Chapter 2

Keeping Up with the Kachhwahas: The Chatrīs of the Narukas of Alwar, the Dadu Panthis, and the Shekhawati Merchants

Located behind the City Palace in Alwar, in northeastern Rajasthan, is one of the largest of all the Rajput chatrīs (Fig. 2.1). The red-sandstone and white-marble cenotaph memorializes Mahārājā Bakhtawar Singh Naruka, who ruled Alwar from 1791 to 1815. The chatrī's interior offers an intricately carved frieze program whose thematic content—scenes of battle, elephant fights, and sātmarī—references aspects of ideal Rajput kingship. If, as we saw in the previous chapter, a chatrī's increased scale and decorative program indicates a new king's legitimacy anxieties, then clearly Bakhtawar Singh's chatrī is an indicator that all was not well in Alwar state at the time of its construction. In fact, political unrest had been a near constant feature of Alwar's princely history since its foundation in the late-eighteenth century. As demonstrated throughout the Rajput chatrī baghs, anxious Rajput kings make for innovative and ambitious chatrī patrons, and indeed Alwar's tumultuous political situation accounts, in part, for the Naruka kings commissioning several large-scale chatrīs with politically meaningful decorative programs.

The Narukas are a branch of the Kachhwaha dynasty of Amber and Jaipur. In 1774, Rao Rājā Pratap Singh (r. 1774–91) declared independence from Jaipur and established the autonomous state of Alwar. His successor, Bakhtawar Singh, was among the many Alwar rulers to adopt a son, in his case Vinay Singh, whose appointment divided the court. Unsurprisingly, construction on Bakhtawar Singh's monumental chatrī commenced almost immediately after Mahārājā Vinay Singh (r. 1815–57) came to power. In light of the Narukas relatively recent establishment of their own sovereign state, Bakhtawar Singh's alliance with the British, his contentious adoption of Vinay Singh, and the fact that Vinay Singh was a minor at the time of his father's death, the new mahārājā would have felt particularly compelled to visually announce his right to occupy his throne. Once again, political turmoil and a new Rajput king's legitimacy anxieties combined to memorialize the previous king with an extraordinary chatrī.

This chapter analyzes the chatrī traditions of three communities associated with the Kachhwahas: in the case of the Naruka and Shekhawat Rajputs the association is political; in the case of the Dadu Panthis, religious; and in the
case of the Baniyas, the hereditary merchants of Shekhawati, geographical. Each of these groups appropriated from the Kachhwahas the practice of commemorating their ancestors through chatris, and each then adapted the memorials’ forms and decoration. The chapter begins with an analysis of the Naruka chatris in Rajgarh and Alwar, paying special attention to the structures’ religio-politically informed murals and friezes. The sacred and profane thematic content of the Naruka chatris’ decorative programs stridently announces the Narukas’ right to rule their new autonomous state, by evoking the alliances they forged with the Dadu Panth Hindu religious order and the most recent incumbents on the north Indian political stage, the British. The Naruka chatris also reference the dynasty’s descent from its parent house, through the appropriation of forms and plans from the Kachhwaha chatris at Jaipur. Thus for the Narukas, like their Kachhwaha relatives, Man Singh’s chatri was a potent lieu de memoire. However, perhaps as a way to visually justify their independence, the Naruka chatris often surpass in ambition those of the Kachhwaha maharajas. The Dadu Panthis also commemorate their leaders with chatris, and they will be examined as legitimizers of religious authority. The chapter concludes with a look at how members of this mercantile community in