Introduction: Rajputs and Their Royal Umbrellas

In 1925 the mahārājā (king) of the Indian state of Gwalior, Madho Rao Scindia, died suddenly in Paris while en route to London.¹ He was cremated at Père-Lachaise Cemetery, and his ashes were promptly conveyed back to India in state. The urn containing his ashes was transported in a private train to Marseilles, where it was ensconced in a private stateroom on an ocean liner the Scindia darbār (court) hired exclusively for the journey. The royal remains were met at the dock in Bombay with full military honors. Several Indian princes and citizens of Gwalior made the trip to pay their condolences. The urn was then transported from Bombay in a private car on a specially ordered train, which made a stop at each state capital en route to Gwalior, allowing the state’s ruler to pay his respects and take a final darśan (viewing) of the ashes. After arriving in Gwalior, the urn was conveyed by a traditional śav yātrā (funerary cortege) to the Scindia necropolis at Shivpuri, some thirty miles away. Finally, Madho Rao’s ashes were re-cremated at Shivpuri in a full Hindu dāh samskāra (ritual of last rites) ceremony. At each stage along the somber journey, the presence of Madho Rao’s son and heir, Jivaji Rao, was conspicuous.² Nearly a decade later, Madho Rao’s white-marble chatrī (cenotaph), which Jivaji Rao commissioned, was completed on the exact site where the second cremation was held and where a portion of his ashes was interred in the ground (Fig. 0.1).³

The final journey of Madho Rao Scindia’s earthly remains and the events that occurred along the way shine considerable light on understandings of death, performances of lineage and political authority, and the role of funerary architecture in princely north India. Why did the Scindia darbār go to such lengths to convey the king’s cremated ashes across the world, all the while extending to them the same respect they would an uncremated corpse? Several dignitaries even came to have a final darśan with the mahārājā, as they would with a corpse in a traditional royal Hindu śav yatrā. It was clearly of the utmost importance that Madho Rao be laid to rest in his home state, in proximity to

¹ Specific titles for kings vary throughout India and over time. The Sanskrit titles rājā and mahārājā are the most common for non-Muslim Indian rulers.
² Miscellaneous File, Bundle 138–274, no. 15 (1925), and Miscellaneous File, Bundle 59, no. 4 (1925), Scindia State Archives. Clippings from Jayaji Pratap (Gwalior), June 11, June 25, July 9, 1925.
³ Interview with Ashok Kumar Mohite, who has been the administrative officer at the royal Scindia necropolis at Shivpuri for over three decades (April 4, 2007).
his ancestors, and that his remains be marked by a permanent architectural structure. A major factor in the treatment of Madho Rao’s ashes was the performance of political legitimacy. In princely India, political legitimacy was bolstered by dynastic lineage. Jivaji Rao’s presence at all these highly performative stages of his father’s final journey reiterated the line of descent and authority from father to son, as it did (and continues to do) in royal funerary corteges and necropolises across north India.

This anecdote describing Madho Rao’s extraordinary last journey succinctly demonstrates the significance of funerary rituals and memorials in royal India and the perceived necessity of making ancestry and political authority a permanent feature in the built environment. Chatrīs are an integral component of the visual vocabulary of north Indian Hindu kingship, and Madho Rao’s life and death would have been incomplete had he not been commemorated with one. Beyond this, the chatri entwines Scindia lineage, and the unbroken transference of political authority, with the urban fabric of the land his dynasty ruled.

This book is concerned with the chatris commissioned by the Rajputs, members of a Hindu jātī (subcaste) that is part of the wider martial and