

1 Malwa: Land of Many Empires

In the British Museum, there is a lovely statue of a female deity which is said to be from Dhar, the centre of our protagonists' zone of action, but from many centuries before they appeared. The museum's webpages note that this is a statue of Ambika, a deity shared by Hindus and Jains. The base of the statue bears a Sanskrit inscription which declares that the statue was commissioned and dedicated by a Vararūcī, who was intent on the Candranagarī and Vidyāharī branches of Jaina religion of Bhoja the king, and who had also dedicated a statue of Vagdevī and a triad of Jinas (Jaina adepts). King Bhoja is a legendary king of the Rajput Parmar dynasty, who ruled from his capital in Mandu in the first half of the eleventh century; the date on the stela is 1091 Śaṃvat, which corresponds to 1034 CE.¹

There are other claims regarding the sectarian identity and historical provenance of this statue; claims which are of a piece with efforts to recreate a glorious Hindu past for India, anchored on to specific personalities and places. Bhoja Raja, and his legendary royal complex, Bhojaśālā, form a regional version of that story of the Hindu nation. According to this account of the story, the statue in the British Museum is not of the amphibious deity Ambika but of the Hindu goddess Sarasvatī, and that it was originally situated within the Bhojaśālā complex which was (predictably) later destroyed and built over by Muslim invaders.² The Mandu story and the historical wrongs it seeks to right are structurally identical with the more notorious efforts in Ayodhya, Mathura and Banaras: in each of these places, there is an intensified sacred geography, standing as symbol of a sectarian identity posing as national. That sacred geography is focussed on specific architectural complexes whose present and tangible reality simply do not match with the idealised past projected on to them. The ephemeral Bhojaśālā's historical existence is based on extrapolation from certain inscriptions, discovered inside a building which is also known as Kamal Maula's mosque (Figure 1.1). This building is currently under the surveillance

¹ www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=182355&partId=1&searchText=marble+jain&page=1.

² 'It's a Jain Statue, Clarifies the UK', *The Hindu*, 15 June 2003.



Figure 1.1 Latha Masjid/Bhojaśālā © Amit Choudhary

of the Archaeological Survey of India, which sells tickets saying ‘Bhojashala/Kamal Maula mosque’. Pious Muslim men offer prayers outside the building; Muslim women and men throng to the *dargāh* (tomb) of the thirteenth/fourteenth-century Chisti saint Kamal Maula, or Kamal al-Din Malawi³ that stands next to it, and locals of all religions flock to the *‘urs* (annual death anniversary celebrations) of Kamal Maula which enclose and enfold this disputed complex. In Mandu, as in all these other places, there are other people and inconvenient histories, which, with the convergence of a range of local and national aspirations in the early twentieth century, began to be seen as intrusions.⁴

³ Muhammad Ghawsi Mandavi, *Gulzār-i Abrār*; I consulted the Urdu translation titled *Azkar-i Abrār*, translated Fazl Ahmad Jewari (Agra, 1908, reprint Lahore, 1975), p. 581.

⁴ Archaeological Survey of India, ‘Bhojashala and Kamal Maula’s Mosque’, www.asibhopal.nic.in/monument/dhar_dhar_bhojmosque.html#gallery; many of these inscriptions were discovered by K. K. Lele, the Superintendent of Education in the princely state of Dhar. K. K. Lele, *Parmar Inscriptions in Dhar State, 875–1310* (Dhar State Historical Records Series, 1944). Lele may also have been the source of the misreading of the inscription which led to the confusion of the statue of Ambika with that of Sarasvatī. Deborah Sutton has written about the conflicts between the Archaeological Survey of India and local devotional communities and priests in the process of conservation of Hindu temples in the early twentieth century. Deborah Sutton, ‘Devotion, Antiquity and Colonial Custody of the Hindu Temple in British India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 47:1 (2013), 135–66. There remains to be told the story of Hindu nationalists who manned the

There are other ways of reading such material heritage, ways that permit us to view history as accretion, not epiphany.⁵ At the same time, the competing aspirations that jostle to frame such heritage are themselves the stuff of history; stories themselves have histories. For example, a flattened notion of Hindu nationhood is not sufficient to understand riots over a proposed Bollywood film about a fourteenth-century queen; we need works such as Ramya Sreenivasan's to understand the evolution of the allegorical Sufi story of Queen Padmini and its entanglement with Rajput political aspirations in Mughal and post-Mughal times.⁶ On that note, we have works by Prachi Deshpande,⁷ Samira Sheikh,⁸ Cynthia Talbot,⁹ Chitrlekha Zutshi¹⁰ and Manan Ahmed,¹¹ which teach us how to tell stories about stories. All these scholars have explored creative as well as functional narratives about the past with which various South Asian martial groups – Rajputs, Marathas, Dogras, Mameluk Arabs – have repeatedly redefined themselves and their realms from the early modern era until the present day. In each of these cases, these royal stories have been subsequently discovered in the golden age of partnership between Orientalism and nationalism in order to establish the identity of a region.

This south-western corner of Malwa, our protagonists' hunting grounds, is not associated with a text quite as powerful as *Pr̥thvīrāj Rāso* or *Chāchnāma*, but, as we have already seen,¹² Dhar has its own lost and found hero in Raja Bhoja of the Paramara dynasty. Rulers of the small princely state of Dhar have

lower to middle rungs of the archaeological bureaucracy in colonial and princely India, and the results of their efforts. Michael Willis, 'Dhār, Bhoja and Sarasvatī: from Indology to Political Mythology and Back', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3, 22, 1 (2012), 129–53.

⁵ Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Finbarr B. Flood, 'Architecture of Malwa Sultanate', in Abha Narain Lambah and Alka Patel (eds.) *The Architecture of the Indian Sultanates* (Mumbai: Marg on behalf of IGNC A, 2006) pp. 81–91.

⁶ Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in India, c. 1500–1900* (University of Washington Press, 2007).

⁷ Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Past: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁸ Samira Sheikh, *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200–1500* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁹ Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Chitrlekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Past: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

¹² From that point of view, Samira Sheikh's study of formation of Gujarat through a continuous sedimentation of declarations, reports and reminiscences is most similar to mine in terms of its research base; as is Sumit Guha, 'Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices of Historical Narration in Western India, 1400–1900', *The American Historical Review*, 109: 4 (2004), 1084–103.

asserted descent from the Paramara dynasty since the nineteenth century, with the predictable combination of British Orientalism, Indian nationalist scholarship and political patronage. Like Gujarat, Marathwada, Sindh and Kashmir, Dhar and Malwa are located within an area of layered empires; it is just that, despite some significant and ongoing efforts, its story remains more interrupted.

The purpose of this chapter is not to tell the story of a region per se, nor to explore the successive formation of polities. The aim here is to conceptualise a zone – political, social and cultural – within which the protagonists of this book negotiated law. I am guided by the works mentioned, which both interrogate the concept of region and show us new ways of writing regional history. I am also inspired by those works that think of regions in terms of routes – not so much bounded territories, but significant circuits of circulation – of traders, merchandise, soldiers and war.¹³ The protagonists of this story remained ensconced in the same region for at least four hundred years – more, according to family lore – and yet, that same family history was premised on the story of a journey. Settlement and movement are more complementary – as lifestyles but also as political styles – than we usually remember them to be.

In my case, I am interested in space because it is inherently related to law; and while the concept of jurisdiction – that combination of spatiality and authority, of geographical and abstract space – does leap to mind, here I would like to try and move beyond jurisdiction and all that Lauren Benton showed us it could do.¹⁴ There are at least two reasons why I think that we need a better term than jurisdiction in order to conceptualise the negotiations with power and legitimacy – i.e., law – that the protagonists of this current story engaged in. The first reason is the wordiness of jurisdiction: derived as it is from the Latin pair *juris* and *dictio*, it renders a sense of law as words above all, captured best in texts and talking heads. The protagonists of my story expressed themselves in words, too, but their ability to speak derived from a range of activity and authority that I think needs a different word, one more closely linked to South Asian *lexis* and *praxis*. This is not an argument in support of the anti-intellectual conceptualisation of pragmatic ‘jurispractice’.¹⁵ As I have said elsewhere,¹⁶ looking beyond formal institutions for law in South Asia (and maybe elsewhere, too) need not mean dismissing the possibility of abstract thought. It is here that the literature on regions offers interpretive models, for

¹³ Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jos Gommans, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c. 1710–1780* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and Highroads to Empire, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁴ Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*; Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*.

¹⁵ Lauren Benton, ‘Introduction’, *The American Historical Review*, 117: 4 (2012), 1092–100, at 1093.

¹⁶ Chatterjee, ‘Hindu City and Just Empire’.

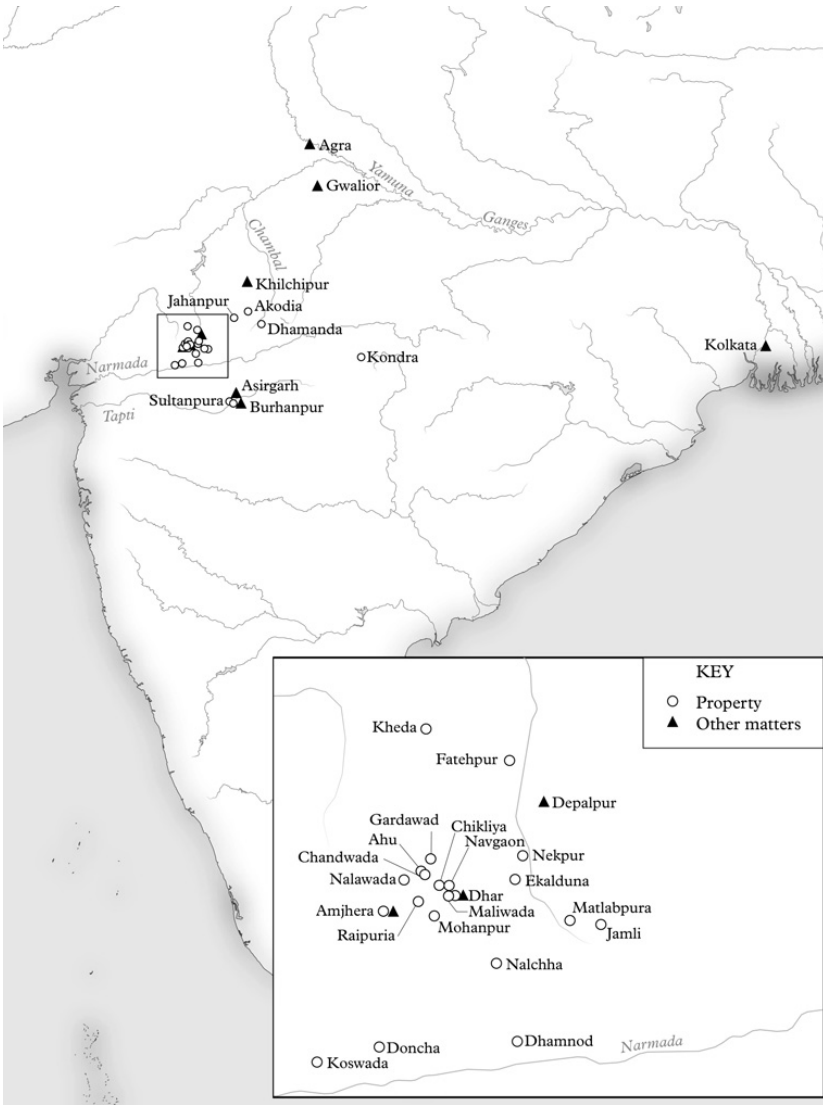
the works I have cited on the history and identity of regions are about seeking out conceptual maps, through the clash and demise of empires.

I do not offer a 'background' essay, synthesised from recent scholarship and older works; I proceed, instead, to map the activities of my key protagonists against a palimpsest of shifting political formations, commercial and military circuits and physical environments. The method here is inductive – the description of the relevant 'region' proceeds from the material itself, from the distribution of persons, activities, locales and stories within that material. In that effort, the concept of *dāi'ra*, which includes the meaning of jurisdiction but circles far beyond it, appears to me to be a useful tool.

The word *dāi'ra*, which exists in Arabic, Persian as well as Hindi/Urdu, encompasses a range of meanings related to space and its encirclement. Derived from the Arabic root *d-vav-r*, it is part of one of those highly fecund word constellations which make Arabic such an evocative language; related words range from geometric to maritime and administrative. *Dāi'ra* itself, in all three languages, can be a circle, but its meaning also extends to other encircled spaces, such as a camp or monastery, and to spaces circumscribed in the abstract, that is, jurisdiction. In the thirteenth century, the historian Al-Juzjani, patronised by the Delhi Sultan Nasir al-Din, had placed Delhi at the centre of the *dā'ira* of Islam.¹⁷ It is this semantic range – encompassing physical, social, architectural *and* legally defined space – that makes *dāi'ra* a useful conceptual tool for thinking of the zone of entrenchment and operations represented by Map 1.1.

Property owned by the family – in the form of houses, tax-free grants of agricultural or garden land, as well as various claims on shares of taxation – was clustered in south-western Malwa, just north of the Narmada river, nestling into the hills and forests that partially encircled it from the west and the south (see inset for details). This was the centre of their *dāi'ra*, but their long arms reached southwards, eastwards and northwards, with a scattering of property in the Mughal centre of Burhanpur, and with intelligence and political networks stretching towards pan-regional political centres: Agra in the Mughal period, Gwalior and Calcutta later. It was within the core area that the protagonists of this story owned and claimed property, fought most of their battles and lived out their lives. But the offshoots of their interests indicated that their *dāi'ra* was embedded in several other territories – ecological, political, commercial, military and administrative. The work of this chapter is to offer a palimpsest of those maps, as they are crucial for locating the characters of this story and for understanding what they did and said.

¹⁷ Flood, *Objects of Translation*, p. 229.



Map 1.1 The *dāi'ra* of the family

Malwa: the Identity of a Region

The *dāi'ra* of Mohan Das and his family revolved around a dense cluster of villages in district Dhar, in the south-west corner of Malwa, nestling to the

north of the Narmada river, the traditional dividing line between Hindustan and Dakhin. The range of their activities fanned out much further, however, with consequent entitlements scattered over a large part of Malwa. As twentieth-century colonial surveys noted, within the sprawling and politically fragmented zone of central India, Malwa formed a distinct region, geologically distinct for being a plateau as opposed to the hills to its west and the ravines to its east.¹⁸ From at least Tughlaq times, that is, the fourteenth century, Malwa was considered the last frontier of 'Hindustan', beyond which began the geologically, linguistically, and politically distinct region of 'Dakshin'.

Geologically, there were both mountain and river boundaries that marked these limits – the foremost being the great river Narmada, which was difficult and dangerous to cross for several months of the year. The Vindhya and Satpura ranges ran parallel to the river, whereas the Aravallis stretched north-eastwards from the Narmada, creating a western boundary. To the north and north-east ran the Chambal, whose deep ravines remain a formidable natural barrier even today. Besides rivers and hills, there were also forests and animals: the hills to the north-west and the region beyond the Narmada river in the south were both densely forested. The region immediately south of the river Narmada was so well-known for its population of tigers, that the district took the Arabic name for tiger: 'Nimar'. Dhar, in particular, being at the south-western edge of Malwa, nestles in a corner created by forested hills in the west and the Narmada in the south. Geological and ecological challenges were not necessarily just barriers, however. They were also resources for those that inhabited them, among them ambitious soldiering groups who used the challenges of the landscape to entrench themselves, repulse rivals and prey on vulnerable traffic that passed through areas they had made their own.

Sometime around the twelfth century CE, heterogeneous nomadic and martial groups, including those that originated outside the subcontinent, began to cohere into royal dynasties with territorial claims, paired with genealogical assertions that traced their origins back to fictive progenitors capable of rendering a Kshatriya identity.¹⁹ Some of these groups, spread from modern-day Rajasthan into central India and along the northern part of the Western Ghats, began to call themselves Rajputs (literally: sons of kings, or princes). Despite active efforts to secure and declare genealogical purity, 'Rajput' remained a relatively open social and occupational category well into the sixteenth century, perhaps even the nineteenth in central India, where this

¹⁸ *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (new ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), Vol. XVII, pp. 98–100.

¹⁹ Among the various theories regarding the sources of such nomadic warrior groups, the Central Asian theory was popular in the early twentieth century, see Crooke's Introduction to James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (ed.) William Crooke (first published 1829, 3 vols., London: Humphrey Milford, 1920), I, xxxi–xxxv.

story is located.²⁰ One such Rajput dynasty was that of the Paramaras of Malwa, established around the tenth century.

Contemporary records of this dynasty, which included the illustrious Bhoja (of the purported Bhojaśālā of Dhar), and Vikramjīṭ, to whom is attributed the Vikram Saṃvat era, are limited to fragmentary epigraphic evidence (such as the stela of the Ambika statue). Sources from a few centuries later (i.e., the fourteenth century) include Jaina Sanskrit *prabandha* literature aimed at documenting ideal 'Jaina' lives,²¹ and legends reported fairly consistently by Persian-language histories²² focussed on the victories of the Turkic and Afghan warriors, who were establishing a sultanate centred on Delhi at around the same time that the Rajputs were emerging into documented history.²³ Through the Mughal period²⁴ and by the eighteenth century, the story of Raja Bhoja, Vikramjīṭ and the Paramara dynasty became a standard part of local lore reported by gazetteers writing in Persian.²⁵

- ²⁰ B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'The Emergence of the Rajputs as Historical Process in Early Medieval Rajasthan', in Karine Schomer et al., *The Idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in Regional Identity* (Delhi: Manohar, American Institute of Indian Studies, 2001), II, pp. 161–191; B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs: The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval India', in *The Making of Early Medieval India* (2nd ed., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 59–92; Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy: The Evolution of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 71–85; Dirk H. A. Kolff, 'The Rajput in Ancient and Medieval India: A Warrior-Ascetic', in N. K. Singhi and R. Joshi (eds.) *Folk, Faith and Feudalism* (Jaipur, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1995), pp. 257; Cynthia Talbot, 'Becoming Turk the Rajput Way: Conversion and Identity in an Indian Warrior Narrative', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43: 1 (2009), 211–43; Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, pp. 7–11; Sreenivasan, *Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, pp. 66–7, and endnote 4, p. 111.
- ²¹ Merutunga, *The Prabandhacintamani or the Wishing Stone of Narratives*, translated C. L. Tawney (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1899); Sreenivsan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen*, p. 26.
- ²² Most significantly, Ferishta, *History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power in India till the year A.D. 1612*, translated John Briggs (1st published 1829, reprint New Delhi: Oriental Books, 1981), Vol. IV, p. 101; and Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, translated H. Blochmann and H. Jarrett, 4 vols. (Calcutta, 1873–94), Vol. II, pp. 215–17.
- ²³ On the five major dynasties that together made by the Delhi Sultanate, see Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Sunil Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192–1286* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007); on the localisation of the Sultanate through the entrenchment of Sufis and soldiers associated with them, see Simon Digby, 'Before Timur Came: Provincialization of the Delhi Sultanate through the Fourteenth Century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 47: 3 (2004), 298–356.
- ²⁴ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, Vol. II, pp. 215–17. Badauni, who had a specific connection, reported about the legendary Vikramjeet of the same dynasty, whose statue he said, was broken by Iltutmish, and who was also the hero of the thirty-two stories which he had translated to Persian under the orders of emperor Akbar – establishing the identity between Vikramjīṭ and Vikramaditya of *Siṃhāsana Battisī*. Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh*, translated George Ranking and W. H. Lowe (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1864), Vol. I, p.95.
- ²⁵ Rai Chatarman Saksena, *Chahar Gulshan*, (ed.) Chander Shekhar (Delhi: Dilli Kitab Ghar for National Mission for Manuscripts, 2011), pp. 107–8.

As far as administrative history is concerned, Malwa was won and lost by Delhi multiple times since the twelfth century. It was invaded by Sultan Iltutmish in 1233, leading to a plunder of Ujjain and its temples, including the Mahakal temple, which may then have contributed artefacts to the Qutb complex in Delhi.²⁶ Control was clearly fragile, for the region had to be reconquered by Alauddin Khalji in 1305 CE, resulting in a historical note by none less than the ‘parrot of India’ Amir Khusrau, the court poet, in his *Khazāin al-futuḥ* (treasuries of victories). Khusrau noted that on the southern border of Hindustan, Rai Mahalak Deo and his minister Goga possessed around 40,000 horsemen and innumerable foot soldiers. This minister and his king were defeated in an expedition led by Ain al-Mulk, the chamberlain, who then received the province of Malwa under his administration.²⁷ However, only a few years later, Sultan Balban appeared to need to subdue Malwa again.²⁸

By the early fourteenth century, the geographical area of Malwa settled into the role of a sultanate province, retaining the old capital of Dhar. Composed in the same century, the Gujarati *Prabandha-Cintāmaṇi* referred to the ‘kingdom of Malwa’ several times throughout the text; this may have been a reflection of sultanate conquest and consolidation of the province as much as a pre-existing regional identity. In 1335, the Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta went from Delhi to Malabar, passing through Chanderi, Dhar and Ujjain, before proceeding to Daulatabad. He reported that Dhar was the capital of Malwa and the largest district (‘*amala*’) of the province. He also reported that Dhar was in the *iqta* (similar to Mughal *jāgīr*)²⁹ of a certain Shaikh Ibrahim, who had come there from the Maldives. Ujjain, the next stop, was reported as a ‘beautiful city’, graced by a jurist who had come from as far as Granada.³⁰

The control of Delhi over the region was fragile; as with Bengal and several other of the regions temporarily overwhelmed by armies from Delhi, Malwa developed into an offshoot autonomous sultanate, such localisation often actuated by the entrenchment of Sufis and soldiers associated with them.³¹ Dilawar Khan, originally appointed governor by Delhi, made use of the disturbance caused by Amir Timur’s invasion in 1398 to declare his independence. Although he retained Dhar as his capital, Mandu began developing as a significant political, architectural and military centre, a process enhanced by his successor Hoshang Shah, who is credited with the building of some of the most spectacular buildings in Mandu, including the formidable Mandu

²⁶ Badauni, *Muntakhabu-t-Tawarikh*, Vol. I, p. 264.

²⁷ Henry Elliot and John Dawson, *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, 8 vols. (London, Trübner and Co., 1871), Vol. III, p. 76.

²⁸ Ferishta, *History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power*, Vol. IV, 101.

²⁹ I. H. Qureshi, *The Administration of the Delhi Sultanate* (4th ed. Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1958)

³⁰ *The Rehla of Ibn Batuta*, translated Mahdi Husain (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1976), pp. 167–8.

³¹ Digby, ‘Before Timur Came’.

fort.³² Over the next one hundred years or so, Dilawar Khan's dynasty, and then that of his cousin and *wazīr*, Malik Mughis, created and ruled a kingdom whose ever-fluid boundaries were the function of constant alliance and warfare with the sultans of Gujarat, Khandesh and Jaunpur and the Ranas of Mewar, and of deals struck and revoked with the next rung in the political hierarchy: the Rajput *zamīndārs*, typically entrenched in significant forts. The detailed accounts of constant movement and warfare appear to indicate that contemporary political chroniclers saw the realm as an emanation of the roving king, rather than a settled territory. If we map Malwa in terms of Ferishta's sixteenth-century account, for example, we see a range of political power, centred on Mandu and Dhar, resting on the forts of Chanderi, Kalpi, Kherla, Keechiwara, Bhilsa (Vidisa), Sarangpur and Raisen, all manned by Rajput and other chieftains, and lunging out towards Baglana, Jaunpur, Chitor, Ajmer, Bundi and Champaran, in a penumbra of power.

At its peak in the fifteenth century, the Malwa Sultanate hosted and patronised several intertwined lines of cultural development, including the Jain religious tradition and literary composition in a language that is now considered old Hindi. The Jain tradition provided a powerful commercial and administrative strand in Islamic Malwa and its penumbra well into the seventeenth century, Muhnot Nainsi of Jodhpur being only the most outstanding example. Such eminence naturally also led to royal patronage as well as private sponsorship of literary and architectural creativity.³³

Associated with the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Khalji (r. 1469–1501) and his son Nasiruddin are outstanding examples of literary composition such as the *Candāyan* of Mulla Dā'ud, the oldest known Sufi *premākhyān* and model for Malik Muhammad Jayasi's *Padmāvat*. Written in Awadhi, a non-local old Hindi literary dialect, the *Candāyan* was a story of travelling in the quest of love, a common trope within the genre; the protagonists were Ahirs – pastoralists with martial aspirations comparable to the Rajputs. The *Ni'mat Nāma*, on the other hand, is a delightfully epicurean work; a highly illustrated book of recipes bearing testimony to the Sultan Ghiyasuddin's love of *samōsas* (and his rather wonderful moustache). Although written in Persian, the *Ni'mat Nāma* is peppered with Hindi words, and written in what is considered a distinctive Malwa *naskh* hand.³⁴ Alongside Hindi and Persian, Sanskrit too found a place

³² Vishwanath Sharma, *Glimpses of Mandu* (Mandu, 1943).

³³ A richly illuminated *Kalpasutra* manuscript was commissioned at Mandu by the monk Kshemahansa Muni during Sultan Mahmud Shah's reign: see National Museum of India, Delhi, manuscript with Accession no. 48.29, www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/prodCollectio ns.asp?pid=92&id=10&lk=dp10 (last accessed 10 May 2018); an inscription in a Jain temple near Barwani referred to the same sultan. Upendranath Day, *Medieval Malwa: A Political and Cultural History, 1401–1562* (Delhi, 1965), p. 199.

³⁴ Norah M. Tilley, *The Ni'mat Nāma Manuscript of the Sultans of Mandu: The Sultan's Book of Delights* (London: Routledge, 2005).

within the sultan's patronage – a Sanskrit *praśastī* (eulogy) was written and inscribed on the Suraj Kund tank for Sultan Ghiyasuddin.³⁵ Mandu remained the political, military, as well as cultural centre in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; renamed as Shadiabad or 'City of Joy', it represented a regional pride fostered by Malwa sultans.

The Malwa Sultanate eventually crumbled, caught in a three-way imperialist struggle between their old allies/enemies, the Gujarat sultans, the eastern Afghans (Sher Shah Sur and his dynasty) and the incoming Mughals. Malwa was first incorporated into the Gujarat Sultanate and then the Afghan empire; but ironically, it is in that period of political annihilation that it acquired lasting cultural identity, typified by the romantic figure of Baz Bahadur. This Afghan soldier, originally called Bayazid, was the son of an official appointed by Sher Shah, and, typical of governors deputed to Malwa, declared himself independent in 1555. His rule was plagued by overwhelming imperial warfare that ultimately defeated him, but, in the meantime, he acquired lasting fame as lover to a certain courtesan called Rupmati and as a great patron of music. Already a romantic icon to the Mughals, Baz Bahadur may be taken to represent certain key parameters of the distinctive Indo-Islamic culture of Malwa, including its visually striking Afghan orientation.³⁶ In 1561, the Mughal emperor Akbar personally led the conquest of Malwa, chasing the unfortunate Baz Bahadur away and causing the demise of his consort. Malwa was settled as a *sūba* or province of the Mughal empire, with most simmering resistance being subdued by 1570.³⁷ The ancient city of Ujjain, titled Dar al-Fath (Abode of Victory), became the new capital of the province.

Routes and Nodes

The Mughal province of Malwa produced some very important cash crops, including the famous Malwa opium, which, the *Ā'in* reported, was a common pacifier given to all children up to the age of three.³⁸ In a later period, international trade in opium would become the economic mainstay of important post-Mughal Maratha states formed in the region, especially that of the Sindhias of Gwalior; the English East India Company would struggle to control this trade.³⁹

³⁵ 'An inscription on the Surya-Kund at Tarapur', in Lele, *Parmar Inscriptions*, p. 86.

³⁶ Abul Fazl narrated their tragic romance, including Rupmati's suicide to resist capture by Adham Khan, in *Akbar Nāma of Abu'l Fazl*, translated H. Beveridge (3 vols., Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1907–39), Vol. II, pp. 213–14; also see the inside cover of the album containing specimens of Persian calligraphy and Mughal paintings, 18th century, Royal Collection, RCIN1005068.a, which depicts Baz Bahadur and Rupmati hunting in a fictional landscape.

³⁷ Ferishta, *History*, IV, pp. 166–8; John Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India* (Calcutta: Thacker & Spink, 1880), Vol. I, pp. 39–40.

³⁸ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari*, p. 196.

³⁹ Amar Farooqui, 'Opium Enterprise and Colonial Intervention in Malwa and Western India, 1800–1824', *IESHR*; 32: 4 (1995), 447–74; Amar Farooqui, *Sindhias and the Raj: Princely Gwalior c. 1800–1850* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), pp. 112–32.

The province also included internationally significant cloth-production centres, such as Sironj⁴⁰ and Chanderi,⁴¹ still famous for its *sārīs*, and was crisscrossed by trade and military routes that connected the Hindustan with the Dakhin and the great ports of the western coast. Those who would travel from Agra to the Indian Ocean port of Surat were prevented from taking a direct route by mountains and forests – the feasible routes were all arcs that swung east before turning west from Burhanpur en route. Of those travellers going from Agra to Surat, those who travelled further south from Burhanpur before turning west usually had some special reason for doing so. In the seventeenth century, an important commercial route was via eastern Malwa, running Agra-Sironj-Burhanpur-Surat and skirting Dhar and Mandu. An alternative, slightly westerly route, favoured by the famous North African traveller Ibn Batuta in the fourteenth century, and by military campaigners including emperor Aurangzeb in the seventeenth, ran via Dhar – the headquarters of our story's heroes.⁴² As a result, the area saw both a great deal of mobile imperial presence and the activities of local military entrepreneurs who attempted to milk the commercial traffic for protection money.

These north-south-west routes were marked by significant nodes of administration and state presence – in terms of both personnel and architecture. The most significant of these nodes for the protagonists of this story were Ujjain, Asirgarh and Burhanpur, besides Dhar and Mandu. All these locations were marked by significant forts; Asirgarh being purely a fort. Dar al-Fath Ujjain, the capital of the Mughal province, was an old city of both commercial and religious significance, site of the famed Mahakaleshwara temple, which may have been destroyed in the twelfth century by the Delhi Sultan Iltutmish (it would be eventually rebuilt by the Marathas in the eighteenth century). Caravans carrying cloth and other merchandise from Agra, or nearer home, from Chanderi, travelled south-westwards towards Ujjain. From Ujjain, a further move south-westwards brought one to the city of Dhar, and further south-west, to Mandu. Both Dhar and Mandu had major forts; Mandu, the capital of the old Malwa Sultanate, was replete with Indo-Afghan architecture. After Mandu, the major natural barrier was presented by the river Narmada, which was difficult to impossible to cross during the monsoons. After crossing Narmada, however, commercial routes to Surat arced out south-eastwards, to avoid a heavily forested region whose threats are still coded in the district name 'Nimar' (Arabic for tiger). The next major stop is the fort of Asirgarh, at the edge of the forested region, and already in the southern district of Burhanpur.

⁴⁰ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, translated William Irvine (London: John Murraray, 1907), Vol. I, pp. 67–8.

⁴¹ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, translated V. Ball (London: Macmillan, 1889), Vol. I, pp. 56–7.

⁴² Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, Vol. I, p. 67.

This was a pre-Mughal fort, wrested from the Faruqi kings of Khandesh by emperor Akbar around 1600 and formidable enough to hold a part of the imperial Mughal treasury, under the supervision of well-appointed nobles.⁴³ More than a hundred years after the British traveller Mundy passed the fort, it played an important role in the Anglo-Maratha wars of the early nineteenth century and was used as a prison for several decades afterwards.⁴⁴ From Asirgarh and Burhanpur, caravans turned westwards, moving via Nandurbar towards the ‘blessed port’ of Surat.

Wars pegged out routes that overlapped with, as well as supplemented, the commercial paths mentioned; spiritual travellers accompanied these armies and caravans. In 1305, Sultan Alauddin Khalji’s general Ain al-Mulk ‘Mahru’ led an invasion that conquered Chanderi, Ujjain, Dhar and Mandu, reaching up to Devgiri (later renamed Daulatabad). The general brought along with him a Chisti Sufi deputed by Nizam al-Din Auliya, who settled in Chanderi and came to be known as Yusuf Chanderi. The great Nizam al-Din is also said to have despatched Kamal al-Din, later known as Malawi, for the guidance of the people of Malwa;⁴⁵ presumably, he travelled by a similar route.

Chanderi, Dhar and Ujjain also figured in the route taken later in the same century by Ibn Batuta, when travelling from Delhi to the Malabar with a commission from the eccentric Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq.⁴⁶ In 1399, when the Chisti saint Muhammad Gisu Daraz, fled from Delhi about to be attacked by Amir Timur, his route from Delhi to Daulatabad via Gwalior and Chanderi must have passed through or close by Ujjain, Dhar and Mandu.⁴⁷ Around two hundred years later, in 1534, the Mughal emperor Humayun passed through Raisin, Sarangpur, Nalcha and Mandu, capturing the fort of Mandu before proceeding to Gujarat in pursuit of the Gujarati sultan.⁴⁸ Ujjain, the capital of the Mughal province of Malwa, was also an important node in this martial/commercial route; in 1658, the future emperor Aurangzeb, moving

⁴³ Several items in the prints and drawing sections of the Asia, Africa and Pacific Collections (APAC), British Library, offer a glimpse of the fort. Mundy, the commercial traveller, described the fort: Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608–1667*, Vol. II, *Travels in Asia*, Richard C. Temple (ed.) (London: Hakluyt Society, 1913), pp. 51–2; *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (new ed., Oxford: Clarendon, 1908), Vol. XIX, p. 108; Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

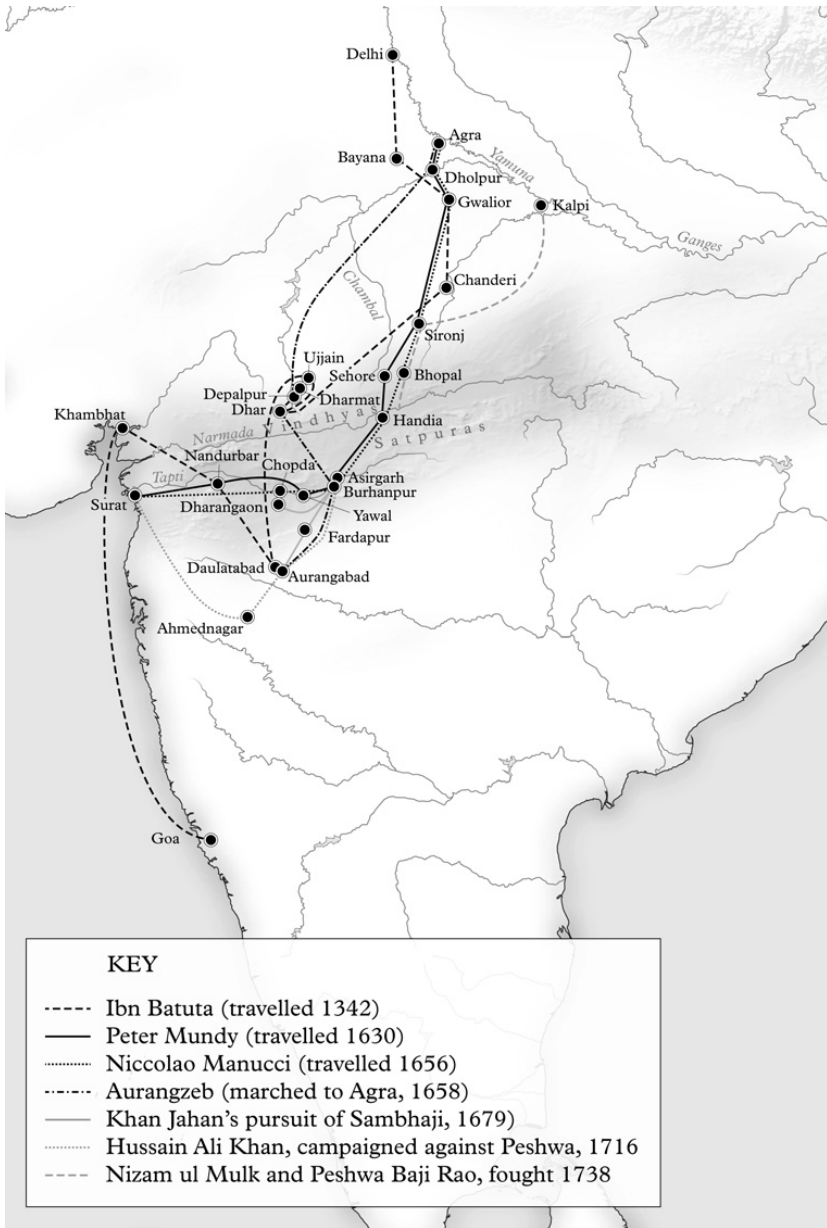
⁴⁴ See the entry in the index for Z/E/4/16/F401 (1839–1842) (APAC), British Library.

⁴⁵ Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (New York: SUNY, 1992), p. 114; Mandavi, *Azkar-i Abrar*, p. 581.

⁴⁶ *The Travels of Ibn Batuta, 1304–1377*, translated Samuel Lee (London: J. Murray, 1829), pp. 155–64.

⁴⁷ Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 37.

⁴⁸ Abu’l Fazl, *The Akbarnāma of Abu’l Fazl*, Vol. I, pp. 300–7.



Map 1.2 Commercial and military routes across Malwa

Agra-wards from Burhanpur, defeated Maharaja Jaswant Singh and despatched by his brother Dara Shukoh at Dharmat, a few miles from Ujjain city.⁴⁹

In the interstices of these great commercial and military movements ran the trade routes of the nomadic *banjāras*, their trade oriented towards the rural hinterland but substantial in scale nevertheless, carrying grain between villages and offering loans on the way, to be recouped on the return leg of the journey, or in subsequent cycles. The *banjāras* moved slowly in packs, grazing their cattle as they went, stopping at villages to procure marketable food grains and to sell other goods in return.⁵⁰ Persian-language historians from the thirteenth century referred to them as ‘people of the caravan’ (*karvānīs*) and occasionally, Delhi-based regimes undertook interventionist measures to control their marketing practices in order to lower and stabilise the price of grain in the capital city. Besides dealing in grain, they frequently accompanied armies, even on very long journeys such as Jahangir’s expedition to Qandahar. Presumably, the women and children that the East India Company agent, Peter Mundy, observed when travelling through Malwa,⁵¹ went along even on those perilous journeys as part of the *tanda*, as their caravans tended to be called in India.⁵² John Malcolm, appointed Resident in Malwa in the early nineteenth century, noted that, although illiterate, *banjāras* were known for their capacity of retaining the details of extremely complex transactions in memory.⁵³

These acute, itinerant traders were looked down upon by members of more settled castes, and shared the in-between status of several low-ranking ‘service’ castes, such as Dom, Dhanuk and Pasi, who hovered on the outer peripheries of villages, sustaining the village but never quite of it themselves. An encyclopaedic Persian-language ethnographic project⁵⁴ commissioned in the early nineteenth century by a man who was himself of amphibious standing,⁵⁵ noted that *banjāras* never lived in the towns or villages, coming and going as they needed. Ethnographic details in James Skinner’s *Tashriḥ al-aqwām* are not always plausible; the book itself is a curiously artificial effort to align social

⁴⁹ Saqi Mustad Khan, *Maasir-i Alamgiri*, translated Jadunath Sarkar (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1947, reprinted 2008), pp. 1–3.

⁵⁰ On transport costs for these caravans, see Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 70 (nn 9–10).

⁵¹ Mundy, *Travels*, II, 95–6.

⁵² Irfan Habib, ‘Merchant Communities in Precolonial India’, in James D. Tracy (ed.) *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 374.

⁵³ Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, II, 152–3.

⁵⁴ James Skinner, *Tahsriḥ al-aqwām*; Add. 27255, ff. 143 r-v; British Library.

⁵⁵ James Skinner was the son of a Scottish soldier and a Rajput woman, who called himself Sikander and raised a cavalry of ‘irregulars’ which he first rented out to the Marathas and then the East India Company. Patronised by John Malcolm, he produced two encyclopedic works in Persian, one about the kings and princes of India *Tazkira al-umarā-i Hind*, and the other the ethnography which we are discussing now. On Skinner and his complex family, see Nandini Chatterjee, ‘Muslim or Christian?’

observations with Brahmanical caste theory of society. Skinner suggested that *banjāras* were the commercial branch of the community (qaum) of Charans (bards), descended from an instance of miscegenation (*varṇasaṃkara*) between a Bhat woman and a trader (*baqqāl*), and also that some *banjāras* worshipped a goddess named Sri Devi, while others were Muslims. Whatever their precise sociological and ritual dispensation, *banjāras* make several fleeting appearances in this story.

The Rajputs of Malwa

The conjunction of war-filled landscape, difficult terrain and busy routes carrying valuable merchandise as well as competing armies led to the social entrenchment and, hence, administrative and military function of a range of local chieftains, many of whom identified as Rajputs. All supra-local regimes that jostled each other in Malwa had to contend with these suppliers of armed manpower and with aspirants to royalty. These warlords used the difficulties of the terrain as their resources, inhabiting forts marking key nodes in the martial and commercial routes that traversed those terrains. This was a process of political formation that rested simultaneously on territory and mobility; all empires that wanted to control Malwa had to control these nodes. The process was wobbly, because these local powerholders were simultaneously oriented towards multiple arcs of power and deference; they need constant wooing and awing.

As they offered their services to multiple regimes, these Rajput warlords of Malwa, especially those famous as the 'Purbiya Rajputs' – struggled for equivalence with Turko-Afghan Muslim aristocrats, emulating their lifestyles and households, while also seeking translocal marriage alliances with more successful Rajput groups⁵⁶ and genealogical self-aggrandisement, specifically through the patronage of bardic groups known as *charans* and *bhāṭs*.⁵⁷ For their part, the Malwa sultans appeared to fully endorse the claim attributed to one famous Purbiya Rajput of Malwa – Silhadi Purbiya – that 'for generations we have de facto enjoyed the essence of the *sultanat*'.⁵⁸ But the Rajputs held back from seizing sovereign authority themselves, recognising that this would mobilise internal and external resistance; it appeared to them wiser to keep the Malwa sultans on the throne. And in this way, a prolonged, intense but mutually cautious courtship was initiated.

When the second Malwa sultan, Hoshang Shah, was captured from the fort of Dhar and taken away to Gujarat in 1407, the Malwa 'chiefs' (possibly

⁵⁶ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy*, p. 85.

⁵⁷ Norman P. Ziegler, 'Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan', *Indian Social and Economic History Review*, 13: 2 (1976), 219–50.

⁵⁸ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy*, p. 90.

Muslim and Hindu) rose in rebellion against the governor appointed by Gujarat, chasing him away and killing a part of his army, before ensconcing themselves in the fort of Mandu. This display of support led to Hoshang Shah's release; back in Malwa, he was able to secure the support of some soldiers immediately but that of others only after fighting them. When the restless Gujarati sultan attacked the tiny Rajput principality of Jhalawar in 1413, on the north-western boundary of Malwa, the chief appealed to Hoshang for help, providing him with an excuse for counter-aggression. Rajput loyalty was untrustworthy still, and so Hoshang found himself beating a hasty retreat when the *rāja* of Jhalawar made no effort to assist him. In 1418, however, when Gujarat started ravaging Junagadh, Hoshang's support appeared more valuable to these principalities, and the *rājas* (Rajput chiefs) of Jhalawar, Champaner, Nadot and Idar, that is, in a full arc on the north-western borders of Malwa, appealed to him, shamefaced for their 'neglect and dilatoriness' in the first occasion, but promising full support in the current campaign against Gujarat. Clearly, they knew the value of local knowledge, for they offered to take him through such a route to Gujarat that the Sultan of Gujarat wouldn't know what hit him. However, even this time, the *rājas* did not quite deliver on their promise, leading to an ignominious retreat for Hoshang.⁵⁹ Some of these *rājas* were capable of raising formidable armies of their own, and had access to crucial war animals, especially elephants. Such *rājas* continued to be self-serving allies, changing overlords whenever suitable, and extending their effective territories as soon as such overlords appeared distracted or weakened. The Sultanates of Malwa, Gujarat and the Bahmanis remained constantly subject to their capricious loyalty.

The Afghan Surs and the Mughals continued the same process of co-option and attrition with the local *rājas* in their subsequent efforts to control Malwa. Humayun marched through Malwa in 1535 on his way to Gujarat, apparently with the support, or at least acquiescence of the *rājas* of Raisin, and had the Rajput *qila dār* of Mandu opening the gates of that formidable fort for him. Thus strengthened, he met the Gujarat army at Mandsaur, and won Malwa for the Mughal dynasty but apparently with a restricted social base of support, requiring a general massacre in Mandu.⁶⁰ Rivers of blood were an inadequate foundation for permanent rule, and Humayun soon found himself out of Malwa. Following Humayun's expulsion, the Surs entered Malwa, and this time the *rājas* of Raisin appeared to be less hospitable. In Sher Shah's violent battle in Raisin in 1543 against the Chanderi *rāja*, Puran Mal, there was

⁵⁹ Day, *Medieval Malwa*, pp. 26–37; Ferishta, *History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power*, Vol. IV, pp. 103–13 discusses Hoshang's career.

⁶⁰ William Erskine, *A History of India under the Two First Sovereigns of the House of Timur*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, 1854), Vol. II, p. 46–56; Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India*, pp. 16–19.

a certain amount of spectacular carnage directed against this powerful clan, justified by an *'alim* who offered a convenient *fatwā* justifying the breaking of safe-passage promises and the slaughter of infidels.⁶¹ Soon afterwards, however, Sher Shah was able to detach a section of the Rajput followers of Maldeo, the ruler of Jodhpur, prior to a crucial battle.⁶²

The Mughals continued and refined this policy. Certain clans of Rajputs were raised by the Mughals to the highest non-princely imperial service ranks, or *mansabs*, granted special privileges such as service land-grants in their home countries (*waṭan jāgīrs*) and even anointed with the title *Mirza*, which purported kinship with Timur and hence the Mughal royal house. Thus, a select few among these warrior clans developed a resource-base and identity that was inseparable from the Mughal power and courtly culture.⁶³ For the majority, however, the Mughal technique was a combination of reconfirming old grants made by previous regimes, but also social engineering; for example, by moving branches of Rajput clans from Rajputana into the *sūba* of Malwa through service grants, specifically awarded to such recruits that managed to defeat other Rajput leaders less amenable to imperial absorption.⁶⁴ In the interstices of these imperial efforts, there took place the formation of little polities. Looking at these processes of political crystallisation offers us an additional perspective beyond that of the dynamics of the military labour market. It is worth looking at a few such examples of Rajput principalities surrounding the region in which our story is set in order to map out the political and social geography of the region.

The best-known of such sub-imperial Rajput principalities in the region lay just outside Malwa, in the area known as Bundelkhand. The Bundela principality of Orchha appeared on the political map in the early fifteenth century. Incompletely subdued and eventually killed in 1592, Madhukar Shah of Orchha remained a problematic recruit for Emperor Akbar. Constantly bickering and land-grabbing, his many sons and purported heirs were no better tamed.⁶⁵ Eventually one of these sons, Bir Singh Bundela, when pressed into imperial service in the Deccan, would abscond and take himself to the rebellious crown-prince Salim's camp in Allahabad, and purchase the latter's patronage by murdering Akbar's *wazīr*, Abul Fazl. In these years, the road between

⁶¹ Erskine, *History of India*, Vol. II, p. 434. ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 437–8.

⁶³ Norman P. Ziegler, 'Some Notes on Rajput Loyalties in the Mughal Period', in John F. Richards (ed.) *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin South Asia Publication Series, no. 3, 1978), pp. 215–52; John F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officials', in Barbara Metcalf (ed.) *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 255–90.

⁶⁴ Raghuraj Singh, *Malwa in Transition, First Phase 1698–1765* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala, 1936), pp. 12–13, 15; Stewart Gordon, 'The Slow Conquest: Administrative Integration of Malwa into the Maratha Empire, 1720–1760', *IESHR*, 11: 1 (1977), 1–40, at p. 5.

⁶⁵ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy*, p. 124.

Gwalior and Ujjain was said to be so dangerous, that even imperial agents felt nervous, and brave Rajputs allied with the imperial court chose to travel by the cover of night and hide during the day.⁶⁶

However sordid the origins of his prosperity may have been, with Mughal blessing, Bir Singh built himself up as a great king, and offered valuable patronage to litterateurs. Such patronage turned Orccha into a centre of courtly Hindi (Braj) poetry, which the classically (i.e., Sanskrit-trained) court poet Keshavdas used to put new wine in old bottles – producing a Braj *praśastī* of emperor Jahangir in good old Sanskrit style in *Jahāngīrrasacandrikā*.⁶⁷ However, continued loyalty during the next succession battle led Bir Singh into the wrong side, and his son and heir Jujhar Singh found himself and his estates under severe scrutiny by the once-rebel Khurram, now emperor Shah Jahan. Pushed to rebellion, Jujhar Singh and his son fled to their home territories, pursued by a huge imperial force. The fort of Orccha was stormed, and when Jujhar Singh fled with his injured son into the jungles to the east of his dominions, the neighbouring Gond tribes revealed that there was no love lost between them and the Rajput chiefs by killing the men.⁶⁸ The conquering general Khanjahan's secretary, Jalal Hisari, wrote a terse 'sociological' history of this clan-turned-kingdom-turned rebels, noting that the *qaum* of Bundelas had come from Bundi, reproducing what might have been a common trope of attributing locational origin and lineage based on phonetic rather than substantive genealogical connections. Hisari continued by recounting that the Bundelas had grabbed possession and dominance in many villages and towns, and some had declared themselves *rājas*, including Madhukar. The relation with the Mughals remained patchy, leading to almost inevitable rebellion and destruction by Mughal forces.⁶⁹

We have less-detailed accounts of other such kingdoms, but the glimpses we are offered confirm that same pattern of warlordism and functional alliance with empire builders, occasioning inadvertent cultural intermingling. Another

⁶⁶ *Waqāi' Asad Beg Qazwinī*, Or. 1996, British Library, published, by collating several manuscripts, as *Waqāi' Asad Beg* (ed. Chander Shekhar) (Delhi: National Mission for Manuscripts and Dilli Kitab Ghar, 2017). Asad Beg, a former servant of Abul Fazl, was incorporated into royal service by Akbar and sent on various diplomatic missions to the south; he crossed Malwa several times. For a discussion, see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 165–203.

⁶⁷ Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Alison Busch, 'The Classical Past in the Mughal Present: The Braj Bhasha Riti Tradition', in Yigal Bronner, David Shulman and Gary Tubb (eds.) *Innovations and Turning Points: Towards a History of Kavya Literature* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 648–90.

⁶⁸ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *King of the World: the Padshahnāma* (eds.) Milo Cleveland Beach and Ebba Koch, translation of text by Wheeler Thackston (London: Azimuth, 1997), Images 35 and 36, pp. 88–91; corresponding text on p. 38.

⁶⁹ Add 16859, British Library, London, ff. 137–46.

Bundela, Chhatrasal, formed the breakaway kingdom of Panna in 1657, and eventually rebelled against the Mughals to ally with the arch-rebels, the Marathas. The connection with the Marathas was substantiated by a significant marital alliance – Chhatrasal's daughter 'Mastani', now with a Bollywood blockbuster to her name, was married (or gifted) to Peshwa Baji Rao I, who brought the fight to the doorstep of the Mughals.⁷⁰ In his own lifetime, and contrary to current Bollywood imagination, however, the Bundela king proved as susceptible to the lure of imperial service as any other military entrepreneur, and was found in the imperial army led by Jai Singh in Malwa, in 1714.⁷¹

On the western edges of Malwa lay Bundi – the reputed original homeland of the Bundelas. Its ruler, Budh Singh, made significant progress towards the latter part of the Aurangzeb's reign. Playing his cards carefully, he sided with Prince Muazzam during key moments and, through the latter's recommendation, gained the districts of Patan and Tonk. He, too, was part of Jai Singh's anti-Maratha army in 1714.⁷² In central Malwa, Sitamau was an outright imperial creation, rising on the ruins of Ratlam – through confiscations and grants made by Aurangzeb to a loyal member of a *Rāthod* clan that was otherwise prone to disaffection.⁷³ Baglana, to the south of Tapti, was also a principality created by long-ensconced hill-chiefs who acquired a 'Rajput', specifically *Rāthod*, genealogy in the sixteenth century. Buoyed for a period by Mughal support, they attacked their neighbours and expanded their own realm, until they were annexed by a southward thrust by the prince Aurangzeb. This annexation let loose a host of subordinates who were eventually overrun by the rising Maratha empire in the late seventeenth century.⁷⁴

Thus, Rajput warlord kingdoms ranged all over north-western, northern and central India, forming a left-leaning C-arc around the heartland of the Delhi Sultanate and, later, the Mughals. Clans branched, migrated and formed multiple small and large principalities, which would only much later be connected through genealogical exercises. In the eighteenth century, with the faltering of Mughal control and patronage, and the rise of the Maratha empire, all such sub-imperial polities in Malwa were incorporated into one or another of the states established by the Maratha generals. After the 1730s, even the grand Rajput kingdoms of Jodhpur, Jaipur and Mewar were dominated by the Marathas, who

⁷⁰ Ravindra K. Jain, *Between History and Legend: Status and Power in Bundelkhand* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), pp. 73–4.; Eugenia Vanina, 'Bajirao and Mastani: a Family Tragedy in Eighteenth-Century Maharashtra', in Glushkova and Vora (eds.) *Home, Family and Kinship in Maharashtra*, pp. 101–12.

⁷¹ Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Jaipur* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1984) p. 164.

⁷² Sinh, *Malwa in Transition*, p. 76 ⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80

⁷⁴ Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 64–6, 70–4.

used the Mughal policy of undercutting them by participating in factional squabbles and encouraging the next rung of feudatories.⁷⁵

Only in the nineteenth century, through British romanticisation, as well as the circumscription of political and military power, did Rajputs become specifically associated with Rajasthan (literally, Hindi/Persian: the land of kings) – putative homeland for Rajputs. Tod, first Resident at the court and camp of the Maratha general Daulat Rao Sindhia, and then political agent to the Western Rajput States from 1818, celebrated British achievement in separating the various warrior groups and breaking their kinship and patronage networks, all of which he framed in a nation-centric narrative of freeing the Rajputs from the control of the foreign Marathas.⁷⁶

Thus, until the nineteenth century, Malwa was an integral part of that mobile and martial political geography, which was marked as the land of Rajputs (western Rajasthan) through the pan-north Indian folk epic of *Dholā-Māru*.⁷⁷ The Rajasthani-language versions tell the story of Prince Dhola's two wives, Maru (or Marvani, of Marwar) and Malwani. His journey from one to the other and back represented the twinning of the two Rajput sub-regions, as well as the circulation of martial males between them. In the seventeenth century, when the *Dholā-Māru* story was achieving a stable manuscript form in connection of Rajput courts of Marwar, the story of the derivative nature of Malwi Rajputs, and their de-racination through assimilation with local customs appears to have been popularised by Rajput nobles who had recently moved into the Malwa, backed by Mughal imperial appointments and grants.⁷⁸

Raṅḃaṅkā Rāthoḃ

Among all these Rajputs clan-kingdoms, those that claimed *Rāthoḃ* genealogies have a significant role to play in this story. Right next to the district of Dhar were the principalities of Jhabua and Amjhera – both ruled by *Rāthoḃ* clans.

⁷⁵ G. N. Sharma, *Rajasthan through the Ages: Vol. II from 1300 to 1761 A.D.* (Bikaner: Rajasthan State Archives, 2014), pp. 147–67.

⁷⁶ James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India* (London: Smith & Elder, 1829–1832); Norbert Peabody, 'Tod's Rajasthan and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 30: 1 (1996), 185–220; for an old challenge to Tod's thesis of Rajput 'feudalism' see Alfred Lyall, 'The Rajput States of India', in *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social* (London: J. Murray, 1882); Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁷⁷ Aleksandra Szyszko, *The Three Jewels of the Desert: the Dhola-Marū Story: a Living Narrative Tradition of Northern India* (Warsaw: Elipsa, 2012); Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Leaves from the Desert: The Dhola-Marū-ra-Duha – An Ancient Ballad of Rajasthan', in Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 273–334.

⁷⁸ Sinh, *Malwa in Transition*.

The ruler of Jhabua had been reinstated by Shah Jahan in 1634, after a period of disturbance.⁷⁹

The kingdom of Amjhera claims as its *mūlpurūsh*, Rao Ram (1529–74 CE), who, following a dispute over succession, invited emperor Akbar to intervene in Jodhpur. Rao Ram's grandson, Rao Jaswant Singh is said to have moved to Malwa, to (a now untraceable) fort called Morigarh, and his son, Keshavdas, received a host of grants in south-west Malwa, leading to the effective establishment of the state of Amjhera.⁸⁰ Several generations later, Jagrup Rathor provided active service to the governor Nawazish Khan in clearing the area, and was rewarded with a *mansab*.⁸¹ This man's son, Jasrup Rathor, will make a rather sanguinary appearance on our story.

Of these typically fissive groups, whose common motto (*virad*) is the claim of being unflinching in war (*ranbankā*), those that settled in Marwar,⁸² and especially the Jodhpur branch, rose the highest within the Mughal nobility and royal family. This line is now unsurprisingly the claimant of the highest genealogical status among *Rāthoḍ* – considered a kind of mother house.⁸³ Success within the Mughal imperium appears to have gone hand in hand with the production of chronicles by court-sponsored bards known by the caste name of *charan* and *bhāt*, which, again predictably, erased as much of the feudal dependency as possible, in creating the story of these autochthonous royal houses.⁸⁴

Together, such processes blur any border that we might now imagine between the modern Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.⁸⁵ They also, unsurprisingly, blur the boundaries between state and society, for such local recruits and implants were essentially warlords whose loyalties depended on the balance between the relative benefits of imperial service and local autonomy, which in turn depended on the size of their retainer armies and hence the possibility of military success. As constant shoppers for better deals, they represent that persistent turbulence but also a source of state-formation, which André Wink has called *fitna*.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 78

⁸⁰ Thakur Raghunath Rathor Sandla, *Amjhera Rājya ka Itihās* (Jodhpur: Maharaja Mansingh Pustak Prakash Kendra, 2007), pp. 91–9, 102–3, 106–7.

⁸¹ Sinh, *Malwa in Transition*, p. 78; citing *Nawazish Khan's letter book*, ff 10a; 11b–12a.

⁸² Norman Ziegler, 'Evolution of the Rathor State of Marwar: Horses, Structural Change and Warfare', in Schomer, *Idea*, Vol. 2, pp. 193–201, talks about the centralisation of the Marwar state.

⁸³ Genealogy, always a crucial exercise with royal aspirants, is now a more popular activity because of its combination of cultural-identity pursuits and digital technologies, including the World Wide Web. See www.indianrajputs.com/history/rathore.php.

⁸⁴ *Rathōḍān ri Khyāt*, (ed.) Hukm Singh Bhatti, 3 vols. (Jodhpur: Itihās Anusandhan Sansthan, 2007).

⁸⁵ Indeed, the idea of a national and absolute distinction between Marathas and Rajput is one that has been shown to be one of Tod's inventions. Peabody, 'Tod's Rajasthan', pp. 208–9.

⁸⁶ André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth Century Maratha Swarajya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Girāsīyas and Afghans

There were other martially oriented corporate groups that thrived in the ecology of Malwa but were less successful in turning their war zones into polities. Among these were armed groups such as *girāsīyas* claiming mixed Bhil (hill-based warrior groups) and Rajput ancestry. Scholars have long been confused about the precise ethnic connotation of the term *girāsīya*, which occurs several times in the documents of our collection. The military historian Irvine considered them hill tribes, but Raghuvir Sinh, based on Malcolm, asserted that these were outlaw Rajputs.⁸⁷ Malcolm himself noted unequivocally that the ‘Grassiah’ chiefs were all Rajputs, but of the category that had been dispossessed and thus eked out a living through predatory raids.⁸⁸ The connection with Rajputs and landed power also held in the neighbouring region and province of Gujarat, which also shared the common story of *girāsīya* stemming from a derivative of *grās* – a mouthful – implying a share in land rights. In the eighteenth century, the term, and the group named by it, became associated with robbery and protection rackets.⁸⁹ Despite such decline in fortunes, at least some of the *girāsīya* chiefs were significant enough even in the early nineteenth century for the East India Company to conclude treaties with them, protecting their claims on major princely states such as the Holkars.⁹⁰

This was one of the inner frontiers of any empire that claimed the region, including those of the Mughals. Quite like the Sahyadri hills (Western Ghats), about which Sumit Guha has written, the turbulence of Malwa, north of the Narmada river, implied both an endless source of cheap military labour and subversive sources of alternative royal legitimacy, with its own kings, bards and genealogical myths.⁹¹ The professions and fortunes of such militarised marginal groups changed for the worse during the processes of colonial and national sedentarisation; an unimaginative postcolonial anthropological study took the view that these were people of ‘backward’ tribes, bearing no possible connection with the Rajputs.⁹²

Afghans were another locally significant martial group whose occupations and status extended towards royalty on one side and robbery on the other, albeit with a wider geographical and social range than the *girāsīyas*. At least some Afghan chiefs saw their identities of a piece with that of the Rajputs, demonstrated through their choice of titles such as *rāwat*, and their

⁸⁷ Sinh, *Malwa in Transition*, p. 92. ⁸⁸ Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, Vol. I, pp. 508–11.

⁸⁹ Samira Sheikh, *Forging a Region*, p. x, citing M. S. Commissariat, *History of Gujarat*, Vol. I, pp. 80–1 and others.

⁹⁰ Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, Vol. II, Appendix XVI: M, pp. 415–16.

⁹¹ Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, Sepoy*, pp. 17–18 – on *girāsīyas*; Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India*.

⁹² B. I. Meharda, *History and Culture of the Girasias* (Jaipur: Jawahar Nagar, 1985).

genealogical stories.⁹³ The first Afghan kingdoms in Malwa were formed as the offshoots of the dynasty and polity of the Delhi Sultanate, especially the Khaljis. The term ‘military market’ applies particularly well to Afghans, who maintained a dominance over the supplies of military war horses for several centuries, and also supplied a constant flow of recruitable soldiers, frequently aspiring for more than ‘*naukarī*’. Derived from a Mongol word – *nökör* – implying retainer/faithful companion/friend, *naukarī* itself was always more than service anyway. It was a concept of political ability and loyalty, popularised around the fifteenth century, which continued to jostle with other concepts that it was related to – especially *bandagī* (servitude), which under the Delhi sultans and their provincial counterparts had lent itself to the politically elevated *bandagī-yi khās* or the specially favoured slave, ex-slave or quasi-slave retainer. Afghan kings struggled with warbands and their leaders, all determined to assert brotherhood and equivalence; certain Afghan warlords were known to have addressed the emperor Bahlol Lodi, himself descended from horse-traders, endearingly (or threateningly) as Ballu.⁹⁴ In Malwa, the eastern Afghan Sur empire held sway for brief period in the mid-sixteenth century before Akbar, and the Mughals, took over in the 1570s.

The next political resurgence of Afghans in Malwa, albeit a limited one, coincided with imperialist invasions from the north-west, that of the Durranis, in the 1760s. As with previous conflicts between mobile martial groups, the temporary damage caused to the Maratha empire by that Afghan invasion did not constitute any permanent ethnic opposition. Afghan soldiers flourished under the Maratha *sardārs* (warlords-turned-kings), and, as the Maratha polities crumbled, at least some of them formed part of that motley bunch of freebooters the British called the *Pindārīs*. The campaign against the *Pindārīs*, which brought the British into power in central India, was equally directed against their sponsors, the Marathas.⁹⁵ Some parts of this mercenary mass congealed into more stable polities, most importantly, at Tonk, with an Afghan dynasty at the helm.⁹⁶ The kingdom of Tonk was particularly connected with Malwa, given the founder, Amir Khan’s

⁹³ Digby mentions the instance of Jamal al-Din Rawat, disciple of fourteenth-century Sufi Shaykh Ashraf Jahangir of Jaunpur; Digby, ‘Before Timur came’, p. 324.

⁹⁴ Sunil Kumar, ‘*Bandagī* and *Naukarī*: Studying Transitions in Political Culture and Service under the North Indian Sultanates, Thirteenth-Sixteenth Centuries’, in Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh (eds.) *After Timur Left: Culture and Circulation in Fifteenth-Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 60–108.

⁹⁵ *The Mahratta and Pindari War* (Simla: Government Press, 1910); Stewart Gordon, ‘Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders and State Formation in 18th century Malwa’, *IESHR*, 6: 4 (1969), 403–29.

⁹⁶ Gommans, *Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire*; Jos Gommans, ‘Afghans in India’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, 2007.

vassalage of the Maratha general Jaswant Rao Holkar, whose state was headquartered at Indore.⁹⁷

Not all Afghans in Malwa were kings, soldiers or even military horse-traders; there was a small but significant settlement around the tomb of Kamal al-Din Chisti, whose legacy, and that of other Chisti and Shattari Sufis, graced the city with the name *Dar al-anwar pirān-i Dhar*.⁹⁸ Soldiers and religious adepts were often part of the same migratory episodes; such a family, associated with Dhar and other central Indian Afghan Sufi centres, might even have produced a Bollywood superstar.⁹⁹

Other Empires: Marathas and British

By the early eighteenth century, this south-western district of Malwa was subjected to repeated Maratha invasions, whose empire spread all over the province and incorporated it after the Mughal *farmāns* (royal orders) of 1741 formally appointed Peshwa Balaji Rao deputy-governor of Malwa.¹⁰⁰ Mughal recognition lagged behind political realities: Malwa had been subjected to periodic Maratha raids from the 1690s, and, in practical terms, passed under the control of Maratha *sardārs* in the early eighteenth century. Three generals and their dynasties established the most significant Maratha kingdoms in Malwa – the Holkars, with the headquarters in Indore; the Sindhias, headquartered in Gwalior; and the Puwars with their dominion in Dhar and Dewas. The substance of these new polities was a matter of prolonged battles and negotiation, with competing and mutually contradictory grants from the sovereigns of competing sides (the Mughals and the Marathas).

As a corollary of this process, Rajput clans in the region changed loyalties, but some of the new Maratha overlords also began to claim to be Rajputs. Such was the case with the Puwars of Dhar, as well as the genealogically associated states of Dewas Senior and Junior.¹⁰¹

It was from the fragmented Maratha kingdoms of the region that the British eventually formed the Central Indian Agency in the early nineteenth century.

⁹⁷ 'The Pindaris were not a tribe, but a military system of bandits of all races and religions'. *The Mahratta and Pindari War* (Simla: Government Press, 1910), pp. 4–5; Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, Vol. I, pp. 325–48; *Memoirs of the Puthan Soldier of Fortune: The Nuwab Ameer-ud-doulah Mohummud Ameer Khan*, compiled in Persian by Busawan Lal, translated H. T. Prinsep (Calcutta: Orphan Press, 1832).

⁹⁸ Syed Bashir Hasan, 'Chisti and Shattari Saints of Malwa: Relations with the State', *Journal of Business Management and Social Science Research*, 3: 3 (2014), 51–4; based principally on Muhammad Ghausi Shattari's sixteenth-century text, *Gulzar-i Abrar*.

⁹⁹ Jasim Khan, *Being Salman* (Penguin, 2015).

¹⁰⁰ Sinh, *Malwa in Transition*, pp. 268–9; also Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, I, pp. 94–5, in which Malcolm provides a translation of the terms of the engagement given by the Peshwa.

¹⁰¹ Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, I, pp. 97–115; Manohar Malgonkar, *The Puars of Dewas Senior* (Bombay, 1963).

Appointed its political and military head for four years from 1818, John Malcolm would produce the most comprehensive political survey of the region, which revealed the area as a shatter-zone in the clash of empires.¹⁰² Dhar emerged as one of the princely states in the region, under the control of the Puwar dynasty, its territories braided with the much larger possessions of the Holkars of Indore and Sindhias of Gwalior.

Conclusion

Malwa was a land of layered empires from long before the advent of the Mughals in the Indian subcontinent. The family whose story this book tells was distinctive in surviving several changes of regimes: claiming to be present in the region even during the Malwa Sultanates, they outlasted the Mughals, the Marathas as well as the British, retaining documentation of their rights until the present day. Through those documents we can approach the working of empires from underneath, and discover how significant rights-holders situated just beneath the shifting imperial structures entered and extracted themselves from those polities, and what notions of selfhood and entitlements they retained throughout that process of shifting loyalties.

¹⁰² On Dhar state, see *Central India State Gazetteers* (Bombay, 1908), Vol. V, Western States, pp. 389–515. In 1819, a treaty was signed between the Raja Ramchandra Rao Puwar (represented by Raghunath) and the East India Company (represented by John Malcolm), which is reproduced in Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, II, Appendix XVI: F, pp. 408–9.