The Three Lives of Devidas Jaitavat
A Sixteenth-century Rathor Rajput Warrior

In the 1550s, Devidas Jaitavat emerged as an outstanding military commander in the service of the ruler of Jodhpur, Rao Malde Gangavat (1532-62). After the death of his brother, Prithiraj Jaitavat, in 1554, Devidas had assumed the leadership of the Jaitavat family of Rathor Rajputs. He soon became a favorite of Malde's, particularly after his brilliant leadership of a Jodhpur contingent during the battle of Harmaro in 1557. Shortly afterward he assumed command of the garrison at Merto, in the face of attacks by the Mughals in Ajmer. In 1562 the Mughals besieged Merto, and Devidas, after conducting a long, heroic defense, died in a final battle a few miles from the town.

Or so it was presumed. Nearly ten years later a man appeared in Marwar calling himself Devidas Jaitavat and dressed in the garb of a sanyasi. He had a convincing story to explain his long absence. The resemblance of this man to the Devidas who had died in 1562 was close enough that many accepted his claim. But some did not, among them the Mughal Emperor Akbar, who met him in 1573 or 1574. This "second Devidas" proved to be a competent soldier. He began to organize resistance to the Mughal occupation of Marwar. He took control of Vagri, the principal seat of the Jaitavat family, displacing Askaran Devidasot, his own son if, in fact, he was Devidas. His presence became a burden to the Jaitavat family and to the Mughals, and so he was killed. Thus ended the second life of Devidas Jaitavat.

In the eighteenth century it would seem that the story of the reemergence of Devidas had become an embarrassment to the chroniclers of Marwar. As a result, they omitted some of the details and fabricated others to create a new narrative more palatable to their contemporaries. This altered story one might say represents the third and final "life" of this remarkable Rajput. Or, it may be that this version was actually a more accurate account of Devidas, put forward to contest the false tale told by an imposter, the "second Devidas" mentioned above, who used some actual events in the life of the "first" or "original" Devidas to help construct his own identity.

My purpose here is threefold: first, to document in detail each of the lives of Devidas and to evaluate the sources upon which my reconstructions of these lives (or, more correctly, portions of lives) are based; second, to evaluate the systems of honor and shame within which Devidas and his
Rathor Rajput peers existed; and, finally, I hope to show how Devidas's evolving biography in the sources over a period of nearly two centuries reveals certain imperfections inherent in these sources and also evidences changing views of exactly what constituted acceptable conduct for a Rajput warrior.