other ways from its successor, industrial capitalism, by the constant circulation and high fluidity of capital rather than its investment into fixed assets.²⁶ Frank Perlin has shown the many ways in which South Asia as a region became deeply interlinked in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—even prior to colonial conquest by the English East India Company—with the rest of the world. For instance, Indian textiles and cowrie shells were carried to Africa by European traders and exchanged for slaves to be traded across the Atlantic.²⁷ Over time, the strong control that merchants began to exercise over commercial manufacturing led to a drain of resources from regions and populations specializing in production and to the concentration of wealth not only in the hands of particular groups in South Asia but, with the involvement of European traders, in metropolitan centers in western Europe. Areas that flourished as centers of commercial manufacture were not in fact necessarily poised to make a transition to industrial capitalism.²⁸ Instead, the webs that tied them to transregional exchange made these regions of commercial manufacturing essential contributors to organizational change, capital accumulation, and reinvestment in world regions.²⁹

So interwoven were nodes of economic activity around the world in the early modern age that economic forms and changes in some (though not all) parts of

the globe could not be fully understood by the late eighteenth century without attention to developments in far-flung but connected regions.³⁰ Money began to penetrate everyday life, mediating not only economic transactions but also social and political ones. The merchants of Marwar in the eighteenth century formed a diaspora even as they maintained roots in the land of their origin, often leaving wives and children back “home” in Marwar as they pursued wealth elsewhere. Many remained in Marwar and, as mentioned above, a large number participated in Rathor administration. They worked not only as scribes and accountants but also as ministers and governors, participating in government and warfare. As Rathor kings sought to counter the blood-based claims to power and to a share of sovereignty that their rajput caste fellows could command, they came to rely increasingly on men of merchant castes.

The records upon which I rely for this book, the *Jodhpur Sanad Parwāna Bahīs*, bear the imprint of merchant administration in numerous ways.³¹ First, their very form—the *bahī*—was closely associated with merchants by the early modern period and continued to be so well into the modern era. These ledgers consisted of long and narrow pages, roughly three feet by one foot, that were bound together at the top with thread, and were encased in soft canvas covers, usually overlaid with red cotton cloth. These *bahīs* were capable of being folded and tied together for compact storage. Merchants, particularly of western Indian origin, used *bahīs* to maintain their accounts and to record transactions. In eighteenth-century Marwar, as in some other rajput principalities in Rajasthan at the time, a range of records and not just accounts were maintained in *bahīs*.³² Second, the commands are sometimes attributed to particular officers, many of whom are identifiably of Vaishnav-Jain merchant castes. Third, officer lists of the eighteenth-century Rathor state that survive into the present day identify the holders of such key offices as head of the royal chancery (*śrī hajūr rā daftar*, in which Rathor records were written, compiled, and maintained), the prime minister, the officer in charge of military matters, and the governors of districts to be dominated by merchants.

The role of merchants in early modern social and political convulsions has been well established in North American and western European history. Recent scholarship, however, has underscored that merchant-driven political and social change is not a uniquely “Western” story. Early modern societies all over the world were witness to social and political changes triggered by the generation of new wealth from long-distance trade and from banking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The expansion of trade and of credit relationships generated new social classes, intellectual and religious movements, and political upheavals. Baki Tezcan has argued that the expansion of market relations in Ottoman territories widened political participation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³³ Ali Yaycıoğlu has noted the proliferation in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire of notables who combined military and administrative operations

with trade, moneylending, and tax farming.³⁴ For early modern China, Richard Lufano has shown how merchants sought to improve their social position through “self-cultivation,” which entailed among other steps moral regulation and the avoidance of “vice.”³⁵ Japan too saw *daimyos* becoming increasingly dependent on merchants for credit in the early modern period and the emergence of mercantile associations that could leverage their influence over the state to create monopolies.³⁶ By the end of the early modern period, some Japanese merchants began to enjoy a higher standard of living than their samurai “superiors,” shaking up the social order.³⁷ At the very end of the eighteenth century, West Africa was witness to merchant-led struggles against aristocracies that had become enriched through the Atlantic trade.³⁸

Where does South Asia fit into this picture? I suggest through this book that in South Asia as well, merchants—a broad category that included not just hereditary trading castes but other caste groups, such as brahmans, members of which became actively involved in trade and moneylending—worked to usher in a changed sociopolitical order.³⁹ Here, however, there was no “revolution” in the sense of a convulsive set of events but rather a diffuse set of changes that transformed state and society from within. This may well have been due to the beneficiaries of growing trade and finance already being part of infrastructures of power and administration as bureaucrats, accountants, and scribes. These “new men,” however, certainly were not at the pinnacle in terms of social status, and this is what they sought to transform in early modern Marwar by deploying their command over the state. Most central to these efforts was the success of merchants and brahmans in transmuting profit into status. In parts of South Asia such as Marwar, they succeeded in replacing *ancien régime* ideas of bodily vigor grounded in blood and war with a new vision of the elite body—vegetarian, austere, and chaste.

HINDU, MUSLIM, UNTOUCHABLE

Constitutionalist, anticaste and anticolonial leader, and political scientist B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) argued that to be Hindu was inseparable from practicing caste.⁴⁰ More recently, Dalit scholars have warned that an understanding of religion-based mobilization, often called “communalism” in the South Asian context, is impossible without recognizing its relationship to caste difference.⁴¹ My findings from eighteenth-century Marwar attest to the precolonial roots of the inseparability of the imagination of the Hindu community and the Hindu body from the demarcation of a radical and inadmissible other in caste terms. The Muslim and the outcaste then reinforced each other to produce a radical other subsumed under the umbrella “Untouchable,” who in turn embodied everything the Hindu was not. The quotidian was significant, as it remains today, for the operation of the diffuse violence and exclusions that caste entailed.⁴² The history I trace