Preface

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This book explores the historical and cultural processes by which people under colonial and postcolonial rule come to regard themselves as part of a "community," sharing a particular local and panregional ethnic community identity. The focus of this ethnohistorical case study of community formation is a wealthy and controversial migrant business community in Calcutta, the Marwaris. Although the Marwaris are arguably the wealthiest and most successful business and industrialist community in India, they have earned a contested national reputation as a community that is socially and politically conservative, corrupt, clannish, and even backward in the social values they espouse, particularly in matters relating to women. This perception has in fact been so pervasive that in sources such as *Molesworth's Marathi-English Dictionary* (1857) the term Marwari is defined as applying "allusively to a cunning and knavish fellow." [1] This one example speaks volumes about how deeply the word "Marwari" is associated with negative connotations in the minds of non-Marwaris.

My study of community-formation among the Calcutta Marwaris [2] challenges theoretical paradigms in the social sciences that suggest that the affective and supposedly primordial ties of community are antithetical to capitalism and modernity. Colonial capitalism in India did not always destroy community; in fact, as in the case of the Marwaris, it sometimes created it. Colonial capitalism provided the particular enabling context for the emergence of a modern Marwari identity. The starting date of my study, circa 1897, marks the burgeoning use of the term "Marwari" as a category in Calcutta public life, as the result of community agitation against colonial antigambling legislation. The closing date, 1997, marks, with fortuitous symmetry, the year that I finished my fieldwork research and returned to the United States to begin writing my dissertation.

As a community whose public identity is characterized and marked by the very central contradictions of modernity, the Marwaris present a challenge to current social science explanations about community formation in public life. This makes them a fascinating and yet difficult case to write about. On the one hand, they are a strongly capitalist community whose identity has emerged in the last century through transregional flows of capital and migrations of traders. On the other hand, in forming their own public self-image under the conditions of colonial and postcolonial capitalism, the migrant and diasporic Calcutta Marwaris do not present themselves as an outcome of modernity. Instead, they have drawn extensively on the idioms of seemingly naturalized patriarchal sentiments of lineage, gender, extended family, and kinship, along with expressions of regional loyalty to their imagined homeland of Marwar, in Rajasthan.

By negotiating their modernity using the primordialized language of community, and not the language of a bourgeois public sphere, the Marwaris are quite unlike their generally less business-minded, middle-class, English-educated Bengali *bhadralok* neighbors, who championed a national colonial modernity through state intervention and legislation. The Bengali *bhadralok*, acclaimed for their modernizing efforts in education, literature, and universal legislative social reform under the sponsorship of the colonial state, have long been hailed as the harbingers of an Indian modernity presumed to be valid for other Indians who may not share–and may sometimes even actively contest–those same bourgeois cultural values. By virtue of their strong cultural capital in Calcutta, the Bengali *bhadralok* have been extensively written about by contemporary scholars and as such have implicitly set the norms for other people whom Bengalis routinely label "non-Bengali." My study is partly aimed at rectifying this bias in scholarship, and attempts to articulate how other groups have negotiated the processes of modern self-fashioning in Indian public life. In fact, looking at the Marwaris as one of the "Others" against whom Bengali *bhadralok* identity is defined may shed light on the actual historical *peculiarity* of the Bengalis as colonized Indian subjects.

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My study of the community identity of the Calcutta Marwaris engages academic debates of the last two decades about the rise of public culture and the production of community and locality under the flows of capital and migration. Historians and anthropologists working on the topic of colonialism, in India and other places, have identified the production of new or changed community identities as one of the primary effects of colonial rule. Extensive research on how the colonial state used objectifying techniques–such as the census and ethnographic surveys–to classify colonized people has demonstrated that this colonial knowledge shaped the way that colonized peoples saw themselves and constructed their identities. [3] At the same time, historians of India such as Ranajit Guha have cautioned scholars not to regard the state as an all-powerful arbiter of "social facts." [4] While still acknowledging the unequal and unjust power relations characteristic of colonial rule, Guha focuses on areas of appropriation and resistance, where colonized people often found their own means of negotiating the dynamic configurations of colonialism and modernity. Guha urges historians to rethink our descriptions of colonial modernity so that we do not write India's history as merely an echo of the modernity of the colonial masters.

Guha's characterization of the colonial state as consisting in "dominance without hegemony" has been a point of departure for my inquiry. Though the colonial state is not absent from my analysis, I am most interested in looking at instances in which Indians acted (or at least thought that they were acting) as the makers of their own history. I want to examine how Indians negotiated their own sense of difference among themselves, along lines of ethnicity, region, and gender, in areas where the British were not obviously

in hegemonic control. Although my thinking about the production of colonial knowledge has been influenced by scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Ann Stoler, Bernard Cohn, and Edward Said, [5] I have also been influenced by ethnohistorical work such as that of E. Valentine Daniel, Talal Asad, Ranajit Guha, and the Subaltern Studies collective, who have questioned the ways that scholarly narratives of the colonial encounter have been overly influenced by Eurocentric understandings. [6] I hope to bring these two perspectives together.

One final note on my argument relating to dominance without hegemony is pertinent here. My making an appeal for the creation of historical narratives that are not dominated by the discourse of the colonial state should not be mistaken for a throwback to Orientalist-style accounts in which the state is given a passive role in the construction of culture, knowledge, and power. This has not been my intent. This does not mean that I will be describing the internal life of the secret trading networks among Marwari businessmen and what they did when the colonial state was not looking. Nor will I be looking at what it means to "be Marwari" in the way that Daniel's study is about "being Tamil." [7] Rather, to illuminate discourses and practices of the Marwari community in colonial and postcolonial India I focus on the interstitial space of public life between community and the state. [8]

Based upon my ethnographic and archival research on the Calcutta Marwaris, I argue that communities are enacted by performances of identity in public life that draw upon idioms of kinship and family. These performances cut across the divide between public and private, and provide challenges to theories about public culture that rely on explanatory devices such as the invention of tradition and the imagination of community. The very gendered articulations of lineage, family, and gender roles in public and political representations of the diasporic Calcutta Marwari community, it turns out, are not so easily explained by these conceptual tools of analysis.

My interest in the history and anthropology of India dates back to the middle of my undergraduate years at Carleton College when I enrolled in Professor Eleanor Zelliot's course on the history of modern India. One course in Indian history soon led to another and another, and in 1988 I spent a fascinating year in Pune, Maharashtra on the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) India Studies program. Though at the time I would never have considered this experience to be anthropological fieldwork, it was without a doubt a foundational experience in my later graduate training in the history and anthropology of India. After starting graduate school in anthropology and history at the University of Michigan in 1991, I made two more trips to India over summer breaks to get reacquainted with friends from my ACM days, investigate potential field sites and dissertation topics, and to concentrate on

learning Hindi and Urdu. These early fieldwork experiences form my own personal historical backdrop to the archival and fieldwork research presented in these pages.

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I started my "official" fieldwork in 1994—95, with a research fellowship from the now-defunct University of California, Berkeley Professional Studies Program. I went to New Delhi to do research on the development and effects of the professionalization of domestic education on Indian women, with the idea of focusing on the institutional history of a prominent home science college, the oldest in India. I was interested in examining how aspects of domesticity and colonialism had become routinized in formal educational curricula. During this research I became aware of an impression among some students that the field of home science and domestic education in general has been especially popular among Marwaris and *baniya* (middlemen trader) communities. [9] I began to read more about the histories of business and trading groups in order to make sense of why particular communities would make cultural and financial investments in the professionalization of domesticity. The connection between trading groups and the professionalization of domesticity was not an outcome I would have predicted before I began my research.

In the process of sorting out these connections, I learned just how closely discourses and practices of public, private, domesticity, kinship, and community identity in modern India have become intertwined. I found that the Marwaris are a group with a complicated and often troubled relationship with their own public identity and with the attendant discourse of domesticity that forms a surprisingly large dimension of their public presence. The site of my research on domesticity and public identity then shifted from a college institution of home science to the Marwari community in Calcutta. In Calcutta, where I ultimately did most of my fieldwork, the term "Marwari" connoted a very prominent, contested, and relatively unresearched social identity. I returned to India in 1996—1997 for another year of fieldwork on a junior fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies. During this research period in Calcutta, Professor Gautam Bhadra gave generously of both his time and ideas from his expertise in Indian history to guide me in my research efforts.

My own role as a scholar clearly had an impact on my attempt to study or define Marwari identity in Calcutta. Because of the multivalent quality of the ethnic tag "Marwari," and its often demeaning connotations of stinginess and corruption, I had to take great care in the ways that I deployed the term in both public and private settings. This meant that I could never directly ask anyone if he or she was Marwari. My first attempts to do exactly this–to ask people, "Are you a Marwari?"–ended in mutual embarrassment and occasional insult. I eventually learned to wait until the person might use the term "Marwari" to identity himself or herself, and then I might cautiously follow

suit. Some people, recognized by others to be from the most prominent Marwari families, rejected the term "Marwari" entirely, insisting instead to be called a Rajasthani, an Indian, or a Calcuttan. Ethnic identity, I discovered, was a highly contentious matter. Even though I was not studying a "community" in the more common sense of the term, as signifying the politically explosive context of Hindu-Muslim communal violence, I found that people do not necessarily always control the ethnic tags that label them. And yet these ethnic tags, though contested, provide the means by which Indian public culture is constituted and represented.

Appointment Anthropology

My ethnographic methodology among Marwaris, at least among the wealthiest families, usually consisted of "appointment anthropology." [10] I never called anyone up "cold," without having first had a proper introduction from someone else, either with a letter or preferably a phone call. These introductions, I felt, helped grant me both social legitimacy (I could hope to be taken seriously) and also social protection. Getting started on this networking process took time. I was initially introduced to a prominent Marwari writer by a Bengali filmmaker friend, and from my acquaintanceship with this woman made contacts with others. It was very difficult to meet the most prominent industrialists because they were often out of town, very busy, and/or could not be bothered spending time with a graduate student from the University of Michigan. Still, using "appointment anthropology" I met dozens of families, many of whom were socially, economically, or politically prominent, with connections to the various public and private institutions of the city that I was interested in researching. I often started out by meeting people in their offices. Families might later invite me to attend weddings, community association meetings, or to come over to their houses for tea or meals.

Before I started my research, I expected an "interview" to be a situation in which I would sit down with one other person, ask probing questions, one following from the other, and easily get all the answers. Experience proved that "conversations" was perhaps a better name for what these encounters were. I usually had to wait a long time to see someone. Then the person would receive and sometimes make phone calls, deal with unexpected situations and crises, leave the room and return again, while others would come in to chat, and snacks and tea would be served. This was merely an introduction. In addition, my questions always had to be flexible enough to accommodate the mood, temperament, and personality of the host. Sometimes people revealed skeletons in their closets, perhaps confident that I was enough of an outsider to be harmless or unable to spread rumors. More often, it was very slow and difficult to establish trust with people who were already quite adept at managing the flows of information about themselves. I could never, for example, get very detailed information about business matters, and when I would tell people later on that I was not interested in business, they would be more relaxed in hearing what I had to say.

During much of my "appointment anthropology," I spoke to most Marwari men in English, aware that their English was often better than my Hindi, and, more important, aware that Indians are especially sensitive and status-conscious about proving their ability to speak English, particularly with foreigners. Yet my four years of studying Hindi prepared me to have detailed conversations with many Marwari women (and a few Marwari men) who did not, could not, or would not speak in English. Though wealthier women in their forties and fifties were often completely fluent and at ease in English, those over about sixty years of age or lower-middle class women were generally unable to speak in English with me. At the time I sensed that they felt embarrassed about my speaking to them in Hindi, which they may have seen as a form of necessary condescension on my part. Since I was generally only invited to come over to meet Marwari women during the day, while their husbands were at work, there were often few English-speaking people around. So these women were often relieved when an English-speaking person entered the room so that they could halt the conversation. My grasp of spoken Hindi during my fieldwork was strong enough that I never had to rely on an interpreter. The introduction of an interpreter, either Marwari or Bengali, would have greatly constrained the already very formal relationships that I developed with Marwari women and men. On my very first interview, my conversations with two sisters extended into the early evening, and they asked if I would have my dinner there. I paused for the sake of politeness–thrilled that this might be an occasion when I would have a chance to meet and observe the entire joint family–and gratefully accepted. It was hard for me to hide my disappointment when one sister replied, Fine, you tell me when you are ready, and the servant will bring your food out here to the living room. There was no question, it seemed, of getting beyond the front sitting room into the more intimate areas of the house.

Putting Away My Notebook

There were things that I could do, however, to try to ease my way into the lives of Marwaris, particularly when meeting women. The single most important strategy that I used was to put away my notebook, that time-honored sign of academic and anthropological research. It would have been impossible to establish any kind of trusted relationships with people had I wielded paper and pen at first encounter. [11]

Not having a notebook was simply a concession to normal everyday behavior during social occasions. I did not want to present myself to people as only a researcher. So, during my initial meetings with people, I generally carried neither a big notebook nor any other object, such as a tape recorder, to make notes. I kept a bit of paper and a pen in my handbag, in case I felt it was imperative to write down the name and telephone number of a potential contact. If I felt it was important to have a second meeting, I would then bring a small tape recorder along and request permission to make tapes. Only a small handful of people were willing to be taped, and though I was initially disappointed at hearing a refusal, I realized that tape recording

drastically limited the range of subjects people were willing to discuss, particularly in terms of touchy subjects such as inter- and intra-community relations.

I became quite conscious of the importance of how people manage the information that they are willing to share with an outsider, including an American graduate student. People are extremely secretive about anything to do with money or business, and my information on these matters in this book comes primarily from secondary sources. But in terms of managing ethnographic encounters, there were other things at stake. Many people, especially Bengalis, expressed their cynicism to me about fieldwork research: people could easily "lie" to me during the interviews. Indeed, it was true that at times people would say things that directly contradicted information that I had gathered from others, from written sources, or even things they had told me themselves. Yet I realized that even seemingly false utterances have a useful truth value for the anthropologist. It did not always necessarily matter whether the information people gave was literally accurate. Cultural meaning is always contained in every intersubjective utterance regardless of whether we perceive it to be true. The reasons people might have said what they said, as much as *what* they said itself, could be mined for useful information. Even an outright lie (to take the least charitable interpretation) contains cultural information useful in cobbling together a sense of how people make a public representation of themselves and/or others in shaping the symbolic boundaries of community.

Friends and Informants

My ethnographic encounters were not all in the mode of appointment anthropology. I especially enjoyed getting to know three young Marwari women, two of whom were friends with each other. During the many pleasant afternoons that I spent with them, I was cognizant of how much their own processes of self-reflection and cultural analysis were parallel and often very informing to my own thoughts and observations.

The three women were in their early 20s, unmarried, and from middle-class families, with a spread of income levels, residential locations, personal aspirations, and family relationships. For all of them, the question of marriage loomed as a very central concern, but one that was often only indirectly expressed. Their anxiety about marriage articulated itself in more immediate concerns, particularly over their families' preparation of marriage "biodatas" to show prospective grooms' families, and also over money. What each of them negotiated, in some sense, was the waiting time in which their families struggled to amass the many thousands of rupees for their dowries. [12] Having finished college, they needed to have activities to put down on the biodata to show that they had kept busy, but without becoming so overly educated that no Marwari boy would want to marry them. The more educated the girl, the more money the boy's family would

generally demand. Because Marwari boys do not usually study past the MBA level, it is almost unheard of for a Marwari woman to go to graduate school at all, even for a master's degree, let alone to do a Ph.D. Except in a very small number of cases, graduate study would only be undertaken after marriage.

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Rani Jaipuria (I have changed the names of all for reasons of confidentiality) lived four lanes over from my apartment in the traditionally Bengali neighborhood of Lake Gardens. I met her through a female Bengali film director friend of mine who was a friend of Rani's brother. Rani's father was ill with a terminal disease, and her brother was the only wage-earning member of the family. When I returned to Calcutta in the summer of 2000, one of Rani's friends told me that Rani's father had been cheated out of his share of the family business by his brothers, and some of his illness and depression could be attributed to this major disappointment. The Jaipuria family lived in a very cramped apartment, consisting of a kitchen, combined bedroom and living room, and a side room where the father sat. Inside, the main piece of furniture in the big room was a double bed in the middle of room, where Rani and I would sit and talk. Rani had just finished college and was studying computers at a prominent local technological institute, hoping to find a job in computing. She had relatively more independence than many Marwari girls her age, perhaps because her father was ill and her family was struggling financially and needed additional income. Rani spoke impeccable English, and also knew Hindi quite well.. She offered to help me by verifying translations of articles that I did from Hindi, and was happy to assist me, though she always refused to accept any payment.

The second woman, Rimi Pilania, lived in a small but very nice apartment in a new building in a fashionable area of Calcutta. Rimi had lived in Calcutta after her family moved there from Bihar. Besides Rimi, the household consisted of her mother and father, a younger sister, and an older and recently married brother and his wife. Their living room was furnished with the typical upper-middle class ornate sofa at one end, and a *gaddi* mattress at —the —other end. [13] The flat had two bedrooms for the conjugal couples, and an alcove off the living room where Rimi and her sister slept. Rimi had studied Hindi for her B.A. degree and at the time of my fieldwork was working on an M.A. in Hindi literature. She wrote and published short stories and was thinking about doing a Ph.D. She told me that her father did not know for a long time that she had started doing an M.A. and hit the roof when he found out: How on earth could he afford the dowry if she had an M.A.? It was already so much trouble trying to find the right boy. If she did end up doing her Ph.D., she said, it would have to be kept a secret from her father for as long as possible.

That was not the only secret. Rimi's father and brother never knew about my existence either. Rimi and I had originally met at the house of the son of a prominent Marwari freedom fighter in the independence movement, and we

exchanged numbers. She told me not to call on Sundays or in the evenings, when her father would be at home, although I was never clear about the exact reasons. I respected her wishes. Obviously, he would not have liked it. To my surprise, Rimi was the one to first call me to see about getting together, and she invited me over to her house. I subsequently visited her many times, often having lunch with her, her sister, sister-in-law, and mother, along with any relatives who might be visiting or had dropped by, but again, only on weekdays. Rimi was not very confident about speaking in English, and so we communicated in Hindi. She sometimes told me about the dynamics in her family, especially stories about her new sister-in-law, and often was more interested in asking about America than talking about her own life. The family priest came by regularly to do puja, as did another man who described himself to me as a marriage broker–someone who kept tabs on others and played matchmaker for a select group of families.

During the days, when her father and brother weren't around, Rimi was quite independent and went out for shopping, movies, and to visit friends, especially other writers. (After I left Calcutta, she wrote to tell me that she had enrolled in harmonium lessons, an activity that many young women do to acquire some talent in music while they wait to get married.) Whenever I visited Rimi's house, we all–quite literally–shared our lunch of heavy *chappati*, yogurt, lentil *dal*, and a couple of hot vegetable curries, together dipping our fingers into the same piles of slightly bitter-tasting food off of the same stainless steel *thali* plate. The first time I was presented food in this way, with the expectation that we would all eat off the same large plate, I was a little shocked and wondered whether I could manage such intimacy with people with whom I really was not that intimate. In four years of living in a variety of places in India, I had never heard of this or seen it done. This very intimate sharing of food, *akannaborti* (literally, eating the same food), is a euphemism for joint family and a ritual marker of the closeness of the extended family and the lineage known as the *kul*. Normally, in other Indian cultural contexts, joint families speak of maintaining closeness by eating from the same hearth/cooking pot, but not necessarily from the same plate!

Rimi knew that I was looking for a research assistant to help me read Marwari family histories written in Hindi and promised to help find someone. One day, we arranged to go to the old Marwari neighborhood of Burabazar to meet a friend of hers, Amita Patodia. Rimi and Amita had studied together at Shri Shikshayatan, the Marwari women's college founded by community social reformer Sitaram Seksaria. Amita lived in a very large, old, decrepit building off a narrow lane, a typical dwelling for the area of Burabazar, standing opposite a Jain primary school; the building was not divided up into separate flats for bourgeois nuclear families. An unlighted, damp, and mildewed stairway led to separate rooms set off dark and narrow hallways. Amita and her family had a couple of these rooms, although they were not joined together in a private flat and were scattered all over the building. Amita's mother died when she was young, leaving her and an older brother. Her

father then married a much younger woman, and they had another daughter together before he died. Amita's brother worked as a trader in a traditional *gaddi* (a trader's office; literally, mattress) in Burabazar and would sometimes come from his office for lunch. Amita, I, her step-sister, and step-mother shared our food from the same large *thali* plate. In other dark and proximate rooms were various uncles, aunts, and other relatives who ate separately. Amita had her own room in the flat, where we sat and talked. A very bright and good-natured young woman, Amita was happy to do some research work for me so that she could earn some money. Working outside the house would have been out of the question. She did all the work inside her bedroom, in the afternoons and at night, when others slept. When I visited her, we discussed the research work, and she often drew connections between the research themes with many examples from her own life. Like Rimi, Amita preferred to speak in Hindi with me and sometimes consulted a dictionary when we reached an impasse. The first time that I paid her, she held the money in her hands and told me proudly that it was the first money she had ever earned for herself. She said that she really did not want to have to ask her uncles for money. After I left Calcutta, she asked me to write to her in care of her brother's *gaddi*, not at the house where I had paid my visits. The uncles, it seemed, should not come to know of my existence.

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The time I spent with these three women, and the relatively greater depth in which I got to know them, served as the backdrop to my archival and historical research as well as to my appointment anthropology. But even the intimate act of eating off of the same plate with them was still a far cry from actually "living among the Marwaris" around the clock. The fact that my very existence was kept secret from senior male family members speaks volumes about the ways that these women managed their daytime relationships in ways very different from when family men were present.

Proximate but Distant Neighbors: Bengalis of Calcutta

Originally, I thought I would try to find an accommodation as a paying guest in an upper-middle-class Marwari household, but initial inquiries revealed that no such family would accept the idea of my paying money for hospitality. One rather destitute Marwari family, struggling to maintain their now-decrepit mansion in Bollygunge, approached me with the idea, but they charged too much and insisted that I follow a curfew of being home by 7 P.M. every day. I found the atmosphere of the household depressing, and in hindsight I feel lucky that I turned them down. This family managed to keep tabs on my whereabouts during the rest of my time in Calcutta and phoned me a number of times asking whether I could help them out financially. So instead of living among Marwaris, my home life was enmeshed in the lives of middle-class Calcutta Bengalis, a cultural milieu in which many of my observations of Marwari life were formed. I ended up always living in lower-middle class Bengali neighborhoods. The fact that I was not directly studying Bengalis changed my relationships with them; I found people to be

quite relaxed. They could be themselves with the knowledge that I was not going to be scrutinizing (and later writing about) their every action. I sometimes lived as a guest in Bengali households, and for a long time had my own apartment in the middle class Bengali area of Lake Gardens in South Calcutta. I became close to the neighbors in my apartment building, with whom I frequently visited. I would sometimes drop in on them and watch television in the evenings. When one neighbor's father died, I was also included in funeral rituals, which are restricted to close family members and friends. I learned to speak and understand Bengali well enough to live comfortably in a lower-middle class Bengali neighborhood. This intimate participation in the affective worlds of middle class Bengalis provided me with both a comparative angle and also a vantage point for understanding the significance of the Marwari presence in Calcutta.

My various Bengali friends, whom I knew from America or from previous visits to India, emphasized to me how careful I should be around Marwari men, whom they claimed had terrible reputations as lecherous, untrustworthy, and uncouth. These Bengalis believed it could be physically dangerous for me to stay with a Marwari family. One person told me how a relative had been fatally poisoned in a Marwari household in East Bengal. Most of the warnings, however, were about the possibility of unwanted sexual advances from Marwari men. My friends warned me that because of the incredible economic power of the Marwaris, I would have little protection from the police in case anything should happen. I listened carefully to these cautionary tales, to which I had a number of reactions. Mostly, I took them as hilarious representations of their ethnic others. I viewed these Bengali warnings about the Marwari male penchant for lechery and rape, in particular, as exaggerated extensions of their perception of a Marwari "rape" of Bengal. This is a good example of how ethnic, economic, and social identities could become intertwined.

During my research I was conscious that I would not be able to claim that I had "lived among the Marwaris," even though I visited Marwari households several times a week. To a certain extent, practical considerations were paramount. Although I was on a generous fellowship, I simply could not afford to live in a palatial house in posh Marwari localities. Nor did I choose to live in Burabazar, the congested, polluted, and absolutely chaotic area of northern Calcutta that middle class and poor Marwaris call home. I turned down invitations to stay as a guest in Marwari households, reluctant to give up the relative independence offered by living among Bengalis. But since no other Marwari family offered me a place as a paying guest, and I did not want to keep moving from household to household as a short-term guest, I had to make the most of what access I could have to Marwaris. My visits to wealthy Marwari homes were generally structured and formal and I almost never casually "hung out" in Marwari households. Even with my three young Marwari friends, I was not invited to visit in the evenings, when the men would be home. I did, however, get to know several members of the ladies wing of the All India Marwari *Sammelon* (Federation) and visited them in

their homes as well, after joining and participating in their social reform organization. Because my research was done not with the traditional immersion among the people one studies but instead among their Bengali neighbors, my study remains largely an ethnography of Marwari identity in public life as framed by the Bengali experience. I do not claim knowledge about processes of imagination or invention that may be going on inside the Marwaris' heads. Rather, I restrict my analysis to what I call their public "performances" of identity.

Though it would be an exaggeration to say that Marwaris and Bengalis live in two separate worlds with no social interaction, the communities do remain socially quite distant, despite their physical proximity in the congested city of Calcutta. Many of the Bengalis that I encountered in everyday life were fascinated to hear about my research because they themselves did not know much (or did not really care to know firsthand) about the Marwaris. I was surprised, in fact, to find out how little even most Calcutta academics knew about the group that had essentially become their city's primary economic benefactors. My discussions with Bengali neighbors and friends prompted many stories and animated discussion. My interchanges with Bengalis about my work helped give me a sense of how identity is relationally defined that became a central part of my research.

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Besides interacting with Marwaris and middle class Bengalis, I also spent time in international academic circles, among other foreign and Indian academic researchers I met during my fieldwork. I was hardly isolated from the transnational subculture of academic life. This third circle of friendships and acquaintances, much akin to my American life at home, proved to be both personally and academically sustaining during my eighteen months of research in India. I spent part of my time socializing with other academics in Calcutta, almost always speaking in English with a sprinkling of Bengali, discussing academic work in seminars at the University of Calcutta, holding reading groups, going out to eat, and enjoying *adda* (gossip). Giving formal presentations of my work while in the field, and getting immediate and detailed feedback, greatly helped to shape my ideas and the course of my research. I also had numerous visits from American friends and family, including my parents. In fact, bringing my parents along on appointment anthropology helped increase my credibility, though they themselves know little about India. In the presence of my parents, people were much more forthcoming with information, documents, invitations, and contacts. In a community that especially values kinship, my parents became part of my own performance of identity.

Archival and Historical Sources

In addition to my appointment anthropology and the time I spent with Marwari friends and the women in the Marwari Federation, I did considerable amounts of archival research. There was no single written archive that was easily available for my study. The official records of the colonial era–located in

the India Office Library in London, the National Archives in New Delhi and the West Bengal State Archives in Calcutta–were important English-language sources for understanding the relationships forged between the community and the state. I researched English, Hindi, and Bengali materials in the India Office, the National Library of India, the Library of Congress, and in Indian public libraries, private collections, and the institutional libraries of schools, cultural, and philanthropic organizations. Bengali materials became important in understanding the relational qualities of identity formation. I learned written Bengali well enough to research and locate texts on my own, which I then had translated by a Bengali research assistant.

My knowledge of written Hindi became important when I realized how little has been written about Marwaris in English, especially on social issues. Most histories of Marwari families, and even Marwari business for that matter, have been written in modern standard Hindi. Any words in Marwari were noted as such in the texts. I encountered a few older sources on business families from Rajasthan written in old Marwari, which I could not understand, nor could my research assistant. Hindi, for all practical purposes, had become the *lingua franca* of the diasporic community. During the home visits, some of the wealthiest families handed me their own published family histories, written in Hindi, outlining in detail the accomplishments of their extended family or lineage (*kul*). These books describe the life events of the most successful family members, usually originating with some prominent ancestor who first became involved with business and then migrate to a colonial urban center away from Rajasthan.

My research on the Calcutta Marwaris took me to several unexpected places, which I describe in this book. I ended up visiting and researching a number of curious sites, from imaginary homelands with abandoned painted ancestral mansions in Rajasthan to the rain-gambling courtyards tucked deep in the crowded lanes of the Marwari neighborhood in Burabazar in Calcutta. My ethnographic research in particular led me into the lives of Marwari women, where I witnessed everything from housewives engaged in ‘domestic science’ of the home, to high-powered business executives overseeing business dynasties, to even the highly controversial worship of *sati* (widow burning). In each of these cases–and others–described in the pages that follow, I seek to explain why I argue for the use of the term "performance" to explain the cultural and historical processes by which people make claims on particular markers of identity in civil society and in public life.

Notes:

Note 1: J. T. Molesworth, *Molesworth’s Marathi-English Dictionary* (1857; reprint,Bombay: Bombay Educational Society Press, 1991).Back.

Note 2: Throughout this book I use the terms "Calcutta Marwaris," "Marwaris in Calcutta," and "Marwaris" somewhat interchangeably. This is because Indians do not perceive any "cultural" difference between Marwari identity generally and Marwari identity in Calcutta. As I will show, Marwaris are not easily identified with any one particular place. However, I use the term "Calcutta Marwaris" when I am making historical claims about Calcutta in particular. Back.

Note 3: Bernard Cohn has been exemplary and inspirational in this regard. Bernard Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia," in *An Anthropologist among the Historians* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987): 224—254.Back.

Note 4: Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony,"*Subaltern Studies* 6 (1989): 210—309.Back.

Note 5: Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993);Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).Back.

Note 6: E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Talal Asad, "Are There Histories of People without Europe?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29:3 (1987); Ranajit Guha et al., eds., *Subaltern Studies*, volumes 1—10 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982—).Back.

Note 7: Daniel, *Fluid Signs*.Back.

Note 8: Frederick Cooper's recent work on decolonization in Africa, which treats the intersection between colonial and African discourses of labor as "a limited space of mutual intelligibility and interaction," provides a very useful model. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xii.Back.

Note 9: This view, however, has been contested by some home science professionals, but the association was what initially interested me in the Marwaris.Back.

Note 10: I borrow this term from T. M. Luhrman, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), vii.Back.

Note 11: I am grateful for this advice from economic historian Omkar Goswamy, who introduced me to a number of prominent Marwari families in New Delhi.Back.

Note 12: One of the women has recently completed writing a novel on this

subject.Back.

Note 13: The *gaddi* is literally a mattress or floor cushion.Back.

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