

Book Review

DIVYA CHERIAN, *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023), 284 pp.

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Divya Cherian's book *Merchants of Virtue* is a micro study of the precolonial state of Marwar in western Rajasthan. Through a detailed study of the legal archives, Cherian examines how law and state power were deployed to shape the category of 'Hindu', a process that was inextricably linked to the shaping of the 'Other', that is, groups labelled as untouchable. The book challenges the notion that the labels 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'Untouchable' were products of colonial modernity and makes the compelling argument that these categories can only be understood by investigating how caste shaped them. The book's strength lies in the rich eighteenth-century legal archives that it uses, which effectively display the fraught, everyday disputes and experiences that created the boundary between 'Hindu' and others. Cherian argues, in line with current scholarship on western India, that caste practices were repeatedly negotiated and altered using law. The book demonstrates the juridical jockeying by elite communities—Vaishnavs, Jains and Brahmans, in particular—to alter customary practices and reshape social and ethical norms. The author repeatedly asserts that mercantile groups leveraged their economic and political clout to achieve their objectives. They had a willing partner in this in the ruler Vijai Singh (r. 1752–93). The latter took initiation into the Vallabh sampradaya in 1765, which, according to Cherian, brought him into the 'same spiritual and moral community as many merchants of Marwar' (p. 27). However, the author acknowledges that the pursuit of a new ethical orientation witnessed in this period may be an exception. This requires further study, especially since later rulers shifted their patronage away from Vaishnavism.

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In the first part of the book, titled ‘Other’, Cherian details the ways in which mercantile groups used their influence to firmly establish spatial distance and commensal separation from ‘lowly’ groups. These efforts, involving everything from bodies and housing to water sources, were consistently framed as a necessity for preserving honour. Cherian argues that the creation of the ‘Hindu’ was achieved by demarcating them from the *acchep* or untouchable ‘other’, a category which included caste groups engaged in leatherwork, waste clearing occupations, landless vagrants, as well as Muslims. Artisanal castes were also occasionally collapsed into the category of untouchables. The book, therefore, makes the argument that the ‘Hindu’ was essentially the imagination of the local elite castes. It also contends that elite ‘Hindu’ groups pushed the state to pursue policies of non-harm and vegetarianism. According to Cherian, the policing of people’s dietary choices was unprecedented. In pursuit of these objectives, the state deployed surveillance and punitive measures against animal slaughter for ritual, sport or consumption. These orders, and punishments for flouting them, were enforced more stringently on *achhep* castes, who were seen to have an ‘innate’ tendency to harm animals.

The second part of the book focuses on the ‘Self’, examining the embrace of a new ethical orientation through rigorous self-discipline and abstinence from meat, alcohol, gambling, and other perceived ‘excesses’. Consequently, the enforcement of a vegetarian ethic was accompanied by laws to eradicate violence against all sentient beings. The state sought to discipline those who harmed non-human actors through a series of protective measures: prohibiting the castration of bulls, safeguarding winged insects from lamps, and even sparing venomous creatures like snakes and spiders. Lastly, Cherian contends that heightened concerns over caste and lineage purity translated into stricter regulation of the sexual behaviour of elite ‘Hindu’ women in early modern Marwar. The law was wielded to discipline unwed mothers and effectively implement anti-abortion strictures. Cherian notes that in laws related to drinking, gambling and chastity, it was the merchants and the Brahmans who were the chief targets of the Rathor state’s effort to craft a body of ethical subjects (p. 139). The delineation of the ‘Hindu’ was, therefore, through the disciplining of the self and the distancing of the ‘other’.

The language of the book is accessible, and the narrative style is engaging. Through a localised study of Marwar, it makes significant contributions to the historiography of caste and untouchability. The argument also effectively pushes back the timeline for the creation of the labels ‘Hindu’ and the ‘Untouchable’ other, challenging their identification with colonial modernity. However, it largely concerns itself with caste groups at the extreme ends of the social order. The book would have benefited from a theoretical engagement with ‘middle’ caste groups—agricultural castes, for instance. How did these castes fit into the process of the creation of the ‘Hindu’? In many places, the author’s arguments make it seem as

though the state was able to reshape customary and ethical norms uncontested. Yet, the archival sources detailed in the book repeatedly present a different picture—of tensions, wilful disregard and outright opposition—to the policies pursued by the state. Exploring these contestations in greater detail would have further nuanced the book's rich insights.

Akhila Mathew

Azim Premji University, Bengaluru