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Gendered Sovereignty and Domestic Statecraft: Household Power in Seventeenth-Century Rajput Polities

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Abstract- ***The political history of seventeenth-century Rajput polities has conventionally been examined through kingship, warfare, clan honour, territorial sovereignty, and relations with the Mughal Empire. Within this historiographical framework, royal women have often been represented as symbols of honour, loyalty, sacrifice, or dynastic virtue rather than as participants in the institutional processes through which political authority was reproduced. This article reconsiders that framework by examining the Rajput royal household as a site of domestic statecraft. Focusing comparatively on Marwar and Mewar between c. 1600 and 1707, it argues that sovereignty was produced not solely through the formal authority of male rulers but also through gendered practices involving kinship, succession, ritual, patronage, and political memory. The article draws upon scholarship on Rajput political culture, Mughal-Rajput relations, royal households, gender, and vernacular historical traditions. Particular attention is given to the succession crisis following the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Marwar in 1678 and to the political and cultural environment of Maharana Raj Singh's Mewar. These cases demonstrate the importance of examining royal women not simply as passive members of dynastic households but as participants in processes through which lineage and legitimacy were preserved. The article proposes that the zenana should be understood neither as an autonomous centre of political power nor as a purely private space, but as a gendered institutional environment connected to wider structures of sovereignty. By integrating gender history with political, kinship, and spatial history, the study offers a revised interpretation of early modern Rajput state formation.***

Index Terms—Domestic statecraft, gendered sovereignty, Marwar, Mewar, Rajput polity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Rajput polities in early modern India has frequently been narrated through the language of martial masculinity. Kings, warriors, battles, territorial expansion, clan honour, and resistance occupy a central place in conventional accounts of Rajasthan. Such scholarship has been indispensable for reconstructing political developments, particularly the changing relationship between Rajput states and the Mughal Empire. Yet the concentration on formal kingship has also encouraged a relatively narrow understanding of sovereignty. The royal household has generally appeared as a secondary setting surrounding the political centre rather than as part of the political system itself. Women have similarly been represented through categories of honour, sacrifice, marriage, motherhood, or ritual.

Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that Rajput political culture cannot be adequately understood without considering kinship, memory, gender, and the production of historical narratives ([1]; [2]). This article develops that intervention through the concepts of gendered sovereignty and domestic statecraft. The central argument is that the Rajput household—especially its female-controlled or female-oriented spaces—could operate as a political environment in which dynastic continuity, succession, marriage alliances, ritual legitimacy, and political memory were negotiated. The original research proposal similarly identifies the household as a structured institution affecting legitimacy, succession, diplomatic relations, and architectural memory.

The argument does not suggest that Rajput women exercised sovereignty in the same manner as male rulers. Nor does it imply that all royal women possessed political authority. Instead, it asks how gender shaped the distribution of political responsibilities and how forms of authority associated with marriage, motherhood, widowhood, ritual, patronage, and kinship could acquire wider political consequences. Marwar and Mewar provide a useful comparative framework. Both were major Rajput polities, yet their political relationships with the Mughal Empire developed differently. Marwar

became deeply integrated into Mughal political structures, while Mewar maintained a distinctive political identity despite periods of accommodation and conflict. The seventeenth century therefore provides an especially productive period for examining how dynastic households responded to imperial integration, succession disputes, and changing political circumstances.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY: FROM MARTIAL RAJPUTS TO GENDERED POLITICAL CULTURE

Earlier colonial representations of Rajasthan frequently privileged Rajput martial virtues and organised historical narratives around heroic resistance. James Tod's influential Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan played an important role in constructing this image, although its nineteenth-century colonial framework requires considerable critical distance. Later nationalist narratives often retained aspects of the heroic Rajput image, particularly the association between political legitimacy and martial honour. More recent scholarship has questioned such representations. Ramya Sreenivasan's study of Rajput historical memory demonstrates how stories concerning Rajput queens and heroic women were repeatedly reconstructed by different communities and political actors.

Her work is particularly important because it shows that gender was central to the construction of historical memory rather than merely an additional theme within Rajput history ([1]). Varsha Joshi's study of Rajput women likewise demonstrates the importance of marriage, polygyny, succession, purdah, and royal households in understanding Rajput society ([2]). These studies make it possible to move beyond the image of women as passive symbols. Nevertheless, a further analytical step is necessary: the political history of the Rajput household needs to be reconstructed alongside its social history. This approach can be strengthened by comparison with scholarship on Mughal households. Ruby Lal has challenged the simplistic representation of the Mughal haram as a space of confinement and political irrelevance.

Her analysis demonstrates that the royal household could be connected with public-political affairs, institutional development, and negotiations among elite men and women ([3]). While the Mughal household cannot simply be equated with the Rajput zenana, Lal's approach provides a useful conceptual basis for questioning the rigid division between domesticity and politics. Studies of Mughal-Rajput relations further demonstrate that Rajput rulers were integrated into wider imperial networks of military service, marriage, diplomacy, and political status ([4]; [5]). Nandita Prasad Sahai's study of Marwar emphasises that Rathor kingship depended upon complex structures of patronage, documentation, negotiation, and relationships with regional society rather than military coercion alone ([6]).

The historiographical gap therefore lies at the intersection of these fields. Rajput political history, women's history, kinship studies, and architectural history have often been treated separately. The concept of domestic statecraft seeks to bring them together.

III. GENDERED SOVEREIGNTY AND DOMESTIC STATECRAFT

3.1 GENDERED SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty is commonly associated with the formal authority of the ruler. Such a definition, however, risks obscuring the social and cultural practices through which legitimacy was reproduced. This article uses gendered sovereignty to describe the ways in which political legitimacy and dynastic authority were structured through gendered institutions. The king might exercise direct political and military authority, while queens, mothers, widows, and other female members of the ruling household could participate in the preservation of lineage, marriage relationships, ritual continuity, and dynastic memory. This distinction is important. Female political agency should not be assumed merely because a woman belonged to a royal family. Instead, it must be reconstructed through particular practices and institutional relationships.

3.2 DOMESTIC STATECRAFT

The concept of domestic statecraft challenges the assumption that the household and the state occupied separate spheres. In dynastic societies, marriage, reproduction, succession, inheritance, adoption, and ritual were directly connected with political continuity. The household can therefore be understood as a micro-political field . Decisions made within it

could affect relations among clans, succession to the throne, alliances with imperial authorities, and the legitimacy of rulers. This conceptualisation also corresponds with the proposal's argument that the household functioned as a site where governance, succession planning, diplomacy, and legitimacy were negotiated.

IV. MARWAR: WIDOWHOOD, SUCCESSION AND THE POLITICAL HOUSEHOLD

The strongest seventeenth-century example for examining domestic statecraft in Marwar is the succession crisis following the death of Maharaja Jaswant Singh in 1678. Jaswant Singh had occupied an important position within the Mughal political order and served in imperial military and administrative contexts. His career illustrates the complex relationship between Rajput kingship and Mughal service ([7]; [4]). His death at Jamrud in 1678 created a major succession problem because he died without an established adult male heir capable of immediately occupying the Marwar throne. The circumstances surrounding the succession were particularly significant because two of Jaswant Singh's wives were pregnant at the time of his death. One of the children subsequently died, while the surviving son, Ajit Singh, became central to the struggle over the future of Marwar.

The episode has been discussed extensively in scholarship on the Rajput rebellion and Mughal-Marwar relations ([7]; [8]; [5]). This case makes the royal household politically visible. The pregnant widows were not simply members of a private family. Their bodies and reproductive status became directly connected with the question of dynastic continuity. The birth of a legitimate male heir transformed the succession question and became one of the central issues around which resistance to Mughal control developed. The political importance of this episode should not be reduced to the later military activities of Durgadas Rathor. The household dimension is equally significant. The survival and recognition of Ajit Singh involved questions of custody, legitimacy, protection, and dynastic identity.

The case therefore illustrates an important feature of gendered sovereignty: reproductive status could become a political resource because dynastic succession depended upon it . The Marwar succession crisis also demonstrates why the distinction between public and private becomes problematic. Pregnancy, widowhood, childbirth, and maternal custody appear to belong to the domestic sphere, yet in this case they became central to the political future of a kingdom. The Mertiyo Rathor chronicles are particularly valuable for reconstructing the social and political environment of Marwar. Saran and Ziegler's extensive translations of Middle Marwari materials demonstrate the richness of vernacular sources for understanding Rajput family structures and political relationships ([9]).

Such sources allow historians to move beyond imperial Persian narratives and examine the political culture from within regional traditions.

V. MEWAR: RAJ SINGH, DYNASTIC MEMORY AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

Mewar provides a contrasting but complementary case. Maharana Raj Singh ruled Mewar from 1652 to 1680 during a period of significant Mughal-Rajput tensions. G. N. Sharma's Mewar and the Mughal Emperors remains an important historical reconstruction of the relationship between the Sisodia state and the Mughal Empire ([10]). Recent scholarship has demonstrated the importance of vernacular and Sanskrit texts in understanding the political culture of Raj Singh's reign. Cynthia Talbot's study of Rāj-vilās , Rāja-ratnākara , and Rāja-praśasti shows that different texts produced at roughly the same time could represent Aurangzeb and Mughal-Rajput relations in markedly different ways. These differences reflected changing political circumstances rather than a single, fixed Rajput ideological position ([11]).

This observation has wider implications for the present argument. Dynastic legitimacy was not simply exercised through armies or administrative institutions; it was also produced through historical narratives, ritual language, genealogies, and representations of the ruling family. Lindsey Harlan's analysis of stories concerning Sultan Singh, the son of Raj Singh, further demonstrates the importance of family narratives in the construction of political memory. Stories concerning Sultan Singh reflect anxieties surrounding succession, royal authority, family rivalry, and the dangers inherent in dynastic politics ([12]). Importantly, Harlan identifies a

narrative in which a queen and a Brahmin are blamed for influencing Raj Singh against Sultan Singh.

Regardless of the historical reliability of this particular story, its existence is revealing. It demonstrates that female figures could be inserted into narratives explaining political conflict within the royal family. Such narratives should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of actual female political intervention. They are better treated as evidence of the cultural expectation that members of the royal household—including women—could occupy meaningful positions within dynastic politics.

VI. KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE AS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Marriage was fundamental to Rajput political organisation. It established connections between ruling houses and created networks of kinship extending beyond territorial boundaries. Scholarship on Rajput marriage has demonstrated that matrimonial alliances were closely connected with state formation and political legitimacy ([1]; [2]). The political significance of marriage becomes particularly clear in the context of Mughal-Rajput relations. Rajput rulers could establish relationships with the Mughal court through matrimonial alliances, while kinship relationships could simultaneously generate obligations of loyalty. The War of Succession of 1657–59 provides an instructive example. Cynthia Talbot notes that Maharaja Jaswant Singh and other Rajputs participated in the conflict partly within a political culture in which kinship relationships mattered.

Rajput support for particular Mughal princes could therefore not be understood solely through abstract political ideology; family and matrimonial relationships also influenced political expectations. This demonstrates that women, although often absent from the battlefield narratives, could remain structurally significant to political relationships because matrimonial alliances created the kinship connections through which political obligations were interpreted. Marriage therefore functioned as a form of diplomatic infrastructure . It connected households, clans, and courts and contributed to the formation of political networks.

VII. RITUAL, ARCHITECTURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF POLITICAL MEMORY

The political household was also a cultural institution. Ritual practices associated with birth, death, marriage, worship, ancestor remembrance, and dynastic ceremonies contributed to the construction of continuity. The original proposal identifies women's involvement in devotional practices, temple patronage, memorial rituals, and birth and death ceremonies as important areas for investigation. However, the evidence requires methodological caution. It is difficult to reconstruct the precise degree of authority exercised by individual women solely from male-authored chronicles. The stronger argument is that royal women's ritual roles were embedded within a larger dynastic system through which political legitimacy was reproduced. Architecture provides a related form of evidence.

Palaces, temples, gardens, water structures, and memorial spaces materialised dynastic authority. Female patronage, where documented, therefore deserves attention as a form of political representation. The zenana itself can be examined spatially. Rather than interpreting seclusion simply as exclusion from politics, historians can ask how restricted spaces were organised, who had access, and how information and influence moved between the inner household and the court. Ruby Lal's work on the Mughal household provides an important methodological comparison by demonstrating that spatial separation did not necessarily eliminate political interaction ([3]). The Rajput case requires its own evidence, but the conceptual lesson is valuable: seclusion and political irrelevance are not synonymous .

VIII. THE HOUSEHOLD DURING POLITICAL CRISIS

The importance of domestic statecraft becomes particularly visible during moments of crisis. Stable succession allows political historians to focus on rulers, offices, and institutions. Crisis reveals the relationships beneath these institutions. The Marwar crisis of 1678–79 is therefore particularly important. The death of Jaswant Singh, the uncertain succession, the birth of Ajit Singh, Mughal attempts to control the succession, and subsequent Rajput resistance transformed the royal household into a central political arena. Similarly, the political conflicts involving Mewar under Raj Singh demonstrate the importance

of dynastic narratives and family relationships. The political significance of these episodes lies not simply in their military dimensions but in the struggle over who had the right to represent and reproduce dynastic legitimacy.

This perspective also helps reinterpret adoption and regency. Adoption was not merely a family practice when succession was at stake. Likewise, a widow acting as guardian or regent could become involved in the preservation of dynastic authority. Such practices should be examined as institutional responses to the problem of continuity. The research proposal identifies adoption, widow regency, and succession as major areas in which female authority needs to be reconstructed.

IX. COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION: MARWAR AND MEWAR

The comparison between Marwar and Mewar reveals both similarities and differences. Marwar's closer integration with the Mughal Empire created a political environment in which Rathor rulers participated extensively in imperial military and administrative structures. Scholarship on the Rathors demonstrates that this relationship did not eliminate local political authority; instead, Mughal integration contributed to the transformation of Rathor kingship and regional state formation ([6]; [9]). Mewar followed a different trajectory. Although relations with the Mughal Empire varied considerably, Mewar retained a distinctive ideological and political identity associated with Sisodia sovereignty. Raj Singh's reign illustrates the complex negotiation between accommodation and conflict.

These differences make comparison particularly valuable. The purpose is not to categorise Marwar as “integrated” and Mewar as “independent,” but to ask how different imperial relationships affected the organisation of royal households. In both cases, however, kinship remained politically important. Succession remained dependent upon family continuity. Historical memory remained central to political legitimacy. Royal women remained embedded in the structures through which these processes operated.

X. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCE CRITICISM

A gendered history of Rajput statecraft requires the use of multiple types of evidence. Vernacular chronicles such as khyats and vigats are particularly important because they preserve regional perspectives on dynastic history. The Mārvāḍ rā Parganāṁ rī Vigat , for example, represents an important seventeenth-century Marwari chronicle tradition. Recent scholarship confirms the value of such vernacular material for reconstructing Rathor political culture. Persian imperial chronicles are essential for reconstructing Mughal-Rajput relations but should be read alongside regional sources. Sanskrit and vernacular court poetry can reveal how political legitimacy and dynastic identity were represented. Administrative records, genealogies, inscriptions, temple records, architectural remains, and patronage documents can provide additional evidence.

The methodology should therefore involve triangulation . No single source should be assumed to provide a complete account of women's political activity. Particular attention should also be paid to silence. Women may not always appear as named political actors even when their actions shaped succession, marriage, or household continuity. At the same time, historians must avoid turning absence of evidence into evidence of agency. The objective is to reconstruct historically demonstrable structures of authority rather than to impose modern assumptions about female empowerment.

XI. CONCLUSION

The political history of seventeenth-century Rajputana becomes more complex when the royal household is treated as an institutional component of sovereignty rather than a private sphere outside politics. The cases of Marwar and Mewar demonstrate the usefulness of this approach. The succession crisis following Jaswant Singh's death reveals how pregnancy, widowhood, childbirth, custody, and dynastic legitimacy could become central to the political future of a kingdom. The history of Mewar under Raj Singh demonstrates the importance of dynastic narratives, family relationships, and political memory. Together, these cases suggest that sovereignty was reproduced through a combination of formal institutions and household practices. The concept of gendered sovereignty helps explain why women's political significance cannot be

measured only through direct office-holding or military command.

Their authority could operate through kinship, reproduction, ritual, patronage, custody, and memory. The concept of domestic statecraft similarly challenges the binary distinction between public and private. In dynastic political systems, the household was itself part of the machinery through which succession and legitimacy were maintained. This does not mean that Rajput women possessed equal political power with men. Their authority was constrained by patriarchal structures, social expectations, lineage rules, and spatial segregation. Yet constraint and agency were not mutually exclusive. Women could exercise historically significant forms of authority precisely through institutions that were gendered and hierarchical. The study therefore contributes to a broader reconsideration of early modern state formation.

Political authority should not be located exclusively in rulers, armies, courts, and administrative offices. It must also be studied through families, marriage networks, ritual practices, spaces of domesticity, and the production of dynastic memory. The Rajput royal household consequently emerges not as the opposite of the state but as one of the spaces through which the state was reproduced. The zenana was neither simply a prison nor an autonomous political centre. It was a gendered institutional environment whose occupants could participate, in different and historically contingent ways, in the maintenance of dynastic power. A history of Rajput sovereignty that places household institutions alongside courts and battlefields therefore offers a more complete understanding of seventeenth-century political culture.

It also provides a productive bridge between gender history, political history, kinship studies, architectural history, and the study of early modern South Asian state formation.

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