CASTE
IN
QUESTION

IDENTITY OR HIERARCHY?

EDITED BY
DIPANKAR GUPTA

Caste in question

Contributions to Indian Sociology

Occasional studies

1. T.N. MADAN, ed., 1976. *Muslim communities of South Asia: Society and culture* (vol. 6, 1972). New Delhi: Vikas.*
2. SATISH SABERWAL, ed., 1978. *Process and institution in urban India: Sociological studies* (vol. 11, no. 1, 1977). New Delhi: Vikas. Second impression (New Delhi: Vikas), 1978.*
3. T.N. MADAN, ed., 1982. *Way of life: King, householder, renouncer: Essays in honour of Louis Dumont* (vol. 15, nos 1&2, 1981). New Delhi: Vikas. Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. Second impression (New Delhi: Vikas), 1982. Second edition (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), 1988.
4. VEENA DAS, ed., 1986. *The word and the world: Fantasy, symbol and record* (vol. 19, no. 1, 1985). New Delhi: Sage.*
5. McKIM MARRIOTT, ed., 1990. *India through Hindu categories* (vol. 23, no. 1, 1989). New Delhi: Sage. Fifth impression (New Delhi: Sage), 1998.
6. T.N. MADAN, ed., 1995. *Muslim communities of South Asia: Culture, society and power* (Revised enlarged edition) (vol. 6, 1972). New Delhi: Manohar (First published by Vikas*).
7. PATRICIA UBEROI, ed., 1996. *Social reform, sexuality and the state* (vol. 29, nos 1&2, 1995). New Delhi: Sage. Third impression, 1998.
8. VEENA DAS, DIPANKAR GUPTA and PATRICIA UBEROI, eds, 1999. *Tradition, pluralism and identity: In honour of T.N. Madan* (vol. 32, no. 2, 1998). New Delhi: Sage.
9. JONATHAN P. PARRY, JAN BREMAN and KARIN KAPADIA, eds, 1999. *The worlds of Indian industrial labour* (vol. 33, nos 1&2, 1999). New Delhi: Sage.
10. SUMATHI RAMASWAMY, ed., 2003. *Beyond appearances? Visual practices and ideologies in modern India* (vol. 36, nos 1&2, 2002). New Delhi: Sage.
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Dipankar Gupta

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Preface and acknowledgements

Any student of Indian sociology would be interested to know how caste is faring in contemporary India. The fact that India is undergoing rapid changes, both economically and politically, contributes to the urgency with which an update on caste becomes necessary. Though there have been several works that have discussed the impact of caste on democratic politics and how different castes have reacted to growing urbanisation and the Green Revolution, there was still a gap that had to be filled. What needed to be done was to analyse these changes within a conceptual framework that would allow for an alternative perspective on the caste order.

It is often said that caste is changing, but what is not clear is whether this entails the need for a new term altogether, or whether this form of social stratification can now be merged with another rubric, such as class, that is tried, tested and much universalised. Steering clear of these temptations, the articles in this volume provide us with an alternative perspective on caste as a whole, using contemporary experiences to reflect upon the received theories of caste. For any such undertaking it is impossible to ignore Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*, even if one has serious disagreements with it.

Through a number of field-based studies the articles in this volume argue for a different conceptualisation of caste—one that would take into account the need for caste assertion and dignity as well as notions of hierarchy. Taken together, these contributions contend that pride in one's caste identity is a very important characteristic of the caste order and that this is not incompatible with contesting notions of hierarchy. To be able to carry this point across theoretically it is imperative that we abandon the view that a single all-encompassing hierarchy is the most enduring diacritic of caste. Instead we must now ask if caste can be seen first in terms of discrete identities, and then see its implications in terms of the articulation of multiple and contesting hierarchies.

Once this point is made, a new vision on caste becomes possible. We can now integrate caste mobility in history with the caste politics of today, taking care to finesse our discussions by keeping in mind the specifics of

contemporary India. But the economic and political pressures that were mounted on India from the mid-19th century onwards should not compel us to concede conceptual territory by accepting either that caste is class, or that caste is essentially about a single hierarchy such that those low in the order willingly acquiesce in their own degradation.

I am very grateful to Patricia Uberoi for her encouragement and help in bringing out this volume. She is a true friend and a wonderful colleague. The hardest part of the work was when she helped me bring out the special number of *Contributions to Indian sociology* on Caste (vol. 38, nos 1&2), where the articles in this volume originally appeared. She also went through my revised introduction for this publication, and laboured over many of the details that invariably go with the publication of a volume.

Dipankar Gupta
New Delhi, July 2004

Introduction:
The certitudes of caste:
When identity trumps hierarchy

Dipankar Gupta

From the time *Village India* was published, if not earlier, it has been widely recognised that castes are not locked in local confines, but act and interact in a nexus beyond the village (Marriott 1955). McKim Marriott expressed this conceptually in terms of 'little' and 'great' traditions, arguing all along that this is exactly how cultural changes take place in all major civilisations (ibid.). Keeping in step with this, M.N. Srinivas pointed out the vitality with which some castes were moving out of their traditional areas of expertise and entering into the competitive domain of democratic politics (Srinivas 1972). Concurrently, Srinivas also brought to our notice how the hierarchy of purity is subverted on the ground by the presence of the 'dominant caste' (Srinivas 1987). André Béteille reconfigured these arguments and posited that castes were moving from a system of cumulative to dispersed inequalities (Béteille 2002). In recent articles he has gone further to argue that even those who fight politically in the name of caste never invoke the *Dharmasastra* in their defence (Béteille 2000: 229–30). To look at castes, therefore, in terms of their attributes drawn from the notion of a pure ritual hierarchy would certainly not resonate with facts on the ground.

The articles in this volume begin with the assumption that ritual dominance in no way determines the nature of caste interactions in contemporary India. From politics to gender to economic interaction, the pure hierarchy is not just being questioned; more often than not, it is left unattended on the wayside. Castes that were considered to be 'shudra-like' in status have taken the fight to the more established castes and claimed, on occasions, statuses superior to Brahmans or to traditional Kshatriya jatis, including the Rajputs. Agrarian castes such as Jats, Ahirs, Gujars, Thevars and Kurmis are out there leading politics from the front and taking their identities

outside the village. We also know now from the works of those like Fox (1969), Shah and Shroff (1975) and Babb (1998) that the merchant Baniya communities do not necessarily see themselves as inferior to the traditional Brahman and Kshatriya varnas. In addition, untouchable castes that were once considered supine and docile are now militant, aggressive and fully conscious of their power and rights in a democratic polity. No matter which way one looks at caste, the system, such as it was supposed to have been, has clearly collapsed. Where there was once a seeming tranquility of caste relations ordered by a status hierarchy (howsoever localised in character), we now have a plethora of assertive caste identities, each privileging an angular hierarchy of its own.

To argue against this background that castes obey the hierarchy of purity, or that lower castes willingly acquiesce in their own degradation (Moffatt 1979), seems quite archaic and besides the point. The pure hierarchy that Louis Dumont wrote so compellingly about a few decades ago (Dumont 1988) now stands bereft of empirical support from practically every quarter of Hindu India. As assertive caste identities articulate alternative hierarchies, there is hardly any unanimity on ranking between jatis. In the past, when the village was characterised by the regime of a closed economy, the hierarchy that was expressed was the one that had economic and political power behind it at the local level. Today, with the pressure of village overlords more or less taken off, and with the introduction of democratic mobilisation and urbanisation, castes can freely express their identities and their attendant hierarchies, even if they cannot always be manifested on the ground. They are now ideals that energise political activisms quite at variance from those of the once dominant local castes. This leads to a spiral of caste antagonisms symbolised by contradictory hierarchical formulations in the political marketplace. In a sense, rarely is a hierarchy expressed in practice today without it being challenged by the very people who were earlier supposed to be quiescent. Politics and economics no longer make their presence felt 'surreptitiously' and in the 'interstitial levels', as Dumont had once argued (ibid.), but up front and with the full complement of bells, whistles and other noisy instruments.

Though Louis Dumont was wrong on a number of issues, he was stylishly in error. The manner in which he put forward the traditional Brahmanical viewpoint on the pure hierarchy has not, and perhaps cannot, be bettered. He gave hierarchy a technical meaning, and drove the term methodologically and consistently throughout his work. Where he erred was in his insistence that other castes lined up neatly behind the Brahman in complete ideological concordance. He failed to see that each caste

valued itself very highly and had deep pockets of ideological inheritance from which it could draw continuous symbolic energy for both political activism and economic competition.

It is often argued that one is being unfair to Dumont by insisting that for him only the true hierarchy mattered, for did he not also acknowledge that under modern pressures structure can yield to substance and castes begin to act as ethnic groups (Dumont 1988: 227)? Aware of the frequent dust-ups that castes entered into in contemporary times, Dumont conceded that the pure hierarchy may become disaggregated into competing blocs. This feature was seen as something that was brand new, never witnessed in the past. But what made Dumont's admission less appealing is that he provided no analytical reason as to why and how a pure hierarchy could become parcellised into competing substantialised units. In that case are we to assume that the ideology of the pure hierarchy is dead? In which case, what has taken its place? Are we now in the realm of competing equalities? All these questions require analytical answers but they are not to be found in Dumont, nor in the works of those who adhere closely to his formulations. In fact, Dumont undermined the need to search for such answers by arguing that such changes were peripheral and did not really disturb the hierarchical essence of the caste system. According to him: 'Everything happens as if the system tolerated changes only within one of its secondary spheres' (ibid.: 228).

Johannes Fabian argues in *Time and the other* (1993) that anthropologists have a peculiar resistance to granting their respondents a status coeval with themselves. This is most evident when anthropologists conceptualise the 'other'. No matter how often they might record the many significant transformations in the societies that they study, when it comes to conceptualising, anthropologists tend to box their respondents into a timeless, unchanging analytical frame. Studies on caste are similar in character. While there is no dearth of empirical evidence regarding the many instances when castes compete against each other, and on the number of times they have reneged on textual orthodoxy, yet when conceptualising, Dumont's pure hierarchy is revived with undiminished vigour.

It does not help very much either to argue that caste is a colonial creation, and hence all that we see around us is really a motley crowd of hastily cobbled identities of very recent vintage (for example, Bayly 1999: 188–202, and *passim*). While it is true that identities, including caste identities, change over time, it would be incorrect to go to the extreme of asserting that caste itself is a colonial creation. Such a point of

view not only makes the Hindus appear bigoted, which they are, but also stupid, which may not always be the case. It is as if the inhabitants of India had no identity worth the name prior to colonialism, and were one large, undifferentiated mass. The British changed all this, or so the story goes, and Hindus were calmly driven into all kinds of caste, religious and sectarian corals at the behest of colonial prodding.

Yet, in a significant way, colonialism *did* make a difference. The way British officials understood caste obviously also affected the way caste was practised, and this led to some quite innovative relations between different jatis all over India (Dirks 2001: 10). From the earliest moves of the Asiatic society to the legal codification achieved by Henry Maine, the Brahmanical view was privileged as the correct interpretation of Hindu culture and custom. This is what gave Brahmans a larger than legitimate role in the conception of Indian society—a feature that is only recently being challenged from a variety of quarters. In this connection the works of Dirks (1987), Quigley (1993) and Raheja (1988) are welcome corrections, provided we remember that it would be methodologically incorrect to replace the Brahman with the Kshatriya as they tend to do. As we pointed out earlier, there are overvaluations of the Baniya that are extant and vibrant even today and, as articles in this volume bring out, the Scheduled Castes have valorised conceptions of themselves as well (see Narayan and Jodhka in this volume, and Khare 1992).

The articles in this volume begin with the assumption of assertive caste identities that are in no way embarrassed by Brahmanical renditions. In fact, none of the contributions in this selection could have been imagined if the Brahman notion of hierarchy were really as definitive as scholars and members of the literati often tend to assume. The fact that Brahmadeya lands were given out by rich patrons has persuaded some to believe that the priestly caste had an unusual hold over the minds of Hindus in practically every aspect of social life. What is overlooked is how the church aggrandised itself in medieval Europe. Priests convinced those on their deathbeds to will their property to God and to the true holy family. The vast wealth of the church cannot be accounted for without taking into account donations of this kind which were made with the hope of winning favour in the afterlife:

Today [12th century-D.G.] when a man falls ill and lies down to die, he does not think of his sons or his nephews or cousins; he summons the Black Monks of St. Benedict, and gives them all his lands, his

revenues, his oven, and his mills. The men of this age are impoverished and the clerks are daily becoming richer (Goody 1983: 105).

To reiterate, castes are proud of their identity, regardless of where textual traditions place them on the 'purity-pollution' hierarchy. It should be remembered in this connection that it is not as if this is a recent attribute of castes. E.A.H. Blunt (1960) had observed this decades ago, but little attention was paid to it as scholars were so keen on an objectivated hierarchy. Assertions of caste identity not only make us put phrases like 'upper caste' and 'lower caste' in inverted commas, but also lead us to question whether the many instances of 'caste patriotism' today are actually all that novel. Ahirs, Gujars, Jats, Patidars, Ad-Dharmis and so on have a strong sense of pride in their caste identity. To call them 'low caste' or 'middle caste' can be very misleading and takes our attention away from the fact that they do not see themselves as inferior in any essential sense. Perhaps they are poorer, they may be less powerful, less literate, but not essentially made of substances that are inferior, let alone polluting. Further, as castes always value themselves highly, they must, as a consequence, hierarchise others, howsoever idiosyncratic such formulations may appear to be. Also, while some ex-untouchable castes may not accept their lowly status, they might, however, continue to believe that there are other castes out there that are indeed polluting (see Desai 1976). This is the true phenomenology of caste. Fortunately, history and anthropology have provided us with so many interesting variations of fact that it is possible now to construct an analytical perspective on caste which is faithful to its multiple vocalities.

To do this with a modicum of success we have to suspend our earlier attitude that 'lower castes' accepted their degradation willingly, or participated in their own subjugation (as in Moffatt 1979). We must also accept that caste and politics were always a part of history, though that history may have moved at an excruciatingly slow pace compared to contemporary times. Marathas, Jats and Rajputs all wade through slaughter to a throne (see Chattopadhyaya 1976). That these instances of politically motivated success stories happened centuries ago should not take away from the fact that castes have throughout history gone up and down depending upon the exigencies of power and wealth.

Today caste and politics are linked differently because of adult franchise, and more so on account of the fact that the village is no longer the viable social space it used to be. Poor villagers are constantly on the lookout for jobs outside agriculture, as much as better-off farmers are hoping

to augment their income from non-farm sources. Even the dynamism inserted by the Green Revolution has sputtered to a near standstill. Given the fact that the old patrons cannot act patron-like, either positively or negatively, either to coerce or to gratify, different communities and castes in the villages have begun to lead lives separated from one another. Thus, 'lower caste' activism, which was once typically associated with education and non-agricultural employment (such as among the Mahars and Ezhavas), has now found other avenues of expression. Castes that were once considered to be subaltern in character are breaking free of rural protocol to politically express their ambitions in supra-local formats.

It is true that the back of old-fashioned Brahman-Kshatriya dominance was broken most effectively across India by those peasant castes that were till not long ago considered 'shudras'. It is the activism of these agrarian castes that laid the foundations of a sustainable anti-establishmentarianism among dalit communities in India. However, to call these peasant castes 'dominant' (in the way Srinivas conceptualised the term) may not be accurate. These castes may be numerically significant at the village level but, except for the Marathas, they are nowhere over 30 per cent in any parliamentary constituency. This is what makes the village too small an arena for realising caste interactions in contemporary politics. Once the zone is enlarged, as it must be, dominance is no longer simply in terms of numbers, or control over land, at the village level. Supra-local aggregates play back into village politics, and not the other way around (see also Béteille 1992: 86). Given the fact that labouring on land is hardly a viable economic option for a majority of villagers, dominance is highly fractured and cannot rest with any one caste for long periods of time. Dominance is constantly being negotiated between caste leaders, political parties and ordinary voters who, incidentally, do not always vote along caste lines (see Michelutti in this volume). In other words, dominance is disaggregated and highly time-bound, for caste alliances are fluid and are constantly being reconfigured. In terms of caste arithmetic, no one caste can go the distance on its own. This is why identity matters more than system when castes are invoked at the collective level: all else is labile and transitory.

The articles in this volume allow the clamour of other caste voices to speak their mind without censoring them. Instead of seeing these other expressions as exceptions and anomalies, they are treated as articulations of an analytical core where discrete identities constitute first-order realities. It is, therefore, quite logical that there should be multiple and idiosyncratic hierarchies. As caste identities are *discrete* and analytically

'non-encompassing', the hierarchies they espouse should also be non-commensurable, which in fact they are. As Lucia Michelutti's article illustrates, the Yadavas of Uttar Pradesh claim to be better than all other castes, not simply because they are descendants of Lord Krishna, but also because they are natural republicans. As they were traditionally cow herders, it is in their blood, they argue, to lead people as well in a democratic polity. Though the Yadavas claim Kshatriya status, they also advocate a non-rajasik lifestyle that disavows the consumption of liquor or meat. From 1924 onwards, the Yadava assertion of their caste superiority was championed by the All India Yadava Mahasabha through publications, lectures, representations, and so forth. In this matter the Yadavas are not alone. Caste associations have proliferated all over the country, regardless of whether they were once considered high or low (see also Badri Narayan's article in this volume).

John Cort's contribution in this volume gives us an ingress into how merchants valorise their lifestyles and distance themselves from Kshatriya virtues. Among these castes, it is not notions of purity that mark out hierarchical positions (howsoever contentiously), but pure and simple wealth. The Oswals place themselves above the Shrimalis and the Porvals because they are easily the most affluent among the Baniya castes. This hierarchy of wealth is further consolidated in terms of residence and occupation, but nowhere in these rankings do we find any considerations of purity or of asceticism. Indeed this refrain is quite general, and many of the articles in this volume provide detailed instances of this phenomenon. Whether it be the Jats (see Chowdhry), or the Yadavas (see Michelutti), or the dalits (see Badri Narayan), or the Sikhs (see Jodhka), Brahmanical notions of purity and pollution play at best a very insignificant role among them. In this sense, this collection gives us a comprehensive picture of how castes are valued phenomenologically from diverse standpoints and provenances.

Gaurang Sahay's article takes up the issue of discrete caste identities and confronts the face-off between power and ritual with illustrations from rural Bihar. Lucia Michelutti's article on Yadavas makes the further point that not only do Yadavas have a powerful sense of identity, they believe that they are probably the best vehicles for democratic politics. The obvious contradiction of equating democracy with an overvalued caste identity does not in any way deter Yadavas from political activism. When it comes to political activism in contemporary times, both Sahay and Michelutti point out that the power of a caste is not always directly proportional to its numbers. A lot depends on the organisational strength of a caste. The Yadavas, for example, are politically very powerful even though they do

not dominate numerically. The same can be said of the Jats of west Uttar Pradesh who, with no more than 8 per cent of the population, controlled till very recently the politics of Moradabad, Bijnor, Muzaffarnagar and parts of Aligarh districts. This brings out an important aspect of caste politics that is often ignored. As no caste can single-handedly win an election, it is important to strike alliances across communities. Yet it is not orthodox ranking that determines who is to align with whom. The famous KHAM alliance in Gujarat brought together the strangest of compact between Kshatriyas, Harijans and Muslims, who could not be more distant from each other in terms of orthodox positioning. Nor is it that castes once aligned stay together over long stretches of time. As Sahay and Michelutti show, castes have no permanent friends when it comes to politics. Depending upon the individual interests of castes, they might shift their loyalties quite dramatically within a very short period of time. All of this would have been difficult to conceptually appreciate if one went by the logic of the traditional Brahmanical hierarchy to which every caste supposedly paid obeisance.

Prem Chowdhry's description of the Jats of Haryana, another agrarian caste, is yet again an example of bold over-valuation of one's caste identity. In this case Chowdhry demonstrates how caste councils within this community attempt to order kinship and gender relations to maintain the purity and character of the strain. What makes Chowdhry's study especially interesting is that within the caste of Jats there is a strong sense of rivalry and competition between different clans, or *khap*s within a caste. Further, as Chowdhry is quick to point out, claims of superiority are actually buttressed not by recourse to orthodoxy but to economic status.

Badri Narayan's article examines in detail origin myths that provide dalits with a sense of pride with regard to their caste heritage, regardless of how *Yagnavalkyasmriti* may have characterised them in the textual tradition. The low-caste Pasis believe that they are a martial community, for they were born of the sweat of the Kshatriya king and fabled Brahman-hater, Parasuram. To this end they argue that their caste name Pasi is an amalgam of two words: *pa* to grip, and *asi* the sword. The fact that they rear pigs has also been given a caste explanation. According to the Pasis, they began to rear pigs as they feared the marauding Muslims who would attack them and take away their women. As Muslims loathe pigs, rearing them was a good prophylactic against Islamic depredations. The erstwhile Chamars of Bihar, as Sahay points out, claim Kshatriya status as well. In addition they consider the *Shri Chanwar Purana* to be their religious text, regardless of what orthodox opinion may be on the subject.

Even the Bedias, a caste whose women are primarily sex workers, claim descent from Rajputs and adopt the fiction of patrilineal kinship even though, as Agrawal explains, this seriously stretches the nature of gender relations pertaining within this community. The Bedias assert that a person's caste should be determined from the father's side, and as the clients of their women are Rajputs, Jats and even Brahmans, the children born from such unions should rightfully belong to these upper castes as well. As the Bedias contend, the wheat that is sown determines the variety, not the earth. The contradiction between what they are known as by the outside world and what they themselves consider to be their rightful status is explained away in a number of rather disingenuous ways. For example they may say that I am a Pandit, but otherwise I am a Thakur; or my bodily parts (*ansha*) are of the Jats, but by living among the Bedias I have become one with them. In fact in one case, as Agrawal records, a Bedia woman spurned an offer of marriage from a Jatav boy for she felt that it would be beneath her, as a Thakur, to marry a man from a low caste. In keeping with this general disposition, when Bedias enrol in schools or go to urban centres for jobs, they call themselves by upper-caste names such as Verma, Sharma, Tewari, etc.

Neither can we maintain, as Karanth demonstrates with field notes, that replication of 'upper caste' values necessarily implies acquiescence down the order. According to Karanth, more often than not, replication among the poorer castes is a way of asserting their identity and claiming status parity with those who were once, quite unambiguously, their social superiors. Therefore, unlike Moffatt's argument on this subject, when the so-called 'lower castes' replicate the values of the 'upper castes' they do not participate in their own subjugation (see Moffatt 1979: 303). The Holeyas and the Madigas do not agree on who is superior to whom, while the Lambanis (another traditional low caste) maintain a distance from both and assiduously adhere to their own ritual observances. In fact, it would be incorrect to argue, as Karanth points out, that just because a few members of the Holeya, Madiga and other service castes perform their traditional caste-based service roles, all members of these communities are not enveloped in an inclusionary hierarchical embrace. A majority of those who belong to these subaltern communities do not have anything to do with patron-client networks and, indeed, the fact that the Okkaligas can no longer act as patrons has given the poorer castes the room to come out and boldly assert their identities. Surinder Jodhka makes this point very convincingly with respect to the Ad-Dharmis of Punjab. This caste was traditionally known as Chamars, or leather workers, but

with their rising economic status, coupled with the gradual diminution of the power of landed Jat Sikhs, the Ad-Dharmis freed themselves economically from village-level subservience to landowners. In fact they have gone much further on the symbolic plane and have severed ties with established Gurudwaras and set up their own places of worship instead.

The Ad-Dharmis' opposition to Jat dominance is possible because the kind of control the Jats once exercised in villages can no longer be worked up with any degree of authenticity. Land holdings have shrunk in size and investments in agriculture are no longer as lucrative as they used to be even twenty years ago. Given these multiple openings, spatially and interactionally, Ad-Dharmis have been able to free themselves of their earlier subalternity. They have now successfully carved out a special niche for themselves where they can assert their identity all the way from ritual to economics to political mobilisation.

It is not as if caste assertions of earlier agrarian and subaltern castes abide by the traditional format either. To argue that such identity movements are further instances of Sanskritisation would be quite incorrect. Neither the Holeyas nor the Madigas are Sanskritising themselves, but are delving deep into their own discrete practices to signal their differences from other castes. On this point Gaurang Sahay's article is very illuminating. Sahay argues that though Koeris, Yadavas and Chamars in central Bihar are powerful and wealthy enough to Sanskritise their lifestyles, they pointedly choose not to do so. Koeris and Yadavas do not use Brahman priests to perform their rituals. In fact, Koeri priests are chosen for this purpose by both these castes. In the case of the Ad-Dharmis of Punjab, they insist on a portrait or bust of Sant Ravidas in their place of worship, primarily to signal their distance from the established Gurudwaras that are controlled by land-owning Jats.

The assertion of caste identities can be conceptually accommodated if we draw from Celestine Bouglé's insight made long ago. Bouglé argued that the tendency of castes to exalt their own practices logically leads them to adopt the principle of mutual repulsion (Bouglé 1992). This adds to the multi-directional pulls that exist between contending castes. The fact is that orthodoxy, whether of the Gurudwaras or of the Brahmans, is quite openly challenged in the identity assertions of the once-subjugated castes as soon as they get the opportunity to do so. In many cases, as we discussed earlier, Brahmans are not even called upon to perform their traditional priestly role. Karanth's article shows how Brahmans were forced out of the temples in his field village by the overbearing Okkaliga landed castes. The Jains too, as Cort points out, pay scant respect to the

Brahmans. In fact, they consider Brahmans to be quite low as they eat food offered by others in temples. Merchant Jains only look up to Nagar Brahmans because the latter are rich traders and do not perform any ritual function. As far as the Sikhs are concerned, indeed for Punjabis in general, Brahmans were never influential in any way. Jodhka's article clearly brings out the indifference, if not contempt, with which Brahmans are held in Punjab. To get a measure of this it is perhaps worthwhile to note that, unlike many other parts of India, Brahmans never played an important role in education in Punjab, probably because Urdu was the language of the literati and the elite in this region from pre-colonial times.

No doubt our undue dependence on literary texts has obscured from our view the true nature of caste. If caste identities are today visible everywhere to the naked eye it is not because this is a new attribute but because our obsession with the pure hierarchy did not allow us to see this phenomenon in its true colours. If caste and politics now dominate power calculations in India, this should not be taken to mean that caste was impervious to politics in the past. What has happened instead is that castes today have a different context in which they can express their identity driven politics. As the context has undergone major modifications (such as through urbanisation, adult franchise, etc.), caste identities are expressing themselves differently from the ways they did before.

In this sense it would be incorrect to rush to the conclusion that castes have changed in contemporary India. What we should acknowledge instead is that contemporary transparencies have brought to light aspects of caste that were previously darkened by imperfect lenses. Caste has not changed, but the potentialities that were always there within this stratificatory system are now out in the open, and in full view. True, contemporary contexts should be congratulated for allowing us to see these 'certitudes' in caste. True also that history has done most of our phenomenology for us. But that is not the same as saying that caste has changed intrinsically. Certain known correlates of caste—such as inter-dining restrictions and occupational specialisations—can hardly find empirical supports today. But then again, it was certainly not the case that caste and occupation neatly dovetailed in the past. The phenomenon of 'caste-free' occupations is fairly well-known (see Béteille 2002: 45). Nor can we say that commensality is totally ignored today in caste calculations; just that the spaces for such strategic moves are more limited now than what was true generations back. Castes cannot change intrinsically as long as they are fundamentally founded on identities that draw their sustenance from a rhetoric of natural differences that are imbued with notions

of purity and impurity: as the saying goes, the more things change the more they are the same.

To be able to go beyond caste identities is not something that either democratic politics or market economics can accomplish with ease. To disarticulate caste, endogamy has to be surmounted. Only urbanisation and its logic of anonymity can accomplish this task. True metropolitan experience, as Salman Rushdie once said, is when it is impossible to determine who one's neighbour is going to be. What is true for neighbours can easily be extended to sons-in-law as well. But urbanisation will bring about this denouement in an unannounced fashion—almost as an unintended consequence. Till that happens, caste identities will find novel ways of expressing themselves, now in politics, now in economics, now in capricious expressions of hierarchy, justice and even equality.

Though it will only be thoroughgoing urbanisation that can undermine endogamy by unexpectedly coupling people of diverse castes, this should not be taken to mean that caste identities flourish only in villages. While caste identities are present everywhere, it is only the powerful and the dominant in the villages that could hitherto express their histories, heritage and hierarchies with ease. The identity expressions of the poorer, subaltern castes remained suppressed under the conditions of a closed village economy. Once outside such rural confines, caste identities get much greater scope to play themselves out. This is why the first exposure to urbanisation gives caste identities a fresh lease of life. It is not as if the urban world has made people more caste conscious, but rather that towns and cities impart a certain level of freedom such that caste identities can now be fearlessly, and unabashedly, expressed. This is what is ultimately responsible for loosening a cataract of caste politics in contemporary India. It requires a certain urban generational depth to work out this caste anxiety that is at the root of competitive caste behaviour. This time lag gives rise to the optical illusion that castes get stronger because of urbanisation. Often, things get a lot worse before they get better. Unfortunately, such a cycle of fortune nearly always outlives the biography of the researcher. That is the mortal part of scholarship.

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Caste panchayats and the policing of marriage in Haryana: Enforcing kinship and territorial exogamy

Prem Chowdhry

This article looks at the phenomenon of bitterly contested marriages in Haryana which breach the principles of village and clan exogamy, and analyses the issues thrown up by such marriages. Based on recent case studies, it examines the social factors operating behind the intervention of the caste panchayat—an extra-judicial body—and the success and limitations of this intervention in resolving such issues. The analysis highlights fluctuations in the status of different clans, and the contemporary multi-directional pulls within a caste, with different groups either claiming a higher or equal status, or attempting to maintain their status against challenges and erosions effected by other clan groups within the caste fold. The issue of contentious marriages reflects the degree of internal strife, conflict and cleavage in contemporary rural society in Haryana, underlining the way in which a combination of forces are using traditional tools for traditional as well as modern political purposes.

In a caste group in north Indian society the principles of hierarchy and equality are articulated in complex ways. For example, all Jat *gotra* or *got*, as it is known in rural north India, are considered equal. The *got* is an exogamous patrilineal clan whose members are thought to share patrilineal descent from a common ancestor (not from a single mythological sage as understood by the brahmanical use of the term *gotra*). Yet there

is a social hierarchy within the caste, and especially among different *got* within a village, which involves notions of dominant and subordinate *got*. Often there is considerable disagreement concerning the rank order. The changes occurring in ideas about rank and equality, along with the increasing differentiation of status, power and wealth developing within each caste, are contributing to a re-evaluation of the relative status of different clans and the collapse of the earlier relatively coherent, internally consistent ideology within the caste group. The attempt to translate the theoretical and ideological equality into social structural equality within a caste has evoked both a challenge—cultural, social and political—as well as a fierce resistance.

Difference and hierarchy are the two most widely acknowledged and characteristic features of the caste system.[1] To maintain these characteristics, the principle of strict caste endogamy has to be maintained. Inter-caste marriages lead to a blurring of the differences between different caste groups and disturb the recognised caste hierarchies. Anyone venturing to transgress this law is out-casted or expelled from the membership of the caste group. On the other hand, attempts at strict enforcement of a ban on marriages between certain *got within the same caste group* can be seen as attempts at enforcing a hierarchical and ranked order. Effectively, this suggests a reproduction of the caste system within a caste group, the only difference being that 'ritual hierarchy' criteria (for instance, the ban on inter-dining) are not entailed. In such cases, the hierarchical differences between *got* are manifested as status rivalry, leading to social boycott and often to the expulsion of the transgressor, their families and even an entire group from the caste. All this is done under the traditional ideology of *bhaichara* (brotherhood) that disparages competitiveness and contest within a caste group in order to maintain its *izzat* (honour) and *aika* (unity and solidarity). The collective strength of the caste panchayat (council) is used to socially control deviant caste members so that the cohesiveness of the caste group is maintained. Paradoxically, this blatant legitimisation of inequality within a caste group leads both to its further split and fragmentation, as well as to its solidarity in different social contexts and relationships.

This article looks at certain types of bitterly contested marriages in Haryana, and analyses the issues thrown up by such marriages. Based on recent case studies, it examines the social factors operating behind the intervention of the caste panchayat and the success and limitations

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[1] For a detailed sociological exposition of caste, see Gupta (1991, 2000: 1–85).

of this intervention. It reflects upon the working of the caste panchayat, which emerges as a collective body, wholly patriarchal, using its united power for repressive ends rather than egalitarian or democratic ones. It seeks to understand how and why, despite the post-colonial structural changes in law and polity, the caste panchayat continues to wield dictatorial power as an extra-judicial body, and how it is able to use social problems, especially those pertaining to questions of marriage, for legitimation of its authority, which has been severely eroded over the years. It tries to determine the role of the state agencies in abetting this traditional authority and in legitimising the illegitimate, even while eroding the moral authority of the panchayat. The issue of contentious marriages reflects the degree of internal strife, conflict and cleavage in contemporary rural society, highlighting the way in which a combination of forces are using traditional tools for traditional as well as modern political purposes.

I
Customary rules and caste panchayats

The customary rules regulating marriages in Haryana stand diametrically opposed to the law of the land. Briefly speaking, under the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), except for the observation of certain prohibited degrees of relationship, legal restrictions on the choice of marriage partner are almost non-existent.[2] This implies that under the law, both *sagotra* (kin in the patrilineal line of descent whose members claim descent from the same *gotra* ancestor) and inter-caste marriages are permitted.[3] Yet,

[2] Certain persons, however, could not marry under this Act: those related as *sapinda* (shared body relationship), unless the custom or usage governing them permitted marriage, those with a living spouse or those of unsound mind, suffering from mental disorder and incapable of giving consent, and those subject to recurrent attacks of insanity and epilepsy. See Section 5 of the Hindu Marriage Act, *Mulla Principles of Hindu Law* (Desai 1966: 599–751). The age limit of 15 years for the girl and 18 years for the boy sanctioned under this Act was raised to 18 and 21 respectively by the Child Restraint (Amendment) Act 2 of 1978.

[3] In 1946, *The Hindu Marriages Disabilities Removal Act* was passed, which permitted *sagotra* marriages between two Hindus notwithstanding any text, rule or interpretation of the Hindu law or any customary usage. This was followed by *The Hindu Marriage Validity Act, 1949*, which validated inter-caste marriages, and by *The Hindu Marriage Act (no XXXV of 1955)*, a far more comprehensive Act, which incorporated both these Acts and offered more freedom in marriage, separation and divorce. For details of these Acts, see Gupte (1982: 583–89, 635–69).

customarily, there are a variety of rules and practices and degrees of prohibited relationships observed in respect to marriage in different regions of India. This is specially marked in the north/south divide.[4] Customary marriage rules in most parts of north India uphold caste endogamy and adopt the rule of *gotra* or *got* exogamy. Most caste groups, upper or lower, follow a rule of three or four *got* exogamy.[5] A person is not permitted to marry into his or her own *got*, nor into the *got* of his mother, his father's mother, or usually the mother's mother. The last bar is, however, not universal and the restriction is apparently declining. In effect, the *got* rules prohibit marriage with first cousins of either the parallel or the cross variety. In certain instances (elaborated later) the principle of *got* exogamy is enlarged by clustering several other *got*s represented *in the same village* into an exogamous bloc. Marriage between these *got*s is prohibited or restricted.

In extension of the principle of 'kinship exogamy', there is a rule of territorial exogamy. Most caste groups, such as the Jats, expressly forbid marriage within the same village, and with every village which shares a border with the natal village, or in which other clans of one's village are well represented. The combined effect of these rules of exogamy is that, apart from the three or four *got* exogamy rule mentioned above, a large number of *got*s have to be kept outside the purview of marriage. The inhabitants of a particular village cannot intermarry in a large number of villages, especially adjacent villages or those that fall in the *khap* area (the area held or controlled by a clan). In all these villages the tradition and customs of the dominant *got* are followed by all *got*s. If the dominant *got* observes the tradition of avoiding certain *got* for purposes of marriage, all other *got* in these villages will also follow this avoidance pattern. The inclusion of village exogamy (with its notions of locality being equivalent to consanguinity) observed by virtually all caste groups, high or low, and the existence of a large exogamous *got* bloc, introduce considerable complexity to the marriage prohibitions. (However, in parts of Haryana, namely in Sirsa district which shares its boundaries with Rajasthan, as well as Fatehbad, which was a part of Sirsa district till 1997–98, there is no tradition of village exogamy as elsewhere in Haryana. Fieldwork done

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[4] For these regional diversities and their accommodation and articulation in the politico-legal regime of post-independent India, see Uberoi (2002).

[5] Gathered from field interviews. For the same norms in other parts of northern India, see Lewis (1958: 160–61), and Pradhan (1966: 89–91).

in three villages of these districts—Bhodiya Khera, Khariya and Chautala—shows this abundantly.)[6]

Culturally translated, the principle of village exogamy means that all men and women of the same clan, the same localised clan and the same village are bound by the morality of brother–sister and, therefore, that both sex and marriage[7] are prohibited between members of any of these units (Hershman 1981: 133–34). This extends to the *khap* area involving more than one village and more than one *got*. Significantly, terms like *bhai* (brother*)* and *behan* (sister) are used in the villages even for persons who are not related to each other. Transcending ties of biological kinship, they embrace all males or females of the village of one's own generation, notwithstanding caste affiliations. One of the important connotations of the term *bhai* is that a *behan*'s care and protection are entrusted to him. He is to safeguard her honour and not sully it. These prohibitions create the *bhaichara* which establishes equality between all and denies all hierarchy. This is the idealised *biradari* (community)—both that of the village and the caste—which has full *aika*. Clearly the most hallowed

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[6] This region has a different tradition, which dates back to the time of village settlements when a large number of people from neighbouring regions migrated to settle down in this part of Haryana. Sirsa, for instance, came to be termed in the colonial period as the 'meeting place where the Bangru Jats from the Bikaner region, the Sikh Jats from the Malwa and the Muslim Jats from the Satluj valley, meet the Jats of Hissar' (Ibbetson 1981: 126). The large-scale migration meant the existence of twenty-four to thirty *got* in a single village. This made it impossible to follow a tradition of village exogamy in marriage alliances. Moreover, these families had all migrated along with their *rishtedar*s (families related through marriage). Since the villages included both the affines as well as consanguines, the tradition which allowed marriage alliances within the village or in the neighbourhood was consolidated. The second major migration to this area took place in the aftermath of the Partition (1947). The refugee population who settled down in this region also followed a tradition of making caste-endogamous marriages within the village. The nature of the settlement patterns of these villages also meant the absence in this region of a *khap*-panchayat, tracing its origins to a common ancestor. This provided another important reason for following a different tradition. This absence meant that the caste panchayat could not be as powerful as in the rest of Haryana in the imposition of its diktats. I thank Dr D.R. Chaudhary for a discussion on this aspect.

[7] Athough clandestine sexual relations occur not infrequently between classificatory or village brothers and sisters, any social approval of them in the form of marriage is considered an approval of incest and therefore violently resisted. The semi-secret liaisons tend to be overlooked, as they require no realignment of social relations; as marriage is forbidden, the relationship is also necessarily of limited duration. Marriage, on the other hand, affects the alignment of relationships between groups; it has to be publicly validated by overt transactions, and provides a precedent for similar arrangements in the future.

cultural concepts like *aika*, *izzat*, *biradari* and *bhaichara* are contingent upon maintaining the traditional marriage prohibitions.

It is a breach in these prohibitions that provokes the *biradari* to use the traditional tools available to them in the form of caste or village panchayats to stem such attempts. The term *biradari* is variously defined according to usage. McKim Marriott, for instance, notes that 'the term *biradari* refers not to just one concrete structural unit at the village level but rather to patrilineal connection, real, putative or fictional, at any level of segmentation' (Marriott 1962: 265). Although usually it is the agnatic kin who form the *biradari,* in some instances it may include cognates as well (Das 1976: 1–29). In the context of a caste group, a *biradari* is a social group made up of males who believe they are descended from a common male ancestor, which makes them equal and 'brothers'. But used in the context of the village, *biradari* refers to the entire village, overriding differences of caste, class and creed. Territorially this may extend from a single village to a group of villages.

Customarily, the *biradari* uses the traditional panchayat,[8] or rather, one of a set of traditional panchayats, to settle a variety of disputes regarding caste and inter-caste matters, transgressions, questions of property rights, inheritance and disputes which threaten the peace of the village or the immediate region.[9] Questions of marriage and sexual affairs form a significant proportion of such disputes, and it is in this sphere that the panchayat frequently intervenes to impose 'justice' according to its own definition. Although very little is known about the working of traditional panchayats in contemporary times,[10] they certainly remain an active force in rural north India.[11] In cases of contentious marriages, it is the *caste* panchayat of the *biradari* concerned that is called upon to settle matters.

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[8] I am using the term 'traditional' panchayat to distinguish it from the statutory panchayat established in post-independence India. This usage in no way means that this pre-colonial and colonial body was in any way a non-changing, static institution. Like caste, the traditional panchayat has also undergone changes over time.

[9] Retzlaff (1962: 18) distinguishes four different kinds of traditional panchayat in northern India: (*i*) caste panchayat; (*ii*) general meeting panchayat or the village multi-caste panchayat; (*iii*) the farmer-retainer panchayat; (*iv*) the single purpose panchayat.

[10] For a succinct resumé of the work done by different scholars on traditional panchayats, see Mandelbaum (1990: 278–93) and Cohn (1990: 55–61). It may be noted that most such studies touch upon traditional panchayats as part of their research and fieldwork around village society. The one full length study of panchayats from Uttar Pradesh by M.S. Pradhan (1966) remains shrouded in controversy about its authenticity.

[11] According to Hershman (1981: 35–36), the clan and caste panchayats in Punjab have lost the authority they had exercised in the past, when they acted as courts and

Certain recent cases in Haryana show the frequent intervention of the caste panchayat, which has no legitimacy in law, to attempt to change relationships and impose their own preferences, subsuming the individual/family will to that of the village/collective and prioritising the village and *biradari*'s *izzat* over that of individuals. To illustrate, I shall present an in-depth study of a recent case that occurred in village Jondhi of district Jhajjar. This study is based upon fieldwork done during 1999–2002. In the course of discussion I shall introduce other cases to emphasise some of the major points. The account that follows will throw light on the working of the caste panchayat and accentuate some of its more important features.

II
Dictating relationships: The case of village Jondhi

A recent case which took place in early July 2000 in village Jondhi demonstrates the awesome power of the caste panchayat, the brutal extent to which the village culture and tradition can be extended, the continued hold of caste customs and traditions, and the challenges that these traditions and customs are facing. This case raises various questions regarding marriage and highlights the social ambivalence regarding issues of control, of prohibitive degrees and of incest.

In February 1998, Ashish, a Jat boy of village Jondhi in Jhajjar district, 25 years of age, married Darshana, a 16-year-old girl from village Dabari. This village adjoins Haryana but falls within Delhi. When the case surfaced in July 2000, the couple had a 1½-year-old son. Ashish, a truck driver by profession, used to take export items from Delhi airport to Bangalore. He had been operating on this route since 1993. As is usual with the majority of people from rural Haryana who work outside their village and state, Ashish had his wife and child living with his other family members in village Jondhi. His immediate family included his father, Satbir Singh, and his grandfather Daryav Singh, who lived with them. His extended family in this village, consisting of his five uncles and their families, comprised some forty members.

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arbitrators in disputes affecting their members. According to him, cases are seldom submitted, as they once were, to the elders of the *biradari* or caste panchayats to decide. The situation in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh would appear to be different in this regard from that of Punjab.

Trouble around Ashish and Darshana's marriage arose nearly three years after it had taken place when it became public knowledge that a Dagar *got* boy had married a girl from the Gehlot *got*. Under the rule of exogamy, these two *got*s in village Jondhi fall in the category of prohibited *got* and cannot intermarry. According to a 'tradition', allegedly dating back 500 years, the founder of the village Jondhi, a Jat called Jondh, Gehlot by *got*, had gifted 2,000 acres of land to Jats of the Dagar *got*, a destitute family then living in the jungle, and settled them in the village. This was a time of great paucity of population when all hands were needed to till the land. Around 5,000 acres of land remained with the Gehlots. This gesture was claimed to have established brotherhood relations between the two *got*s that prohibited intermarriage between them. This tradition was claimed to have been duly respected by both the *got* members till it was broken by this couple. It incensed the Gehlot Jats who summoned a caste panchayat of the village to thrash out the issue and avenge the alleged insult inflicted upon the *izzat* of the entire village by such a marriage. Although a caste panchayat, its attendance is open to all villagers. However, as the concerned matter is internal to the caste, it is left to the villagers to decide whether to attend it or not. This is important, as the decision taken at the caste panchayat is binding upon all villagers. Indeed, the co-operation of the entire village is needed to implement the decision of the caste panchayat.

This panchayat appointed a committee of twenty-five members in July 2000 to go into the matter and a series of meetings were held to allow the two parties to come to a compromise in some way. The Dagar family was repeatedly asked to appear before the panchayat dominated by the bigwigs of the Gehlot *got* in the village. From Ashish's immediate family only two of his *tau*s (uncles) attended the meetings. Other members of the family, fearing the worst, stayed away. His father, unable to bear the social strictures, went into deep depression, increased his liquor intake, and was unable to talk to anyone. Only a few members of the Dagar family appeared before the panchayat. The importance given to this 'breach' in marriage prohibitions can be adduced from the fact that, within a span of two weeks, eight meetings of the committee appointed by the panchayat and three meetings of the panchayat were held to come to grips with the problem. During these two weeks almost every conversation in the village and surrounding villages revolved around this issue. All that the villagers could talk about was this 'disgraceful affair', as someone put it.

The couple's absence from these meetings incensed the villagers. The panchayat, noting this as a further defiance, issued an ultimatum to the Dagars at the end of two weeks. The entire Dagar family, including the couple, was ordered to appear before it on 17 August 2000. Failing this, the panchayat declared its intention to deliver their verdict and have it implemented. On the appointed day, a truncated Dagar family, minus the couple, attended the panchayat. The latter announced its verdict and inflicted heavy punishment on the Dagar family.

In a public pronouncement, the caste panchayat held the concerned Gehlot and Dagar families guilty of wilfully breaking a time-honoured village tradition. The Gehlot family of village Dabari came under severe strictures for marrying their daughter to a Dagar boy. The family was expelled from the *biradari* of Gehlots. In future no Gehlot was to have any contact with them. The Dagar family was also vehemently denounced. It was alleged that the Dagars brought about this marriage knowingly, stealthily, and calculatedly. For this, it was pointed out, the number of *barati*s (marriage party) was kept deliberately low. It consisted of only fifteen to twenty people, so as to keep the matter under cover. It was even reported that at the time of wedding, when someone raised the question of prohibited *got,* he was misinformed that the girl's *got* was Solanki—the *got* of the dominant Jats of village Dabari. The latter village has only ten to twelve households belonging to the Gehlot *got*, the remainder being Solanki. It was also given out that the father and grandfather of the bridegroom, who knew of the violation of the *got* prohibition, had deliberately stayed away from the marriage celebrations.

Unequivocally condemning the marriage, the caste panchayat ordered it to be nullified. This decision was in keeping with the popular concept of women as repositories of community honour. Such a concept turned Darshana into an object of honour for the Gehlots—an honour that could not be allowed to be abused at any cost. If this honour had been compromised or defiled by an act of marriage, such an act must be reversed and her status as an unmarried girl must be restored. Consequently, the couple was ordered to revert back to their brother–sister fictive relationship, in keeping with the *got* status that had existed prior to their marriage. This was the only relationship between the Gehlot and Dagar *got*s which the Jondhi caste panchayat was willing to recognise.

To effect this transformation, the panchayat prescribed a ritual procedure to be observed. One, Darshana was to unveil herself in the full assembly of the village. This was a symbolic turning of the *bahu* of the village into a *beti* (daughter). (No daughter is required to veil herself in

her natal village.) Furthermore, she was to tie a *rakhi* on Ashish, that is, publicly accepting him as her brother.

Two, as a daughter, Darshana was to be married again. Her father-in-law, now transformed into her father, was to perform the *kanyadaan* ceremony for Darshana and give her away as a bride. The Dagar family was to bear the entire cost of her marriage. This also meant that Darshana was demoted from her 'superior' Gehlot *got* to 'inferior' Dagar *got*. This made the Dagars responsible for getting her remarried.

Three, the son of Ashish and Darshana was to remain with Ashish. Ashish's family was ordered to deposit Rs 5,000 in the account of his infant son as security.

Four, all forty members of this family were to be expelled from the village. They were given a week to make their departure.

Five, the members of Ashish's family were ordered to sell off their land and other property in the village within a period of two weeks. Failure to comply with these injunctions would result in confiscation of their land and property by the panchayat and forcible eviction from the village.

Six, in case the Dagar family allowed a week to lapse without complying with the panchayat's orders, they alone were to be responsible for any untoward happening in the village. The panchayat refused to accept any responsibility for their lives or property after a week.

The latter stricture was certainly a tacit approval of violence. Such cases are far more pervasive than acknowledged. They play an important role in maintaining structural and assumed hierarchies and are considered normal and legitimate. Violence as an expression of power would certainly have been used by the male Gehlot *biradari* of the village against the couple, and against Darshana in particular, in order to reproduce and reaffirm the relative status and authority of the two *got*s. The Dagars' defiance offered the Gehlots a pretext to punish them for wrongdoing and to assert the importance of maintaining or exercising their authority. With the belligerent tone of the panchayat and rising tempers, wide-scale violence was apprehended.

Yet the police stood by silently. The Deputy Superintendent Police (DSP) of the Jhajjar police station, when contacted regarding this matter, admitted: 'No one bothers about the police in the village. Our decree does not work in the village.' The Station Police Officer (SPO) maintained that the police intervene if and when the law and order breaks down or a complaint is lodged by one of the parties. This 'official' policy of wait-and-watch adopted by the state agency in such cases helps establish the

might of the caste panchayat. Even after the complaint was made to the police, the latter advised the complainants to pressurise the elected sarpanch to make her act. Such matters, according to the SPO, should be settled by the caste elders: 'What are they (the elders) for?' he asked. The precise nature of state intervention in such cases is context specific rather than principled, and does nothing to reinforce the objectives on which the state structure is based, i.e., equality, egalitarianism, citizenship, adulthood, etc. It merely acts to restore law and order, and that reluctantly, encouraging the illegitimate forces to take over. In other words, the police overlook social problems to seek a settlement through the panchayat. Similarly, the sarpanch of the officially instituted and elected gram panchayat not only supports the decisions of the caste panchayat but also actively promotes it, as we shall see presently.

The caste panchayat's belligerent stand put the Dagars on the defensive. They reportedly requisitioned a larger body, i.e., a *khap*-panchayat (a multi-clan council drawn from wider clan areas, also known as *mahapanchayat*) to review the case. On 23 August 2000, a *khap*-panchayat of both the *got*s assembled from different villages took place in village Jondhi. An estimated 1,000 people gathered in the village for this purpose. The Dagar *got* from *panchgama* (of five villages) was massively represented. Representatives of the Gehlot *got* from eighty-three villages also assembled on special request from their *got* kinsmen of Jondhi village. The proceedings of this panchayat took place under the chairmanship of Daya Kishan, the chief representative of the Gehlot *got* from village Mitrao in Gurgaon district. He was also the former pradhan (head) of the Gehlot *khap*-panchayat of forty villages, and had also served as a sarpanch of the gram panchayat in the initial years of independence. Both sides were given a hearing for more than two hours. In this the Gehlots were aggressive and the Dagars defensive and repentant. The senior Dagar, Daryav Singh, placed his *pagri* (headgear) on the ground and apologised profusely with folded hands for the mistake unwittingly committed. The *phupha* (uncle) of Ashish, Ishwar Singh, the go-between in the marriage, acknowledged his mistake by holding his ears in repentance and promised never to repeat it. The Dagars pleaded for leniency, maintaining that the earlier decision of the Jondhi caste panchayat was too harsh on the couple, especially in view of their child.

The *khap*-panchayat appointed a committee of eleven—five representatives of each *got,* headed by the president of the *khap*-panchayat. A written declaration was taken from both the *got* representatives and the concerned families that they would honour the decision of this committee.

The decision, taken after a great deal of consideration, was communicated publicly. The *khap*-panchayat did not dissolve the marriage, but refused to condone it. It also refused to review the decision taken by the Jondhi caste panchayat against the Gehlot family of village Dabari. Darshana's natal family was excommunicated from their *got* for giving their daughter to a Dagar boy in marriage. They could no longer call themselves Gehlot. Socially boycotted for life, no member of the *got* was to associate with them in any way. All pleas for clemency were rejected by the *khap*-panchayat. The *khap*-panchayat further expelled the couple from Jondhi village for life. They were not even granted visiting rights. Their male child was exempt from this punishment, clearly on the grounds of patri-lineage and sharing of blood. The other forty members of this family in Jondhi were allowed to stay in the village, but were expelled from the *biradari* for two years. After two years they could request the Jondhi caste panchayat for a review in order to seek re-admission to the *biradari*. Till then there was to be complete social boycott of the family. Their *huqqa-pani* with other members of the village was banned. Neither could they participate in any of the village festivities, nor could anyone else participate in theirs. Any infringement was to be severely punished.

These, briefly, were the major highlights of the case. Further investigations and interviews revealed certain nuances of the case, which bring into relief the contest around popular cultural and customary practices in rural areas.

Socially, Jondhi is a Jat-dominated village. The Jats constitute 75 per cent of its population. In this, an overwhelming 50 per cent belong to the Gehlot *got* and about 25 per cent to the Dagar *got*. The Gehlots certainly own the bulk of the land in the village, but they are lagging behind in education and other professions compared to the Dagars, who are financially better off. Having taken to education they have branched out, perhaps noticeably more so than the Gehlots, towards work other than cultivation. A large number of them are in the army, the police and other government services. Many have migrated to foreign lands and still others have come to own *sharab ke theke* (liquor shops) and *bhatta*s (brick kilns), and are among the leading businessmen of this region.

The success of the Dagars has been a source of tension between the two *got*s for some time now. The ex-pradhan of village Mitrao spoke of *khundak* (tension/resentment) that some people in the village had against the Dagars, which, according to him, was reflected in the Jondhi caste panchayat's decision. Although he refused to elaborate, it is clear that, in a scenario of unemployment and growing population, there is severe

competition over material resources. The Dagars, according to my Gehlot informants, were not sufficiently respectful towards them (Gehlots). They refuse to ascribe this self-confidence of the Dagars to the changed social milieu and the improvement in their economic standing, but put it down to their arrogance and the existence among them of anti-social elements. The Dagars' claims to equality clashed with those of the Gehlots, who looked upon the Dagars as subordinate partners, and as being of inferior status.

In the traditional *got* hierarchy among the Jats, a Gehlot girl marrying a Dagar boy was bound to provoke extreme resentment. It would be considered a *pratiloma* (hypogamous) marriage by the girl—a marriage beneath herself. Although the question of incest (based upon a fictive sibling relationship between the two *got*s prohibiting any sexual contact and marital exchange between the two) was easily the most important issue around which local and regional opinion was mobilised, a significant associated aspect was the question of status and hierarchy, based upon kinship and power. The rejection or non-inclusion of the subordinate *got* in the structure of kinship alliances is a critical means by which senior lineage members manage the reproduction of power for themselves.

The marriage of Ashish and Darshana, therefore, was not merely a matter of transferring a kinship principle—the superiority of bride-takers and inferiority of the bride-givers—to the clan level, as suggested by Madsen in his study of a similar contentious marriage among the Jats of western Uttar Pradesh (Madsen 1991: 351–65), for the inferiority of bride-givers, due to certain factors, is limited to the immediate family only, and does not automatically apply to the entire clan group.[12] The Dagars

[12] In real terms, according to Hershman (1981: 216), the scope of inequalities created by marriage alliances is circumscribed by the following factors: (*i*) this inferiority is largely limited to specific ritual contexts, for example, at weddings and funerals; (*ii*) only the husband requires any real honour for being a wife-taker, and only the wife's immediate family shares the dishonour of being a wife-giver. The other kinsmen have their status affected in only the most nominal ways; (*iii*) the interaction of the affines is restricted to the relationship of a man with his wife's family, the marriage alliances of any one family tending to be widely dispersed across different villages and families; (*iv*) the inequalities created by wife-giving are limited because they are not significantly related to control of the means of production, i.e., land. Dipankar Gupta (1997: 167–68) similarly argues that in western Uttar Pradesh the concept of wife-takers as superior to wife-givers is not strictly observed. As an example he takes up the case of Mohinder Singh Tikait, the Bhartiya Kisan Union supremo. Though Tikait is locked in an intense rivalry with the father-in-law of his daughter, no one considers Tikait's behaviour improper.

were not actually claiming a *superior* status, but merely a status equal to the Gehlots in village Jondhi, in keeping with their changed politico-economic standing and the egalitarian ideology of *bhaichara* existing between different *got*s. In other words, what was essentially a hypogamous marriage in the eyes of the dominant Ghelot *got*, sought legitimacy from the Dagar perspective as an isogamous match, not a hypergamous one. Such an attempt brought to the surface the on-going contest around a status hierarchy that is continuously under challenge, offering an opportunity to the contesting parties to settle scores once and for all.

The Jondhi case is not an isolated one. It symbolises a social phenomenon that is more widespread. Concerns of status hierarchy among different clans of Jats are crystallising around questions relating to marriage, contributing substantially to the redefinition of traditional practices and status claims. A recent conflict (October 2000) between the Shyrano and Sangwan Jat *got*s can be cited as an example. In the overwhelming Sangwan-dominated village of Damkaura in district Loharu, the attempt of one Bhagwan Singh of the Jhajhodiya Jat *got*, who wanted his son to marry one of the Sangwan *got* girls, was obstructed by the Sangwans. The Sangwans considered the Jhajhodiya *got* an inferior/subordinate *got* in the village, and this marriage therefore as a *pratiloma* marriage. The caste panchayat maintained: '*Sangwan got ki ladki Sangwano ke gaon me bahu ban ker nahin aa sakti*' (a Sangwan girl cannot come as a bride in a Sangwan village), and gave a verdict against it. The two parties were told to break off the engagement or face dire consequences. Bhagwan Singh's plea to the panchayat rested on the claim of his *got* being allied to the Shyrano *got* of the Jats both as wife-givers and wife-takers. The Shyrano *got* men had been instrumental in settling the Sangwans in village Damkaura. Traditionally, therefore, the Shyrano held a higher status than the Sangwans. As a higher status *got*, it was claimed that they were traditionally entitled to take wives from the Sangwans and not vice versa. This tradition came in conflict with the ground reality of the Sangwans dominating numerically and materially in the village Damkaura. In seeking to upset this marriage the Sangwans not only challenged the earlier tradition, but also appropriated it for themselves. As dominant partners they claimed the right to take and not give brides from subordinate *got* represented in the village.

The matter was resolved by evoking the ubiquitous concept of *bhaichara*. Based upon notions of equality and brotherhood, any marriage between the two *got*s would have been incestuous. Significantly, the

objection in terms of incest was nothing but a proxy for an objection to status reversal. The relative claims of the two regionally powerful sub-clans were neutralised and tradition was recovered/reconstructed to the satisfaction of all. The marriage did not take place but a rescheduling of the status claim did. Clearly, there cannot be a uniform application of status claims. Such claims have to take cognisance of village as well as wider regional equations.

III
Status complexities: Resolving claims

In the case of Ashish and Darshana's marriage, the social aspect of the disturbance of status hierarchies is somewhat more complicated and blurred. The ambiguity of approach towards the prescribed norms is likely to spill over in this case onto more and more cases of breach. For a variety of reasons (discussed later), individual concerns may take priority over the collective village and *biradari* concerns. In the case of village Jondhi, Darshana's natal family was clearly not so well off. Darshana's father, a former state bus driver in Delhi, had been disabled due to a stroke since 1988. He struggled to bring up his family of six children— four girls and two boys. Daughters meant having to provide dowries in a situation of steeply escalating marriage costs. Anxiety about their marriages was further compounded, as the eldest girl was physically handicapped and the next daughter engaged to be married. The family's scarce resources were already stretched. Their land in the village was under dispute and the family lived on the father's pension. This meagre income was augmented by letting out part of their dwelling (consisting of three to four small rooms). This fetched them only a little extra, as rents are low in the villages. Darshana's two younger brothers, still in school, were nowhere near contributing financially to the family. In Ashish, then, this family found a good match by any standards. Ashish was reportedly drawing Rs 5,000–6,000 per month in his job as a truck driver. His immediate family owned a pucca house, milch cattle and one kila (five *bigha*s) of land in Jondhi. With his wife and child living in the village and helping the other male members in looking after the land, it would mean a comfortable life with a large surplus income in the form of his salary.

In such a situation Darshana was clearly entering into an advantageous match and marrying above herself insofar as the economic status of her

natal family was concerned. However, from the point of view of the large community of Jondhi Gehlots, this view was not sustainable on two counts. First, in kinship terms the Gehlots, as wife-givers, hardly stood to gain in status by an alliance with the Dagars. Indeed, this marriage could well symbolise the ground reality, i.e., the changed status and power equations between the Gehlot and Dagar Jat *gots*. Second, the Gehlots evaluated the social and economic status of Ashish's family not in comparison with that of Darshana's, but according to the traditional village ranking. In Jondhi, Ashish's family occupied a low status. Ashish was the only male member with a regular income. The family landholding was too small by itself to offer a worthwhile standard of living, and the household consisted of three males and no females, as Ashish's mother was dead. In the eyes of the villagers, it hardly constituted a 'family'.

Had Ashish belonged to one of the more prestigious and economically sound families of Dagars in village Jondhi, it is possible that the strictures passed by the Gehlots would have taken a different form. The caste panchayat is likely to be more lenient in passing judgement on a powerful man than on one who is inconsequential, for the important man may resist or even nullify the panchayat's decision (Mandelbaum 1990: 302–3). Daya Kishan, the ex-pradhan of Mitrao village, dismissed Ashish as someone to be pitied, someone otherwise unable to get married because of his family and financial status. What made things worse was Ashish's overriding concern and haste in getting married soon after his mother's death (a breach of the one year mandatory mourning period). With no woman at home to look after the household and prepare food for his old father and grandfather, specially when he was away, Darshana, from a financially strained household, was quickly chosen to step in. The fact that she was a Gehlot, if considered at all, may well have seemed a minor hindrance.

For the Gehlots of Jondhi, however, this was a major breach of social and cultural norms, and indeed a political challenge. Darshana's Gehlot family was held responsible for this, and the onus fell on Darshana's mother, since the father was an invalid; she had humiliated the family and brought on the united wrath of their Gehlot *biradari*. The suspicion of her active agency in bringing about the marriage was not without foundation. With a realistic assessment of her own financial position she had indeed actively promoted the marriage, and had even hastened it in order to get Darshana and her sister married at the same time. For this she was roughed up by Darshana's two uncles (*tau* and *chacha*) and her

life was threatened. Darshana's mother complained that Gehlot women from Dabri village had also come over to her house to openly criticise the marriage alliance and to abuse her and take her to task.

The Jondhi Gehlots, on the other hand, opined that Darshana's family should have contacted their *got* people in village Jondhi to help procure an equal, if not a superior, *got* match for Darshana. The Gehlot *biradari,* they also pointed out, could even have been asked to share the cost of the marriage in case the *karta* (head) of the family was unable to meet his family's requirements. In a cultural milieu where masculinity and power are linked to the ability to protect and materially support a family, the males of Darshana's natal family stood emasculated, damned and reduced to pariah status. As one Gehlot of Dabri village was to point out: *'inki na-mard harkat ne sub Gehloton ki naak katwadi'* (their unmanly deed has emasculated all the Gehlots). The Gehlot families of Dabri village severed all relations with Darshana's family.

The Gehlot community pressurised Darshana's and Ashish's families to nullify the marriage. This forced the couple to go underground for a while in the month of August 2000. Darshana pointed out later that, had it not been for the child, the ending might well have been sordid and gruesome. Indeed, in several marriages that had transgressed the principle of territorial exogamy, the couples concerned had been physically eliminated. The whole of north India is replete with such cases (Chowdhry 1997: 1919–28). A violent ending took place in village Narnaul of Rohtak district, Haryana, where in June 1999 a Jat girl and a Jat boy had run away to get married. The caste panchayat instructed the family members to kill the girl. The family members, however, sent the girl to her *mama* (maternal uncle). Incensed by this defiance, the panchayat decided to carry out the sentence themselves. They sent a party of ten Jat boys from the village to get her from her *mama*'s house. The girl was killed and cremated by them, significantly against the decision of the family. The elected sarpanch of the gram panchayat, who was a mute onlooker, feigned ignorance. It is alleged that the girl was also raped by her so-called brothers. The contradictions underlying the ideology of 'brotherhood' come violently and blatantly to the surface on such occasions.

The caste panchayat remained tight-lipped about the identity of the culprits, clearly protecting and shielding the rapists. In episodes such as these, which are not uncommon, the guardians and protectors of the 'community' end up as violators. An FIR registered by a Rohtak women's organisation to investigate the crime came to nothing. No one was willing

to testify. The Jat boy, her runaway partner, has been in jail since then on charges of rape and kidnapping.[13]

It is openly acknowledged that a large number of the cases which are taken up by the traditional panchayats are concerned with women. Yet no woman is allowed in the panchayat premises, not even the one who is a party to the dispute. Although this may not be true of all regions and all caste groups,[14] in Haryana a woman is represented by her male family members. The male head of her family is held responsible for her conduct. Similarly, in the almost all-male gathering of the traditional panchayats in Haryana, the female audience is missing. This again may well be region-specific.[15] Curiously, Darshana was compelled to confront the caste panchayat twice. Once, when she was hauled up to the house of Pushpa Gehlot (the elected sarpanch of the gram panchayat), the woman sarpanch, complying with the caste panchayat's dictates, lifted her *ghunghat* (veil covering her head) in the presence of thirty to thirty-five people. On the second occasion, her *ghunghat* was once again lifted by Pushpa Gehlot in front of the caste panchayat consisting of 500–550 people, all of them men. She was directed to comply with the panchayat's decision. Interestingly, what was considered humiliating by Darshana personally was projected by the panchayat members as bestowing *izzat* upon her, as an attempt to retrieve her honour rather than to defame her. Darshana considered the lifting of her *ghunghat* as a great humiliation for herself, but for the *panch*es or the villagers, reclaiming Darshana as a daughter was bestowing honour upon her. It was pointed out to me that to call

[13] A similar case was handled by an individual family and not the caste panchayat. In village Padanna, a Jat boy ran away with a Jat girl from the same village. They were not found despite an extensive search. The Jat family of the girl, belonging to the dominant and prosperous *got,* took violent revenge on the lower class/status family of the Jat boy. They dragged the sister of the absconding boy by her hair in full view of the villagers in the daytime and took her to their double-story house. They openly announced: 'You have sullied our girl and dishonoured us. We shall also soil your girl in return.' Once on the roof, the girl was raped by three of the family members, while the mother stood guard at the entrance. The matter was taken up by the Mahila Jagran Committee who moved the court on behalf of the girl's family. However, convictions could not be made due to lack of evidence and witnesses. The girl's family subsequently left the village for some unknown or undisclosed place.

[14] In village Senapur in Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh, when the case of a lower-caste Kahar woman was decided by the dominant Thakurs of the village, the Kahar woman was present. Her preference for a sexual mate was given full recognition in deciding the case. For details see Zamora (1990: 56).

[15] Zamora (1990: 56). In the above-cited case, both the Kahar as well as the Thakur women formed part of the panchayat audience.

your *bahu* (daughter-in-law) your *beti* (daughter) was indeed upgrading her status and honouring her, not demoting or dishonouring her.

In Haryana it is the *beti*'s or *behan*'s honour that is given precedence and rated high. To illustrate this, the Ramayan story is cited as an example. In the matter of honour and dishonour, it is maintained that it was Ram who gravely dishonoured Rawan, and not vice versa. Ram had refused to marry Shrupnakha, the sister of Rawan, and had been instrumental in cutting off her nose. Rawan, on the other hand, had only abducted Ram's wife. In the scale of dishonour, Ram's action far outweighed that of Rawan's. Out of the two insults to a man's honour, it was a sister's honour rather than a wife's that deserved drastic action. Summing up, the commentator remarked: 'You may say anything against my wife and I may, if I like, choose to ignore you. But if you say anything against my sister, it is a different matter altogether. You will have to bear the consequences.' Although clearly exaggerated, this contention needs to be understood rather than dismissed. It may be noted that the concept of *bhaichara*, whether that of the caste or of the village, covers sisters and daughters, but not wives.[16] In terms of abuses, those relating to sisters and mothers, like *behanchodh* (sister-fucker) or *machodh* (mother-fucker), though colloquially often used in rural areas in even ordinary conversations, are the ones most likely to incite violence. Also, there is no equivalent abuse in relation to the wife.[17] Moreover, it is the brother who is considered the 'real protector' of a woman in Punjab and Haryana.[18] He safeguards her interests against others, including her husband.

For Darshana the sudden appearance of her 'brothers', claiming to protect her 'honour', was totally unsolicited. She showed her mettle by fighting back throughout this crisis. Her strength and assertiveness can be gleaned from the interview of 21 August 2000 that she gave to *Dainik Jagaran*, a local Hindi daily published from Panipat. In this interview she condemned the illegality of the caste panchayat's dictates. Educated

[16] Indeed, the most brutal retribution is reserved for an unmarried girl. In contrast to this, a married woman's liaison may or may not invoke a similar reaction. Violence as a response towards a runaway wife, for example, remains confined to individuals or families, and such cases are not known to receive the support of the wider caste/community networks, or cited as a matter of 'honour' for the entire village. Consequently, what appears to exist is a noticeable difference of approach in rural areas towards the handling of an unmarried and a married woman's amorous liaisons.

[17] A wife is generally humiliated by abusing her natal family, specially her brother and her father, by casting aspersions of incest upon them. For an interesting structural analysis of Hindi terms of abuse, see Srinivasan (1976: 72–77).

[18] See Nirmala's case cited in Das (1976).

up to Class X and generally knowledgeable, she maintained that there was no law of the land which could force her to acknowledge her husband as her brother. Showing tremendous agency and spirit, she also approached the police for help against the illegal ways of the panchayat. (As is usual with these cases, she was not encouraged to pursue this line.) Critical of the caste panchayat, she voiced her strong resentment against its arbitrary decisions. It was she who defied its verdict by refusing to accept Ashish as her brother. She also greatly resented having been subjected to the humiliating ritual of unveiling in the full assembly of the village. She equated it with the behaviour of the Kaurvas with Draupadi. A fully alert Darshana pointed out that 'no law can stop me from entering the village', but maintained that she herself was willing to stay away 'in order to maintain peace'. Darshana also showed herself willing to contact a women's organisation in Delhi. In all this her husband supported her completely but silently. He merely added, 'if they trouble us unnecessarily we will also not keep quiet'.

The lead taken by Darshana in the interview and the low profile kept by her husband underlined the idea that she was taking on the combined might of the Gehlots as a Gehlot. Her Dagar husband, apparently inferiorised by the Gehlots (an inferiorisation which was perhaps internalised by many of his Dagar kinsmen, who were not so well-to-do as other Dagars), implicitly accepted his lower ranking and powerlessness in the caste hierarchy by keeping to the background, allowing his wife to take the lead, an unheard-of thing in the villages. Ashish never faced the caste panchayat either, whereas Darshana was compelled to confront it, which she did with great composure, as the eyewitnesses recall.

An interesting aspect of this case lies in the time factor. Why did it take three years for the news to become public, and why did it become public knowledge at all? The Gehlots give out the story that this news was accidentally discovered by some women from Darshana herself, who had gone to fetch water from the village well. When asked by the village women about her *got*, Darshana disclosed that she belonged to the Gehlot *got*. From there the news caught on like a whirlwind. Investigations suggest a different line, however. It is acknowledged that the fact of the marriage was already known to quite a few people, though it was ignored till the younger generation of Gehlot men made an issue of it. This happened during the election to the post of sarpanch of the gram panchayat in July 2000. Reserved for women, this post was won by a Gehlot woman candidate. Until then, and for fifty-two years, the post had been won by the Dagars. Though numerically strong, the Gehlots

have been faction-ridden, and it was this fragmentation that had enabled the Dagars to get their sarpanch elected. The repeated triumph of the Dagars in the gram panchayat elections had confirmed the general perception among the Gehlots regarding the attrition of their sphere of influence in the village and the growing clout of the subordinate Dagar partners.

In the July 2000 elections of the gram panchayat, the Dagars did not offer their candidate for the post of the sarpanch.[19] Instead, they supported one of the Gehlot factions. Because of the split in Dagar votes, the Gehlot faction they had supported lost. This was flaunted in the village as a Dagar defeat. The change in the political fortunes of the Gehlots was soon reflected in their behaviour vis-à-vis the Dagars. Having come to power democratically, it seemed important for them to assert themselves. The victorious Gehlot faction in the village took to ridiculing the Dagars whenever the occasion arose. The Dagars retaliated by calling them their *rishtedar*. Translated in English, *rishtedar* merely means a relative. Colloquially, however, it means infinitely more, depending upon the occasion and its usage. It is often used in rural areas in a pejorative way. In a conflict situation it is used as an abuse, like the word *sala* (wife's brother). It designates the other person as a wife-giver who hands over his sister or daughter to another man for sexual use. According to Daya Kishan, the ex-pradhan of village Mitrao, the actual taunt thrown by the Dagar boys at the Gehlots was 'We are your *jija* (sister's husband).' Elaborating, he maintained that in a situation where brotherhood is accepted, this claim by any one party could only be an abuse directly suggesting that 'I fuck your sister'. Claiming to indulge in incest with impunity can only lead to extreme violence and murder. As sexual abuses, the use of words such as *rishtedar*, *jija* and *sala* in a conflict situation in the rural areas invites immediate retaliatory behaviour.

Aspects of the marriage that had remained under cover so far could now hardly remain so. Cut to the quick, the young Gehlot men used this

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[19] Reportedly, in the previous election of the sarpanch of the gram panchayat, an understanding had been arrived at between the Dagars and one of the Gehlot factions. In that election, a non-Dagar man (son of a sister of a leading Dagar family who had settled in Jondhi) had become the sarpanch with the help of a faction of the Gehlots. The understanding was that if the Gehlots supported the 'Dagar *Bhanja*' (as he was known) in this election, the next sarpanch would be from among the Gehlots. The Dagars agreed not to put up their candidate, so that the Gehlot faction may have a chance to win. Interview, Ram Chander Yadav, State President, Democratic Youth Federation of India, Village Rampura, district Jhajjar, 28 February 2001.

pretext to settle scores politically. They exploited it to the full to trounce the politically powerful Dagar *got* in the village and make the rival faction of Gehlots fall in line with the others and settle the contentious status claims of the rival *got*s once and for all. Traditional tools were being used to bring the different factions of the Gehlots together both for modern political purposes, as well as in line with traditional status claims within the caste—in an attempt to dislodge the rival 'Other'. In this, a traditional panchayat, though ostensibly a non-political body, ended up making political gains.

In the aftermath of the election, loud announcements by some Gehlot men that this marriage was a 'grave insult' to their caste, *got*, village tradition and custom found immediate favour with the older generation of Gehlots in the village. Confident of the latter's support, as one of them put it, they 'decided to teach the Dagars a lesson they'll never forget'. The whole matter was portrayed in highly emotional tones by declaring the marriage as *vishwasghat* (traitorous), a *kalank* (slur) on the village, and *ochchi harkat* (low-level underhand activity) by the Dagars. Widely projected as inexcusable behaviour, young and old, men and women, all were united in condemning the marriage. Dissenting voices surfaced much later.

The issue of the wilful transgression of caste, family and village norms succeeded in mobilising the villagers across caste, class, *got*, gender and age divisions. For instance, the younger generation, students and other educated youngsters, echoing the older generation, openly stated that 'anyone wishing to stay in the village must respect its traditions and customs and not go against them'. They also accused the predominantly urban job-holder Dagars of having succumbed to 'urban values' and practices at odds with the cultural norms and customary practices of the village community. Posed in such terms, even the Dagars could not voice another opinion. They supported it fully. A Dagar youngster, for instance, pointed out that 'such breach of village tradition must be punished'. With the girl's father openly accepting his mistake, the case against the Dagars was clinched. The caste panchayat was quick to cash in.

The Gehlots isolated the concerned Dagar family and put an end to their interaction with anyone, within or outside the village. They stationed their strongmen to shut out sympathisers. The Dagars, clearly on the defensive, accepted the 'fairness' of the panchayat's charges and criticised the marriage as well. Ashish's father and grandfather openly accepted their mistake and admitted their responsibility.

Dissenting voices were raised only when the extreme verdict was pronounced. This was especially in view of the fact that the infant son of the couple had been rendered not only illegitimate, but one born of an incestuous union. Darshana reported that a few people who protested against this extreme step were silenced and threatened. These included not only the Dagars, but also some of the Gehlots. However, with the harshness and unreasonableness of the verdict, the Dagars' dissent turned more vocal. Pratap Singh, a former office-holder in the gram panchayat, summed it up by declaring it *anhoni* (unnatural).

However, no voice was raised against the right of the caste panchayat to dictate marriage alliances. There was unanimity in the village about this matter being punishable. Opinion differed only on the nature of the punishment. When approached, villagers observed that 'If the culprits are not punished for breaking the moral and cultural code of the village there will be no difference between sisters, daughters and *bahu*s of the village.' The caste panchayat's hold on ruralites was complete in this respect. The village surpanch, Pushpa Gehlot, summed up the popular sentiment by observing that: 'caste panchayats are empowered customarily to deliver judgements on various social issues. These must be honoured. In this alone lies the unity and prestige of the village generally and that of the *biradari* specially'.

Indeed, the role and attitude of the elected sarpanch is important to give legitimacy to matters such as these, which may not stand scrutiny under the law. The sarpanch, as the elected head of the gram panchayat, instituted by the government, has a lot of power and political leverage to intervene in matters which go against the law of the land and the constitutional rights of individuals. But the sarpanchs are not known to act against the dictates of the traditional panchayats. The traditional panchayats represent the *vox populi*, and to go against them would be electorally suicidal. It is a fact that panchayati raj is increasingly becoming a training ground for leadership at higher levels, and it is widely felt that the state leadership in Haryana may emerge from these institutions (Bathla 1994: 178).Therefore, instead of distancing themselves from the decisions of the traditional panchayats, the elected gram panchayat members and the sarpanch seek to emerge as supporters of the decisions of these panchayats. Indeed, in many cases the sarpanch leads from the front. As noted above, this was done by Pushpa Gehlot and her husband, the de facto sarpanch of village Jondhi. Such unqualified support from important personages associated with the state and the government works to stem any criticism and weaken any resistance that may arise.

This is not to say, however, that the sarpanch or the other members of the gram panchayat do not share the opinions of the traditional panchayats on social matters. They do. When approached, one of the gram panchayat members, endorsing the stand taken by the caste panchayat, maintained: 'We cannot allow the whims of individuals to divide our society.' Culturally, rural north India prioritises the collective interest over and above individual interests. The members of a family are expected, as a matter of course, to place the interests of the group above their personal desires.[20] According to this reasoning, the request of the Dagar couple for rehabilitation in the village was unjustified. It is also clear that in matters such as these, the caste panchayat enjoys even wider and higher political support than the gram panchayat. For example, the Haryana Chief Minister O.P. Chautala, who visited Jondhi in the wake of this trouble, firmly maintained that 'whatever the panchayat (caste) decides is right'.[21]

IV
Revision of decision: Shifting concepts

Why did the caste panchayat inflict such an extreme and unrealistic punishment on the couple? Having inflicted it, why did it retract, even though partially? This revision is not peculiar to the Jondhi case. While the traditional panchayats not infrequently revise their decisions due to social as well as political pressures,[22] in the case of village Jondhi the answer to this revision lies in the concept of honour, and what the public holds as honourable and esteemed. Neither the concept of public honour nor the perception of this honour is static or fixed. It is fluid, and differs from time to time and from situation to situation. One concept of honour can indeed even cancel out or over-ride another concept of honour. When the caste panchayat of Jondhi took an extreme step, there were large-scale undercurrents of hostility and competition between the two *got*s of Jats. These feelings were exacerbated by the recalcitrance shown by the Dagar couple to attend the panchayat meetings even when specially instructed to do so. This happened repeatedly. A gesture of self-protection

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[20] This sentiment has been borne out by a number of sociological studies, for instance, Desai (1964), Madan (1989) and Shah (1974).

[21] Jagmati Sangwan, interview, Rohtak, 28 February 2001.

[22] Madsen, for example, argues that in the case of western Uttar Pradesh, the caste panchayat, after restraining the Malik *got* from giving brides to the Balyan *got* of Jats, lifted it subsequently. Jats belonging to these two *got*s, who had already planned weddings of their wards, exercised the pressure (1991: 351–65).

born out of the fear of reprisals on the part of the Dagars was perceived as yet another example of their arrogance and assumption of superiority, as wilful defiance and as a challenge to the panchayat's honour and authority.

The Dagars' alleged defiance of the caste panchayat had shifted the onus from the village to the panchayat. Only the most severe and exemplary punishment could restore the honour of the panchayat. The extreme decision which followed certainly helped establish the awesome power of the caste panchayat and village elders. But it also, paradoxically, eroded its honour and public prestige. The absence of most of the Dagars turned the panchayat into an exclusive and one-sided body, detracting substantially from its popularly projected democratic, united and representative face. The one-sidedness of the caste panchayat's decision was a serious charge on the honour and fair name of the panchayat and its tradition of honourable decision-making.

The traditional panchayat, ideally perceived as *parmeshwar* (godly) and *panch* as the five gods,[23] is generally known to work on the principle of balancing antagonistic factions and effecting a compromise. The power of the panchayat lies in its fairness, its ability to carry the popular opinion of the village in its decision-making, and the social acceptance of its decisions.[24] This face of the Jondhi caste panchayat was severely undermined and its decision was neither considered fair nor accepted by the Dagars nor, reportedly, by some Gehlots who were friends of the Dagars. Consequently, a revision was very much on the cards. Again, since non-compliance with the decision of the panchayat also meant a failure of the panchayat to implement its own decision, this challenged the very legitimacy of the caste panchayat.

Criticism began to mount. The caste panchayat was said to have gone berserk. It was suggested that it was attempting 'unnatural' things, as one school teacher of Jondhi put it. What perhaps remained unvoiced was the status of the child. The scathing attack on the panchayat's decision made by Darshana in her interviews with the press,[25] implying that there

[23] Many ruralites, especially members of lower-caste groups, the educated and the politically oriented, challenge this view of the *panch*es. They believe them to be biased in favour of individuals, factions and even political parties.

[24] Judgement in a panchayat is not reached unless there is unanimity or near unanimity among the presiding leaders. There is little point in a decision unless it can be enforced. F.G. Bailey has pointed out that councils in any society whose members have to implement their own decisions are impelled to search for such consensus. See Bailey (1965).

[25] *Dainik Jagran*, 22 August 2000, pp. 1, 13; 23 August 2000, pp. 1, 5; 24 August 2000, p. 13; 26 August 2000, pp. 1, 9.

was greater authority in the law of the land, was devastating to the panchayat (as one member pointed out on condition of anonymity). The media, in reporting the case, had initially appeared awe-struck by the panchayat's might and its undisputed authority to dictate to its people, but changed its tenor in two of its later editorials, pointing out the illegality of the extra-judicial authority exercised by the panchayat.[26] For instance, *Dainik Jagran*, one of the most widely-read papers in the whole of northern India, criticised the panchayat's decision, declaring it contrary to the law of the land and against human and moral rights. Assuming highly censorious tones, the two editorials condemned it as '*kabilon ka kanoon*' (literally, 'tribal law', but more appropriately 'barbaric law'). There was, however, no questioning of the values involved. I was informed that the local correspondent of *Dainik Jagran* stationed in Jhajjar, who was responsible for filing reports on village Jondhi, was *gheraoed* by some of the caste panchayat members who complained of his adverse reports. This pressure resulted in his being shifted from Jhajjar, putting an abrupt end to the so-called adverse reporting. By then other social institutions like the Meham *chaubisi*, a *sarv-khap* panchayat (all-clan council) of twenty-four villages, also moved in on this matter. They were also highly critical of the extreme pronouncement of the Jondhi caste panchayat. The panchayat's move to uphold the honour of the village and prestige of the community had obviously backfired.

The public, which had hitherto presented a unanimous face, soon split, cutting across class, caste, gender and age divides. A section of villagers refused to recognise the extreme verdict as an 'honourable' settlement flowing from the decision of a 'just and fair' panchayat. The summoning of a *khap* panchayat was on the cards. In this connection, the Gehlots allege that the Dagars requisitioned the *khap* panchayat. This was contested by Ashish and others, who insisted that the *khap* panchayat was called by the Gehlots (who felt that the caste panchayat of Jondhi had gone too far), and not by the Dagars. Whatever the truth, many of the Gehlots were as involved in the revision of the verdict as were the Dagars. The reported initial reluctance of some of the Gehlots of Jondhi village to participate in the *khap* panchayat was soon overcome. In this, Gehlots from other villages played no small a part. Significantly, the verdict of the *khap* panchayat, leading as noted to a partial reversal and a partial reiteration of the earlier verdict, nipped in the bud the dissent that was

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[26] *Dainik Jagran*, 19 August 2000, p. 6; 24 August 2000, pp. 1, 8; 26 August 2000, pp. 1, 9.

unmistakably emerging and threatening to take wider social dimensions. It also restored, though belatedly, the prestige and honour of the caste panchayat. Paying heed to the internal critique which had emerged restored the panchayat's image of impartiality and balance as the upholder of traditional moral values and culture. The media applauded the *samjhadari* (wisdom) of the *panch* and congratulated them for revising their earlier decision.

Yet all the criticism did not lead to the rehabilitation of the couple in the village. Darshana and Ashish's request to be allowed to come back to the village was a cultural claim in that they were challenging the splitting of their family. The caste panchayat was dictatorially threatening the existence of a family by severing family bonds and compelling them to live apart. It is a well-known fact that, in Haryana, many of the educated or those who work in service occupations or in the army prefer to settle in their respective villages and pursue parental occupations after retirement. The attachment of the landowning caste groups to land cannot be underestimated, so the upholding of certain cultural norms (of kinship and territorial exogamy) by the panchayat was at the expense of other cultural norms (family unity).

Within a year of this decision, Ashish's father passed away, making this separation permanent. Ashish visited his village with police escort. The cremation was boycotted by most of the villagers on the grounds that '*hamen koi matlab na sai*' (it does not concern us). The caste panchayat members maintained: 'It is the administration which has allowed Ashish. His coming here is against the wishes of the village.' The gram panchayat sarpanch refused to attend the ceremony saying that they could not go against the wishes of the village. Abstaining from the cremation ceremony of a caste member being held in the village is unprecedented in rural north India, and a breach of this time-honoured cultural practice indicates the extent of prejudice against such marriages. The fear of penalisation decreed by the caste panchayat may certainly have acted as a deterrent, and photographs were taken as evidence of attendance in case the panchayat wished to take stern action against them in the future.

The Dagar community, despite offering initial support to Ashish, backed out after their own position in the village became secure. Had Ashish's family been economically sounder and socially more prestigious, his case probably would not have gone unrecognised and unsupported by the otherwise powerful Dagar community, for there are instances where socially and economically influential families have breached the *got* restrictions successfully. The case of Jagmati Sangwan and Inderjeet

Ahlawat whose marriage (1982) was opposed on the grounds of breaching the *bhaichara* norm of the village was a case in point. A few families of Sangwan *got* lived in the otherwise Ahlawat-dominated village of Bhembheda, district Jhajjar, who objected to this marriage. Inderjeet's family was able to ignore them because of the economic strength and the social standing and influence it commanded in their own *got* and the village. The two *got*s, Ahlawat and Sangwan, are dominant and powerful *got*s in different regions of Haryana. In Bhembheda, however, the Sangwan households are fewer and wield far less influence. The marriage reiterated the status hierarchy existing in the village and upset the concept of equality of the village *bhaichara*. Yet, the charge of 'incest' raised in the case of Jondhi was not raised in this village. The Sangwans' attempts to call the caste panchayat were not successful. Inderjeet's father openly challenged the move. Consequently, no move could be initiated against this breach. According to Jagmati, if the social and economic status of the family is not sound, then the caste panchayat succeeds in its dictates. Influential families get away with breaking the 'traditionally sanctioned norms' which they uphold for others, or appropriate different norms, as it suits them.

To return to Ashish's case, I was told that, excepting his grandfather, Ashish's family was held in contempt due to his father's alcoholism and his gross misbehaviour after his drinking bouts. It was hinted to Ashish by his *biradari-wala*s that, if he so liked, he could sell off his house and property to the other Dagars. Ashish chose to ignore these hints. Since then he has taken up a private job as a driver in Mahendergarh, while his wife and child are staying with his relatives in a different village. Until now (2000) the caste panchayat has not changed its decision, maintaining that the gravity of the charge would not allow them to make any concession. The social boycott of Ashish's family also remains in force for a period of two years.

V
Selective application:
Bhaichara *and the category of incest*

In arriving at its decision, the caste panchayat of village Jondhi had treated the concept of *bhaichara* and the breach of the incest taboo by the couple as the central issue. As noted above, incest in rural areas is a very wide category which embraces all inhabitants of a village, all *got* represented in the village who may be located anywhere, as well as the inhabitants of

those villages which share a boundary with it, by creating fictive brother–sister relationships between them. Any breach in this is considered a serious transgression and dealt with summarily. Yet experience shows that the charge of incest is not applied uniformly to all caste groups in the village. In case one of the parties is of a different caste, the issue is altogether different. It becomes a caste issue and not one of incest.[27] Moreover, it is a well-known fact that most love affairs are within the village itself, clearly indicating that fictive relationships are not really accepted. Most of such alliances result in elopements. However, it is also true that, although highly idealised, cross-caste ties in a village expressed through fictive kinship are valued by both men and women, but they become operative only after the marriage of a girl and especially in her conjugal home. The fictive bond establishes for both of them the desired support structure and solidarity, cutting across caste, class and status ties.[28] Inside the village, with its emphasis upon segregation of the sexes, communication between fictive brothers and sisters hardly exists. It is frowned upon and looked at with suspicion—underlining the imposed and artificial nature of this relationship, which all concerned recognise. Yet as an ideal it works and is upheld by all caste groups as the 'village norm' which must not be broken. Consequently, transgression of this norm is considered incest.

On the other hand, incest *within* the family is generally buried under the carpet. The concept of incest is not extended to family relationships involving unequal power relations between senior males and junior females or any other prohibited category of people. This counterposes fictitious incest *versus* real incest. Activists involved in the women's movement in Rohtak, based upon their experiences in the villages of Haryana, informed me that incest has assumed truly frightening proportions. The daughters and sisters are, however, afraid to voice it as it would reflect on the 'honour' of their families, for which they feel responsible. Police officers similarly testify to widespread incest in families.

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[27] This understanding is based upon my wider study dealing with inter-caste marriages in Haryana, currently under preparation.

[28] Helen Lambert (1996) in her study of Rajasthan argues that the fictional relationships established by women with persons from their natal village offer them a support structure in their conjugal home. These cross-caste ties are of strategic political and economic importance even for men when visiting other villages where their married sisters reside. Other men establish fictional kinship ties of solidarity stretching across caste, class and status through their women. For a similar reading, see Minturn (1993: 59–63).

According to them these cases come to light only when they result in suicides or murders.[29] Some of these cases involve either the *dewar* (younger brother-in-law) or the *jeth* (elder brother-in-law), and may not strictly fall in the category of 'incest', because the prevalent practice of levirate accepts them as sexual partners of a woman.[30] In other instances, the woman may approach the caste panchayat. The few cases that are brought to the notice of the panchayat, however, are not dealt with in any satisfactory manner.

A recent example from village Hathanganna in Gurgaon district is a case in point. The caste panchayat, summoned twice in a case where a woman accused her father-in-law of attempting rape, did precious little. On the first occasion the panchayat summoned the father-in-law, gave him a strict warning and advised the couple to ignore the instance and settle it among themselves. The second time, when the father-in-law repeated his offence, the panchayat expressed its inability to do anything and advised the woman to take recourse to the law, but when the woman tried to register an FIR at the police station, the police refused to do so. In matters such as these, the bonds of community or ideology shared by the police and the traditional panchayat, and not the law of the land, determine the action or inaction of the law-enforcing agencies. The woman then moved the court at Firozpur Jhirka. It was here that the judge instructed that a criminal case be instituted against the father-in-law.

The caste panchayats are clearly uncomfortable and unwilling to deal with the question of incest within the family, especially when it concerns their own caste members. This may not necessarily be the case while dealing with other caste groups, especially the lower castes. When it comes to other so-called inferior caste members, the upper-caste members take a high moral stand and impose very stringent sanctions.[31]

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[29] In January 1998, for example, in village Ichhapuri, district Gurgaon, a woman killed her *jeth* for his incestuous designs on her. *Dainik Jagran*, 7 January 1998, p. 4.

[30] In some instances, even the father-in-law was known to have taken his widowed daughter-in-law as his wife in the colonial period. For details, see Chowdhry (1995).

[31] In a 1994 case from village Bhiwadi, the all-caste panchayat, dominated by the dominant Ahirs of the village, blackened the faces of a woman and her father-in-law and paraded them naked in the village for allegedly indulging in incest. Reportedly, the lower-caste members of the victims' community sided with the Ahirs in inflicting this punishment. A few villagers who protested were hounded out. The police did not even turn up. The matter was later hushed up under directions from politicians. Case reported in *Dainik Jagran*, 19 April 1994, pp. 1, 11.

The iron fist shown in the Jondhi case is totally missing in certain cases and not in others, as cited above. What is it that creates different categories of incest? Why is it that the concept of honour is said to have been abused in one case but not in the other? The analysis suggests that caste, class and status considerations articulate with patriarchal concerns to determine the action or inaction of the caste panchayat and other community members. Also involved is the concept of honour in its dual capacity—private and public. Questions of public honour can be embraced and turned into a *cause célèbre* by the village, but not issues of private honour. The latter are best tackled privately and under cover, even though they fall squarely in the category of incest as generally recognised.

The use of incest by the caste panchayat, in its wider meaning, was challenged by Ashish. Talking about it to the correspondent of *Dainik Jagran,* Ashish reportedly suggested a *quid pro quo* situation in which a Gehlot man could marry a Dagar girl and call it quits.[32] Ashish also pointed out that there were twelve Jat *got* in Jondhi and if all of them were excluded for marriage purposes, it would be extremely difficult and cumbersome to select mates. This, incidentally, is an oft-cited, though off-the-record and confidential opinion on the prevalent norm of *got* exogamy, at least among some of the male youngsters of Haryana. Ashish's marriage, notwithstanding his *got* status in relation to Darshana, and his proposal of a *quid pro quo*, suggest that not only are the set social hierarchies being challenged, but new identities related to a man's work and occupation, and importantly his status outside the village, are being asserted.

Significantly, Ashish's proposal indicates that he did not consider the marriage as incestuous transgression and, therefore, immoral, but a matter of status between wife-givers and wife-takers. In other words, the status reversal brought by his marriage could be set right by a Gehlot marrying a Dagar girl. Paradoxically, in suggesting this, although he was not claiming a higher status for the Gehlots, he was certainly claiming one in which the bride's and groom's families are of equal status. Such a status was firmly denied to the Dagars by the Gehlots. Although Ashish was to deny having ever made such a proposal, the proposal itself had validity, both theoretically and ideally. Indeed, in Haryana a Jat may marry his daughter into the same clan from which he has received a

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[32] Ashish denied this when I asked him about his reported statement in the newspaper. The reporting correspondent, however, stands by it.

bride for his son (Sharma 1973: 81–103). Although this does not disprove clan hypergamy *per se*, it certainly shows a disregard for the immediate hierarchy of wife-givers/takers.[33] Evidence suggests that local patterns of clan hypergamy do not necessarily exist at the regional level. In village Jondhi such an exchange would have been contrary to the traditionally perceived dominant and subordinate positions occupied by the two *got*s of Jats, the Gehlots and the Dagars.

The Jondhi case offers a somewhat complex reading. The opposition to the marriage emanated from the concept of village exogamy, the operation of incest taboos, and the principle of hypergamy, by which a girl of a lower clan can marry a man of a higher clan, but not the other way round. While theoretically all Jat clans or *got*s are considered to be equal, in reality several factors intervene to determine their social ranking in particular areas, especially in view of the changed socio-economic and political position of different *got* groups.[34] The above cited cases also show the status of different clans to be in flux, with different groups either claiming a higher or equal status or attempting to maintain their status against challenges and erosions effected by other clan groups within the caste fold. As marriage alliances are a significant means to establish one's status in society they assume great importance and demand sharper vigilance. The contradictory reactions of certain groups to the demands of caste status reveal the contemporary multi-directional pulls within a caste which account for confrontation and violence in relation to contested marriage alliances.

VI
Custom versus *law: Limited application*

Although the collective decision taken by the caste panchayat is presented as a united and unanimous voice, there is dissent and challenge on this front. This may not arise or be allowed to arise immediately, but may force the panchayat's collective decision to be reviewed or revised, for the united voice and front of the panchayat cannot be allowed to crumble. Besides, there is always the potential danger that dissenters may move the court. Indeed, courts are being increasingly used to settle questions

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[33] See for instance the system of reciprocal marriage or exchange marriage adopted by the rural Kashmiri Pandits, as noted by Madan (1989: 101–2).

[34] The notion of 'Rajputisation' may be useful for understanding such status claims of upwardly-mobile groups within a caste. See Parry (1979: 195–231).

of material interests but internal disputes, especially such as these, continue to be handled by caste-men, and are thus effectively delinked from the state and its law and order apparatus. Recourse to the court over 'personal' issues internal to the caste is not generally approved (Chowdhry 2004: 55–84), and remains a last resort. For ruralites, the financially draining courts, based upon different principles, are hardly equipped to resolve or bring about a compromise to the 'status claims' which are intrinsic to the confrontations and disputes occurring within the same caste group on questions of marriage.[35] In case recourse to law is taken, it is done only under grave social pressure and incurs a great deal of community displeasure. Moreover, in cases regarding contentious marriages, the state agencies like the police and the local administration, as noted above, are well known to throw in their lot on the side of traditional authority. The court, on the other hand, can be moved only after the community has taken an unconstitutional or illegal decision or step. Not many people exercise the option of going to court, but some do.

One such case occurred in mid-2000 in village Daddhi Banna of district Bhiwani. It concerned the alleged breach of a marriage prohibition relating to an extended principle of territorial exogamy. In 1999 Satbir, of the Pilania *got*, had his two sons Sanjiv and Rajkumar married into a Sangwan *got* family of village Kubja Nagar. Village Daddhi Banna falls in the *chalisia* (a circle of forty villages) of the Sangwans, which means that all these villages follow the tradition and customs of the dominant *got* of Sangwans, even though the latter are not represented in this village. Daddhi Banna is dominated by the Pilania and Bajado *got* members. Yet, traditionally all the Jat *got*s in this circle of villages are committed to observing ties of *bhaichara* with the Sangwans. This made the marriages incestuous. A Sangwan *got*-panchayat declared the marriages invalid and socially boycotted all the Pilania *got* families of village Daddhi Banna. This was later revised and only Satbir's family was expelled from the village. Satbir moved the court. The court gave a stay order to the effect that he could not be expelled from the village. Yet the *got*-panchayat's diktat regarding Satbir's social boycott persisted and was observed in the village. The panchayat had also imposed a fine of Rs 100 in the first instance on anyone disobeying their order. Anyone defying the order a second time was to be socially boycotted. These penalties continued despite the court intervention.

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[35] For the villagers' perspective on legal pluralities, see Cohn (1990: 575–631).

In an earlier case of 1998, Surinder of village Dhatta, a Jaglan by *got*, had his daughter engaged to a Jat boy of Saharan *got* in village Khaded. The Jaglans of his village raised objections to this alliance by pointing out that there were a few families of Jaglan *got* in village Khaded and traditionally this *got* could not be entertained for marriage. A *got*-panchayat of the Jaglans instructed him to terminate this engagement, failing which they ordered a social boycott of his family. Surinder moved the court and amidst tight police security had his daughter married off. When interviewed, Surinder accused his fellow Jaglans of being envious of him. He declared himself a 'victim' of factionalism within his *got*. He also pointed out that several Jaglan girls, including his niece, had already been married in village Khaded and no one had raised any objection. His action reportedly earned him great ill will and the villagers showed this in their behaviour towards him. He and his family remain socially ostracised.

Both the cases show the aggrieved party taking recourse to the law in order to challenge the panchayat's decision. In the case of village Dhatta, the marriage did take place with police intervention. It was the same in village Daddhi Banna, where legal protection overruled the panchayat's orders to evict Satbir's family. But in neither case could the court intervene to set aside the social boycott of the families. This is a reality that is well known to the ruralites. Ashish of village Jondhi, for example, when advised to take recourse to the law to prevent his expulsion from the village, had very firmly declined to take such a step, asking how long the law could protect him against the 'joint might' of the village. How many times, he asked, could he take the help of the police to visit his own village when the caste panchayat of the village had decreed to the contrary?

Taking recourse to the law is no solution in cases such as these. Also, any attempt to reverse the panchayat's decision may well lead to permanent antagonism, revenge and violent retribution.[36] I was told of a case in which the lawyer of the man who sought to challenge the caste panchayat's decision was severely beaten up. This was apparently to issue a warning to all lawyers who may venture to help people take recourse to the law against the panchayat's verdict. Nonetheless, it may be noted that the villagers utilise indigenous and official law, the panchayat and the court, in accordance with their own calculations of propriety and advantage.

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[36] In this connection see an interesting case of 1927 analysed by Saurabh Dube (1996: 423–44).

On the one hand, an approach to the court of law or its enforcing agency, the police, as an alternative structure for conflict resolution, certainly leads to a dramatic loss of the caste panchayat's prestige as well as its delegitimation. It is a public demonstration of the refusal to obey its dictates. On the other hand, going to court means a further transgression of the norms of community, compounding the earlier transgression. It is construed as an even greater challenge to the panchayat's decision, leading to a further hardening of its posture. The traditional leadership considers the judiciary, run by people who have no knowledge of rural culture and customary practices, to be working against the caste and community's norms. Anyone taking recourse to it is similarly condemned and stereotyped as 'westernised', 'urbanised' and 'modernised', and out of touch with rural realities. The state and its laws are blamed for all marriages that go against traditional norms and customary practices.[37] However, even while eroding the moral authority of the caste panchayat, the legal authority itself stands undermined insofar as the state agencies confirm and validate the actions of this collective body.

The one question which still needs to be answered is: why are the parents of young girls and boys breaching what are claimed to be the village and caste traditions? First, one should be clear that such breaches are not new; they have taken place even in the past. The post-colonial political economy suggests an increase, but it is difficult to confirm this with any degree of accuracy or certainty. The general impression at the local level also suggests an increase. In this connection it is worth remembering that all the cases cited above are not so-called 'love matches', which may raise the ire of the caste and communities. These are *arranged* matches, brought about by the respective individual and extended families and attended by members of their community. It is because of this factor that the individuals concerned as well as their immediate and extended families come under grave pressure from the panchayat.

The answer to this phenomenon of breaches lies in understanding Haryanavi society. Customary regulations governing marriages have had the effect of creating a very tight market for prospective brides and grooms. With the increase in population, the prohibited categories of

[37] This includes not only the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, but also the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, which for the first time enabled the daughter, sister, widow and mother to inherit land with full proprietary rights to its disposal. Widely condemned in Haryana as *kala kanoon* (black acts), the urban makers of these Acts were accused of not understanding rural problems.

matches have tended to increase. For example, inter-village and regional migrations have resulted in a severe drop in the number of very small villages and a corresponding increase in that of large and very large villages.[38] This has had the effect of multiplying the number of *got*s represented in different villages. An extension of the principle of village exogamy means that all the *got* represented in a village cannot be entertained for marriage. This leaves the marriage market much restricted. The extension of the concept of *bhaichara* also means that all the neighbouring villages have to be similarly excluded.

The growing popular sentiment against *got* prohibitions can be evidenced in the readers' letters to the regional newspapers. For example, one of the letters pointed out the difficulties faced by the inhabitants of village Dhannana of district Bhiwani.[39] This village, he maintained, was surrounded by several villages like Badesara, Seesar, Talu, Mandanna, Jatai, Mitathal, Ghuskani, Pur, Siwada and Munddaal. All these lie in and around 3–6 km distance and some are indeed derived from the other. All these have to be excluded by the inhabitants of village Dhannana for purposes of marriage. Opinion is divided, though those who support the tradition are noticeably in the majority.

Wide-scale prohibitions traditionally imposed on marriages are greatly compounded in a social situation characterised by multiple problems— the extremely unfavourable sex-ratio, the presence of a large number of unmarried men, and the dowry economy of Haryana. All these are interconnected. The widespread foeticide practised in this region in combination with suspected female infanticide through neglect and other causes[40] has led to an adverse ratio of only 865 females to 1,000 males in 1991.[41] In a situation where status hypergamous marriages are the norm, there is a surplus of brides at the top but a pronounced deficit at the bottom. Consequently, unemployed lower-class males find it difficult to get married, causing a great deal of anxiety. This situation is compounded by the very large number of unemployed men in Haryana. The unemployment figures have more than doubled in less than twenty years from

[38] For details of changes in Haryana village size and its population, see Government of Haryana (2001: 48–49).

[39] *Dainik Tribune*, 3 September 2000, pp. 1, 9.

[40] For details see Chowdhry (1994: 14–15, 54–57, 238).

[41] In 1991, this ratio was the second lowest in the whole of India. It stood next to that of Arunachal Pradesh which had a ratio of 859 females to 1,000 males. Reportedly, this ratio has gone down even more in the subsequent ten years (Government of Haryana 2001: 74).

359,255 in 1980–81 to 811,359 in the year 1999—a staggering rise of 125 per cent (Government of Haryana 2001: 530–31), whereas between 1981 and 1991 the population increase in Haryana was 27.40 per cent (ibid.: 40). In the marriage market, it is the employed and not the unemployed youth who is a 'suitable boy'. The limited number of 'suitable boys' means a competition to net them in marriage. This competition creates a surplus of girls in this stratum, feeding into the dowry economy. This market-like situation with a 'suitable boy' out for the highest bidder may well lead the families of both the girl and the boy to ignore the traditional *got* prohibitions imposed on marriages. At this juncture individual and family status concerns override the collective concerns of the community. Such concerns leave the unemployed to either settle for lesser matches or not get married at all. Although it is difficult to give figures of the overlap between the unmarried and unemployed status of males, in the opinion of ruralites there exists a very real connection. A substantial number of the unemployed are to be found among those who are unmarried. In the 1991 Census, 36.24 per cent of men in the category of 15–44 years of age (the so-called reproductive or marriageable age) are shown to be unmarried.[42] In districts like Rohtak, the percentage of unmarried males between the ages of 15–44 is as high as 44 per cent.[43]

Clearly, the marriage restrictions are extremely hard on both sides—for the boys as well as for the girls. The defiance of the *got* norms, both at the individual and the family levels, corroborates this. The attempt by the family members is to open out the marriage market. There is also evidence to suggest that some members of the older generation are apprised of this social situation. That is the reason why, from time to time, caste panchayats have initiated certain alleviating measures to correct the situation by relaxing the prohibitions on marriage between certain *got*s. For example, the Gulia and Kadyan *got*s were deemed to have originated from two brothers, and marriage relations between them were prohibited. This was relaxed even under British rule. Similarly, marriages between Kadyan and Jakhad *got*s were also prohibited, and it was only in 1946–47, that four *khap*s—Gulias, Kadyans, Sangwans and Jakhad—met and took an historic decision to allow marriage relations between them (the Kadyan and Jakhad *got*s).

[42] A total of 1,438,997 males in the age group of 15–44 years out of a population of 3,970,390 males are unmarried. See *Census of Haryana,* 1991, socio-cultural tables, series 8, prt. IV-A, Chandigarh, 1994, p. 22.

[43] In Rohtak, out of a total male population of 977,075 between the age group of 15–44, 547,922 were unmarried (Government of Haryana 2001: 22–23).

More recently, in April 1995 at village Ismailpur, a *sarv-khap* pan-chayat of the Chhahal and Mor *got* declared that members of these two *got*s could intermarry. The occasion was provided by the contentious marriage of a Chhahal *got* girl of village Narad to a Mor *got* boy in vil-lage Ismailpur. The prohibition on intermarriage between these two *got*s had apparently been instituted so long back that no one even remembered its origin. A form of punishment imposed upon them is the common ex-planation of such prohibitions. However, what is clear is that the ban on marriages is considered not merely a breach of *bhaichara*, but also a 'punishment'. The conflation of punishment with *bhaichara* in popular perception is itself revealing.

In May 1995 such a prohibition was also lifted for the Mor and Singhmar *got*s, though marriages between them had been taking place. The decision of the *sarv-khap* panchayat was a ratification and formal-isation of the already changing, and indeed changed, position. Such changes require the support of *got*s other than the ones directly involved. For example, in the historic *sarv*-panchayat of April and May 1995, *got*s present, other than Mor, Chhahal and Singhmar, were Goyat, Nain and Sheyokand. The wider the participation of persons of different *got* in the panchayat, the wider the acceptance of the changes affected in the traditional patterns of marriage relations.

VII
Panchayat's intervention: Success and challenge

Such emendations, however, are few and far between. By and large, the traditional panchayat asserts itself to the detriment of the 'erring' individuals and families. This intervention is also an assertion of the united power and domination of upper-caste, senior male members over younger men and women. It represents a direct attempt at retention of power by the caste leadership, which is fast being eroded and challenged by aspirants from different socio-economic strata as well as by the younger generation. In post-colonial India, the traditional power base stands considerably eroded with the introduction of different state structures such as the elected statutory panchayat (since 1950) and an election mechanism based upon equal citizenship and adult franchise. The statutory panchayat, which has become the focus of political life of the village, has thrown up new socially mixed groups, in many cases drawing substantial representation from the lower social strata. In the changing scenario, the traditional leadership of village bigwigs derived

from the ranks of those born to power and prestige is being pushed to the margins of the power structure.[44]

This diminishing power is sought to be resurrected through the traditional panchayat which uses social problems, specially cases relating to questions of marriage, for legitimation of its authority. In this a large collection of people come together temporarily and rather promiscuously for a certain purpose. What follows is claimed to be an open, fair and democratic decision in respect to a specific problem facing the community. A close observation of the proceedings suggests the contrary. On many occasions, one of the concerned parties is not even present or is too thinly represented. Women are not even allowed to enter the panchayat premises although, more often than not, the decision involves them in an important way. The traditional norm regarding their attendance was certainly broken in the case of village Jondhi. This breach has meant that the applicability of this norm lies in the hands of the panchayat, who may or may not apply it, or may apply it selectively, if not whimsically. The leadership of such an assembly closely monitors the discussion. Dissent is either ignored, kept dormant, or not allowed to surface in any effective manner.

Youth, usually the affected party, are not allowed to voice their opinion, especially when any other older male member of the family is present. They are reprimanded, 'Why do you speak when your father/elders are present?' In rural north India, age and experience are still respected, though change, howsoever slow, now favours the youth. The decision of such a body, with the older generation monopolising and directing its course, is projected and implemented as a unanimous decision, democratically arrived at. It is claimed that '*sab ka mat yo hi sai*' (all have the same opinion), and dissenters, as pointed out, are dismissed as of 'no importance'.

For arriving at a decision, the traditional panchayat mobilises a large number of people on the basis of family, kin, *got*, caste, community and village, including persons from outside the local area. By bringing in a wider *biradari* from outside the village, links which make the panchayat look more powerful are activated. Issues such as the breaking of social taboos, customs, rituals and hierarchy are used as mobilising strategies. These highly emotive issues succeed in uniting people and closing ranks

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[44] Many from this social group had indeed been elected to the newly-constituted official panchayats in the aftermath of independence. However, over the years they have had to make way; or as an ex-sarpanch of village Mitrao, district Gurgaon, insisted, they 'willingly made way' for the younger generation of men.

and cleavages in rural society. In this regard, the concept of village honour, based upon idealised norms and village *aika*, produces a powerful plank.

Significantly, the utopian principle of village unity stands acknowledgedly fragmented in post-colonial India. The pressures exercised by the unprecedented expansion of participation through adult franchise, competitive elections and state intervention have sharpened caste and status cleavages on the one hand, and polarised villages into fluid cross-caste factions on the other. The politicisation of village India is a fact. Existing factionalism and litigation in the villages feed into unstable political conditions, fragmenting it even more. Growing conflict over caste, community and land has become an important aspect of rural politics in India. This fragmentation has meant that no particular group has been or can be in a position to speak for the whole village or for the entire membership of a particular caste community. Yet the intervention of the traditional panchayat in preserving certain values of village life—its culture, customary practices—has the effect of closing ranks, imposing a temporary *aika* through a fragile cohesiveness on what has been and continues to be a highly fragmented village life. The political labels are obliterated to impart a non-partisan apolitical look to the *panch*es.

In matters other than those related to village culture and tradition, the panchayat may or may not be effective, for example, in the frequent conflicts relating to land use or to other material resources. In such cases, the traditional panchayat's decisions are often challenged because there is a clear division or factionalism in the village. As the economic stakes are high, the aggrieved party, egged on by others, is quick to move the court. But in cases involving village honour, culture and tradition and its breach by individuals, a united front is maintained. All dissidence is quelled by the show of unity achieved by threatening the isolation of the dissident/s, or through the use of force, if necessary. The dominant caste groups, though severely divided into factions and interest groups, throw their might behind the traditional panchayat. In cases such as these, they cannot afford to split their own ranks or caste. A show of solidarity serves them in a two-fold way. It helps them to present a united caste-*biradari* front, despite political and party differences. Such a front comes in handy in demanding political and economic concessions from the state. Second, it helps them in establishing their might in the village against other caste groups, specially the lower castes, reaffirming the existing hierarchy and caste/community domination. In cases where violence is resorted to in order to implement the panchayat's decision, an even more effective weapon is placed in their hands. The desire to enforce their domination

and prove their strength is an interest that is amply shared by other members of dominant caste groups.

Yet, despite the tradition of consensus, dissenting voices and challenges to collective decision-making do exist. These may not arise (or may not be allowed to rise) immediately, but may become a source of embarrassment, as in the case of village Jondhi. These may force the panchayat's collective decision to be revised and reviewed. Indeed, the cases cited above indicate that decisions may be reviewed, though with limited effect. Yet, the very existence of an alternative structure, power and authority has created uncertainties among traditional wielders of power. The aggrieved and penalised party can approach the court, whose decision stands over and above that of the panchayat. Although the law works on principles contrary to those of the traditional panchayat, it may have only limited success in a society based upon various hierarchies. Despite challenges, the traditional panchayat's activities may remain a successful intervention to maintain a status quo that the state has attempted to change, at least legally. In other words, the extra-judicial power and activity of the traditional panchayat have severe implications for the state: the state stands devalued, unable to protect its citizens or implement its own laws. Ironically, in cases such as these, the danger to Indian democracy stems from the grassroot level.

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'We (Yadavs) are a caste of politicians': Caste and modern politics in a north Indian town

Lucia Michelutti

This article is an ethnographic exploration of the inter-locking relationships between politics, popular democracy, religion and caste/community formation in a north Indian town. This investigation is carried out through an analysis of the culture of political participation of a community of Yadavs in Mathura town, western Uttar Pradesh. The Yadavs were traditionally a low- to middle-ranking cluster of pastoral-peasant castes that have become a significant political force in Uttar Pradesh (and other northern states like Bihar) in the last thirty years. The article demonstrates how the successful formation of a Yadav community, and the political activism of its members in Mathura, are partly linked to their descent view of caste, folk theories of religious descent, factionalism, and finally to their cultural understanding of 'the past' and 'the political'. It is concluded that Yadav socio-religious organisation directly and indirectly helped the Yadav community to adapt to the modern political world.

I
Introduction

This article is an ethnographic exploration of the relation between caste and modern politics in a north Indian town. Caste and politics have been a recurring theme in anthropological studies in India (Srinivas 1962). Most of the literature on the topic was written, however, between the 1950s and 1970s in the years following Independence. This article reflects a renewed anthropological interest in exploring how caste is responding to recent changes in the Indian political climate. In the 1980s and 1990s, two major novel political trends developed: the upsurge of Hindu nationalism and the political mobilisation of lower castes. Political scientists have long been concerned to explain the 'anomalous' social profile of politically active citizens in contemporary India. In contrast to the West, it is in fact the historically disadvantaged groups who are more likely to vote than their well-educated and wealthy counterparts. Similarly, whereas in the West turnout has been declining for some years, this is not the case in India.

With the aim of contributing to a better understanding of the unique Indian experience of popular democracy at the local level, in this article I examine how specific primordial loyalties encourage participatory democratic processes, and how the latter re-shape the identities of caste communities. In particular, through ethnographic accounts of everyday politics from a neighbourhood in Mathura town, western Uttar Pradesh, on the one hand, and of the role of caste associations on the other, I attempt to illustrate the dynamics and complexity of the process of politicisation of caste (Kothari 1970). I suggest that in order to understand such complex phenomena, attention should be paid to the role of primordial loyalties and to the effective ways in which folk theories of religious descent are deployed in the political arena.

This exercise is conducted through an exploration of the culture of political participation of the Yadavs, traditionally a low- to middle-ranking cluster of pastoral-agricultural castes. In the last thirty years, the Yadavs have become a significant political force in Uttar Pradesh and other northern states (like Bihar). Similarly, Mathura's Yadav community is politically extremely active and organised. Mathura town lies about 100 miles south of New Delhi, in the so-called Braj area of western Uttar Pradesh. This area is well known as the mythical homeland of the god Krishna who is considered the ancestor of the contemporary Yadavs.

In Mathura, the Yadav community traditionally inhabits three neighbourhoods: Anta Para, Sathgara and Ahir Para. The bulk of ethnography presented in this article comes from the neighbourhood of Ahir Para.

In order to explain Yadav political activism and the process of Yadav community formation in Mathura town, it is important to understand the recent political history of Uttar Pradesh, and the major role that caste has had in shaping its political landscape in the last twenty years (Hasan 1998). From Independence to the mid-1970s, the Congress dominated the political arena by forging a coalition of higher and lower castes. Its leadership was generally monopolised by the former. Thereafter, thanks to the Green Revolution, the Yadavs, together with other castes like the Kurmi and Jat, began to challenge Congress domination. Besides agrarian changes, a factor that contributed to the political importance of caste membership amongst low-middle-ranking communities was the implementation of the policy of protective discrimination, and the socio-economic advancements that accompanied it.

In recent years, the political battlefields of Uttar Pradesh have been characterised by the emergence of 'lower-castes' as major vote banks in opposition to the so-called Forward castes. Political parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) mobilise the lower strata of the society against the Forward castes by demanding a greater share of political power. The Yadavs have been active protagonists of the so-called Backward Classes movement (Rao 1979) and of what Yogendra Yadav has named the 'second democratic upsurge' (Y. Yadav 1997, 2000). By the 1970s, Uttar Pradesh's Yadavs had gradually introduced themselves into the political process at local, state and national levels. However, in the last twenty years, Yadavs and other 'lower castes' made their votes even 'more effective with the help of better aggregation in social and political terms' (Y. Yadav 2000: 132). By the 1990s, the manufacturing of electoral majorities based on caste and community seemed to matter more than at any time before (Corbridge and Harriss 2001: 220–21).

At present, there are two well-established Yadav-dominated political parties: the Samajwadi Party led by the Uttar Pradesh leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar guided by Laloo Prasad Yadav and his wife Rabri Devi. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav have become key figures in the contemporary political scene. They are either perceived as heroes, as modern Robin Hoods who steal from the rich to help the poor, or as *goonda*s (gangsters, musclemen) who exploit state resources for personal benefit. In either

case, their political role has been of immense symbolic importance for the whole of Indian society and for the Yadav community in particular. Yadavs have in fact been incorporated into the Indian state apparatus through their own political representatives. This political mobilisation has not only had consequences in terms of the redistribution of power at the macro-level, but has also had implications for the ideas of ordinary Yadavs with regard to their community and their day-to-day lives. Today, Mathura's ordinary Yadavs say that they are by caste 'natural' politicians. By this, they not only refer to the outstanding numerical presence of Yadav MPs in the state or to symbolic figures like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav, but to their marked political activism, to their ancestral factionalism, and to the perceived innate ability of their caste for 'doing politics'. By 'politics', they refer to their ability to make political connections and benefit from state resources.

Informants explain their predisposition to succeed in the political game as 'innate'. They say that 'they learn it in the womb' (*peth se sikhte hai*) and that they were born to be politicians.[1] They also invoked the 'womb' metaphor when they answered my queries about apprenticeship, especially in regard to issues relating to the cow-herding profession (such as ethno-veterinary practices and a particular sign-language used by brokers at cattle fairs). How do people learn these practices? No learning process or apprenticeship training would be mentioned. People looked at me as if I was a fool and said that they were born already knowing how to deal with their herd: 'we learn it in the womb'.

Ahir Para's Yadavs explained their 'martial' qualities and their successful employment in the army and the police in the same fashion. They often proudly reminded me that even the British recognised them as a 'martial race'. Fighting abilities are considered to be hereditary 'skills'. Even today, local Yadavs are still actively campaigning for the creation of a Yadav/Ahir regiment. One of their main justifications cites the Yadavs' claim to be Kshatriyas, i.e., to belong to the *varna* of warriors and kings, with a military tradition since time immemorial. Hence, they are 'naturally' predisposed to fight.[2] The Yadav-Kshatriyas are not only considered

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[1] The word *peth* here is understood as womb. In northern Indian languages there are numerous expressions that represent the womb/belly as the container of knowledge and secrets. Other ethnographies have illustrated how the human embryo is said to be 'cooked' in the woman's stomach by her 'digestive fire (*jatharagni*)' (Parry 1989: 497). Notwithstanding such metaphors, Yadav women are peripheral to the culture of political participation that this article will illustrate.

[2] This type of rhetoric is widely represented in the contemporary Yadav caste literature. See All India Yadav Mahasabha (1999: 39–59).

to have a predisposition to fight, but also to govern. Hence, informants described to me their 'political' ability as a caste-bound activity and/or related to primordial caste features. Accordingly, the skill of 'doing politics' was passed on 'in the blood' from the glorious Yadav ancestors and the god Krishna to the present Yadavs.

The idea that being Yadav depends on birth and that physical traits together with such skills are transmitted by blood is, therefore, 'in the air'. A sophisticated political rhetoric developed by the All India Yadav Mahasabha (their caste association) mobilises such an implicit folk theory of descent by also portraying 'democracy' as a 'primordial' political process, which was given to the mythical Yadavs by their ancestor Krishna. The political system of the ancient Yadavs is portrayed as 'democratic' and as 'republican'. In this sense contemporary Yadavs are also seen as the heirs of a 'democratic' tradition and political skills.

In this article I discuss how 'democracy' is viewed and rhetorically reinterpreted by local Yadavs as well as by politicians, and the literature of Yadav caste associations. I explore how a specific 'caste-view of "democracy"' is successfully deployed and performed in the political arena, and simultaneously used to reinforce a sense of Yadav commonality. 'Democracy' is portrayed in Yadav caste political rhetoric as a primordial phenomenon inherited by contemporary Yadavs from the ancestor-king-god Krishna. 'Democracy' is also depicted as a 'question of numbers' and, as such, as having an affinity with the presumed Yadav 'numerical strength'. Finally, 'democracy' is viewed as a promoter of social justice and equality and the Yadavs as the natural carriers and promoters of such noble principles. Notwithstanding the multivocal ways in which the language of democracy is employed, Yadav caste political rhetoric ultimately depicts 'democracy' as an institution that works for the Yadavs (and to some extent for the 'backward communities') and as 'a stage' (Hansen 2001) on which Yadav interests and demands can be successfully articulated and fought over.

Quite early during my fieldwork, I realised that Ahir Para's Yadavs were extensively exposed to such rhetoric, which was locally disseminated by the local Yadav caste associations. These associations were linked to the regional and national organisational structure of the All India Yadav Mahasabha (AIYM). Besides representing the members of the community as culturally special, this political rhetoric seeks to highlight the powerful role of representative democracy and its capacity to reinforce the economic and political power of 'the numerically strong Yadav community'. The idea that political democratic processes and

government policies (such as of reservation) are crucial for the development of the community is indeed well-grounded. According to Yadav political rhetoric, the Yadavs are not only 'traditionally' suited to govern in such an institutional framework, but also have the numbers to do so. Such ideology portrays the Yadav *samaj* (community) as a 'natural' community with 'natural representatives'.

In this representation, the link between Yadav citizens and their Yadav representatives is conceptualised as one of common *substance.* Yadav MPs and political leaders become symbols of the community like their democratic-ancestor god Krishna. Ahir Para's Yadavs showed a great attachment to Yadav political figures such as Mulayam Singh Yadav and to the SP, which is considered to be the political party of the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh. However, such 'caste' attachment does not entirely determine Yadav voting behaviour in the neighbourhood. Local voting patterns are also influenced by rivalries and factionalism within the community. Informants also explicitly linked this form of 'political participation' to the 'womb'. 'Rivalries' amongst the Yadavs are described as a primordial feature of the community. Paradoxically, however, the same factionalism acts as a powerful agent of democratic socialisation and contributes to the formation of a culture of political participation amongst the community.

Hence ordinary Yadavs constantly trace their 'caste' predispositions and skills to descent, and in doing so they affirm their distinctiveness as a 'caste'. For them, 'caste is not just appellation but quality of blood' (Yalman 1969: 87, in Gupta 2000: 82). This view is not recent. The Ahirs (today Yadavs) had a lineage view of caste (Fox 1971; Unnithan-Kumar 1997) that was based on a strong ideological model of descent. This descent-based kinship structure was also linked to a specific Kshatriya and their religious tradition centred on Krishna mythology and pastoral-warrior hero-god cults. At present the 'traditional' Yadavs' descent view of caste and their religious traditions intertwine with the political rhetoric of the AIYM and with formal democratic processes. The outcome of such intersection is the creation of 'a caste of politicians'.

The argument presented in the following sections is organised in two parts. To begin with, I outline who the Yadavs are and the current role of the AIYM in the politics of the Yadav community formation, thus providing a general picture of the organisational structure of the Mahasabha and of its role in promoting 'democracy' amongst its members. Thereafter, I focus on the ethnographic exploration of the culture of political participation amongst Mathura's Yadavs. This part is divided into three subsections. First, I introduce the neighbourhood of Ahir Para and illustrate

how politically active its residents are. I then analyse how this political participation has been influenced by the organisational ability of the AIYM. In particular, I show how local Yadavs have been linked to the rest of the Yadav national community and to national electoral politics by the political rhetoric of the Mahasabha. Finally, I explore how this ideological input intertwines with local formal democratic processes (such as elections).

II
The Yadav community and the All India Yadav Mahasabha in the 1980s and 1990s

At the core of the Yadav community lies a specific folk theory of descent, according to which all Indian pastoral castes are said to descend from the Yadu dynasty (hence the label Yadav) to which Krishna (a cowherder, and supposedly a Kshatriya) belonged. Thus, although the Yadavs are divided into different subdivisions (Yaduvanshi, Goallavanshi, Nandavanshi, etc.), there is nonetheless a strong belief amongst them that all Yadavs belong to Krishna's line of descent, the Yadav subdivisions of today being the outcome of the fission of an original and undifferentiated group.

By the end of the 19th century, selected representations of Krishna, together with the creation of a 'suitable' past, began to be elaborated by the Ahir/Yadav caste associations. The latter used these sets of religious symbols to improve Yadav status in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. By 1924, the AIYM advocated vegetarianism and teetotalism. In principle, internal inequalities and hierarchies between different subdivisions were suppressed by making all Ahirs, Goalla, Gopas, and others 'pure' and 'superior' Krishnavanshi Yadavs.

However, to understand Yadav colonial caste politics only within the framework of *sanskritisation* would be misleading. Yadav caste associations' petitions to the British representatives did not exclusively demand the recognition of the Yadavs as Kshatriya; rather they demanded separate enumeration for their community and the merger of several pastoral subdivisions under the Yadav caste appellation. Therefore, the ancestor-god Krishna was not only used as a symbol of *kshatriyahood*, and thus of high ritual status, but as a *unifying symbol* common to hundreds of herder castes scattered all over India. Ahir/Yadavs' social leaders and politicians soon realised that their 'number' and the official proof of their demographic status were important political instruments on the basis of which

they could claim a 'reasonable' share of state resources.[3] It is precisely the process of *yadavisation* and the fabrication of a numerically strong community (linked to notions of community entitlements) that came to occupy central political attention within the AIYM in the post-colonial period.[4] In particular, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Mahasabha focused on two interrelated issues: (*i*) the 'demographic' extension of the community; and (*ii*) the implementation of the policy of reservation for so-called Backward Classes. Importantly, the promotion of this double political objective was sustained by the strengthening of the Mahasabha organisational structure and its expansion in the south, especially in Tamil Nadu. Today the organisational ability of the AIYM lies in its effective national structure. The Mahasabha is present in seventeen states at the district, block and neighbourhood/village levels. To my knowledge, there are no other comparable examples of caste associations in India that extend across state boundaries and include members of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In recent years, the Mahasabha has begun to use the media in an instrumental and systematic way. Its voice is recorded in local and national newspapers. New 'historical' and 'ethnographical' texts which discuss the Yadav 'past' and 'culture' have been published; old ones have been reviewed (J.N.S. Yadav 1992; Swami Sudhannad Yogi 1997). A number of Yadav web-sites have also been set up (e.g., www.yadav.com) to mobilise the Yadav *global* community. The process of *yadavisation* is legitimised by the assumption that all the descendants of Krishna share the same substance and, therefore, are Yadavs. The following is an extract from a speech delivered at a Mahasabha meeting in Madras in the early 1980s, illustrating the way in which a national Yadav community is sought to be shaped and created through appeal to primordial ties:

> We have assembled here from different parts of the country. We speak different languages, quite alien to each other. Our habits and customs are different but we feel one-ness and brotherhood among ourselves where we think that we are the descendants of Krishna. The same

[3] See National Archive of India (NAI), Home Dept. Public, May–June 1926, File No. 706 and Delhi State Archives, Home Dept. May 1933, File No. 109-b. *Ahir community petition from the Yadav-Ahir Kshatriya Sabha for adequate representation of the Ahir community in the machinery of the reformed government.* I thank Ian Duncan for this reference.

[4] This does not mean that issues of religious reform are no longer central to the Yadav caste associations' rhetoric. On the contrary, the AIYM still heavily promotes teetotalism, vegetarianism, and the abandonment of blood sacrifice.

blood is running in our veins (Presidential address, AIYM 49th Convention, Madras, 1983 [Originally in English]).[5]

For the past twenty years, the AIYM has been acting as a vigorous pressure group to gain government positions for its members in the Indian state apparatus on the basis of the Yadavs' presumed numerical strength.[6] The following resolutions approved at recent Mahasabha meetings are indicative of this political engagement (AIYM, Resolutions, Gurgaoun, 1998):

(*ii*) It was resolved to request all the political parties to allot at least 15% of seats to Yadav candidates in the ensuing Assembly elections in Delhi, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh in view of the preponderous Yadavs [sic] in these states.

(*iii*) It was resolved that the Hon'able Prime Minister, Sh. Atal Vajpayee, be requested to nominate at his earliest convenience, at least two Yadavs in his Council of Ministers as Cabinet Minister. It was further resolved to impress upon the Hon'able Prime Minister that there was no Yadav Minister of Cabinet Rank. Therefore, Yadavs may be adequately represented in his Cabinet, as the Yadav are the single largest community in the country numbering 15 crores.

(*iv*) Resolved to request the President of India to appoint Yadavs as Governors.

(*v*) Resolved to request the Government of India to undo the grave injustice to the community by not appointing any Yadav as member of the Union Public Service commission, or Judges in the High Court and Supreme Court.

(*vi*) It is resolved to request Government of India to provide reservation of 27% for the OBC women in the proposed 33% reservation for women [Originally in English].

Yadavs also believe that their numbers give them the right to govern: 'democracy after all is a game of numbers' (T.V.S. Yadav 2000: 18).

[5] Extracts from speeches and texts originally in Hindi are given in English translation. Whenever the quote is originally in English, as here, it is so mentioned.

[6] According to the caste size estimates of the National Election Study (NES) 1999 conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, the Yadav caste is the third largest in India, after Chamars and Brahmins.

An India governed by Yadavs is the ideal goal of the community: 'by 2010 the prime minister will be a Yadav'. With such statements Yadav political and social leaders love to anticipate their brilliant political future. Such claims are also supported by a rhetoric which portrays Yadavs as 'born' to rule in a democratic context. In recent years, Krishna symbolism and the Yadav noble 'past' have been taken as evidence of Yadav political attitudes, and used to mobilise Yadav votes and create a political attachment to the community.

The next section introduces Ahir Para and describes the political engagement of its Yadav residents. I then illustrate how the political rhetoric of the AIYM is disseminated in the neighbourhood and how this intertwines with local political and religious culture and formal democratic processes.

III
The culture of political participation amongst the Yadavs of Mathura

'We are a caste of politicians': Ahir Para's Yadavs

Ahir Para is part of Sadar Bazaar, which lies on the outskirts of Mathura town near the Cantonment area. The Yadavs are numerous in the neighbourhood of Ahir Para, and in parts of the neighbouring Bania (merchants), Dhobi (washermen) and Mali (gardeners) *mohalla*s (neighbourhoods). Within Sadar Bazaar, the Yadav and the Muslim communities are numerically the strongest, with the Yadavs said to number about 4,000. They are followed by Dhobis, Malis, Banias, Brahmans and Jatavs. The area inhabited by Yadavs corresponds to four municipality wards: Ward 2, Ward 4, Ward 15 and Ward 10. Since 1996, the latter two are both reserved for women candidates. At present, the elected municipality members of Wards 2, 4 and 10 belong to the Yadav community. Thus, local Yadavs are indeed politically dominant.

Ahir Para's Yadavs traditionally belong to the Nandavanshi Ahir subdivision. In the last fifty years their economic status has gradually improved. This economic transformation followed a recurrent pattern: a shift from cowherding and milk selling occupations to the transportation business (from bullock-cart to motor vehicle), and finally to the construction business. Those who did not set up their own businesses sought jobs in the army and the police, the other two traditional spheres of occupation

for Ahir-Yadavs in northern India. More recently, the government has become one of the most esteemed sources of employment, especially amongst the new generation who have benefited from caste reservations.

Parallel to these activities, there is a realm of illegal ones in the Ahir Para economy: extortion, protection-rackets, usury and petty criminality. These activities are prominent, even if difficult to assess in a systematic way. The Yadavs of Ahir Para are often described by outsiders as *goonda* (gangsters, musclemen). They are commonly referred to as thugs who base their strength on muscle power. Such comments, rumours and stereotypes say a lot about how Ahir Para's Yadavs are perceived in the collective imagination: they are numerous, strong, united and aggressive towards others. Casteism and violence are the other two attributes with which they are generally associated. Moreover, Ahir Para Yadavs are locally viewed as politically involved and connected. The data on political behaviour collected in a survey on Sadar Bazaar's main communities confirm such views.[7]

[7] The aim of the Mathura Survey was to interview a cross-section of inhabitants of voting age from Sadar Bazaar, Mathura. We considered various sampling strategies before deciding upon a stratified quota selection procedure. We opted for the quota selection rather than a probability-based selection procedure because we were keen to ensure a representative distribution of the different castes and communities present in Sadar Bazaar. A purely random sample might have meant that only Yadavs were interviewed. To ensure that other communities were also included, it was therefore necessary to include some preliminary screening. We set loose quotas for caste, community and age. This meant we had to interview the household reference person, who was usually male. There is, therefore, an over-representation of men in the sample. In order to reduce this bias, we also included a small boost sample of women for comparison. We also collected demographic information on all household members. In all, 225 respondents were interviewed. Of these, 175 were married, and additional questions were asked about their spouse. The survey thus comprises three separate samples which are reported in the tables: the full sample (all respondents = 225 cases), the male sample (all male respondents and all husbands of female respondents = 218 cases) and the female sample (all female respondents and all wives of male respondents = 173 cases). Table entries are rarely based on all the cases, as some respondents were either unable to answer some of the questions, or provided incomplete answers. Missing values are reported where appropriate. Fieldwork was carried out after the voting for the Lok Sabha elections 1999 had taken place, but before the outcome of the results was announced. This fieldwork period coincided with that of the NES carried out by the CSDS. Moreover, there is an additional overlap between the two surveys in that most of the political questions were worded in the same way, thus making comparisons between the surveys more compatible. Significance tests were run on all tables. The words 'more likely' or 'less likely' are used to indicate that a difference exists between two sub-groups, or between a sub-group and the average, which is significant at the 0.05 per cent level or above.

Table 1 shows that 39 per cent of the Yadavs in the survey have a family member in politics, for example a ward or *panchayat* representative, MLA or MP.[8] Similarly, a very high proportion of the Yadavs (75 per cent) personally know someone in politics, and 35 per cent had recently contacted a politician in their constituency, which mainly meant an MLA or MP. Yadavs clearly have more political connections than other communities in Sadar Bazaar. The importance of the role of politicians (local caste/clan leaders, party activists, ward representatives) as the link between the state and society in India has been widely recognised (Ruud 2000: 115). In Uttar Pradesh 'politicians' are often the link between criminality/corruption, the police and society (Brass 1997). Ahir Para's Yadavs are connected with the *political* network of central Uttar Pradesh. At the base of these connections are kinship ties. Etah, Mainpuri, Etawah and Kannauj are the districts of origin of the main lineages (*parivar*s) present in the neighbourhood. This area is also the space of the 'kindred of recognition' and the territory within which women are exchanged (Mayer 1960: 161), and it is popularly known as the 'Yadav belt' (English word).

Table 1
Political Connections in Sadar Bazaar[*]

Caste/Community	Family Member in Politics	Personally Know a Politician	Personally Contacted a Politician	Number
Upper castes	21%	61%	18%	75
Yadavs	39%	75%	35%	65
OBCs	10%	80%	20%	10
Scheduled Castes	18%	64%	27%	22
Muslims	12%	51%	12%	41
Other	10%	33%	10%	10
All	23%	64%	22%	223

Source: Mathura Survey.
Notes: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for two cases).
* The 'Forward Castes' category is composed of Brahmans, Banias and Rajputs; the OBCs of Malis and Jats; the SC of Dhobis, Jatavs and Valmikis.

In this area over the last fifty years, local Yadavs have benefited appreciably from state land reforms: from being cowherders, petty cultivators or tenants, they have become the major landowners of the region. This economic progress has been accompanied by growing political success.

[8] Survey questions: Is any member of your family a politician? Do you personally know any party leaders or any candidates in this constituency? Have you ever contacted any political leader (MLA, MP, party leader) for any need or problem?

Today, a high number of MLAs and MPs of the districts of Etah, Etawah, Kannauj and Mainpuri are from the Yadav caste. Their leader and mentor is Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is originally from a village near the town of Etawah. He is a Kamaria-Nandavanshi-Yadav, which is the same Yadav subdivision as the Yadavs of Ahir Para. 'We give our daughters to Mulayam's *parivar*,' my informants often proudly said. Kinship ties (real or fictive) are viewed as important channels through which political power and economic resources are controlled and distributed. By being 'close' to the centre of Yadav power, the Yadavs of Ahir Para are said to be in a position where they could get more benefits from the new redistribution of state resources than the other Yadavs of Mathura town, for example, those living in the neighbourhoods of Sathgara and Anta Para.

Ahir Para Yadavs are not only 'politically' very well connected, they are also politically highly active. Moreover, such political activism is not limited to a marginal elite group. Most of Ahir Para's Yadavs vote. They are members of political parties, actively participate during election campaigns, are obsessed with politics and love to talk about it. Table 2 shows that voter turn-out is high for all the communities in Sadar Bazaar.[9] However, the Yadavs are significantly more 'politically' involved than the average if we look at their activism during the election campaign (attending rallies,

Table 2
Political Participation in Sadar Bazaar

Caste/Community	Voted in 1999 LS Election	Participated in Election Campaign	Member of a Political Party	Number
Upper castes	72%	23%	24%	75
Yadavs	80%	39%	41%	65
OBCs	70%	20%	–	10
Scheduled Castes	76%	18%	32%	22
Muslims	85%	12%	5%	41
Other	82%	9%	–	10
All	78%	24%	24%	223

Source: Mathura Survey.
Note: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for two cases).

[9] Survey questions: In the last Lok Sabha Election some people were able to cast their vote, while others were unable to. How about you? Were you able to cast your vote or not?; During the election people do various things like organising election meetings, joining processions, contributing money ... to help a party or a candidate. Did you do any of such things yourself during the election campaign?; Are you member of a political party?

canvassing from door to door, collecting money and/or distributing leaflets), and at their party membership (41 per cent). Table 3 shows the CSDS data on political participation in the whole of Uttar Pradesh. While Sadar Bazaar is undoubtedly an exceptionally politicised place compared with Uttar Pradesh as a whole, the overall Yadav involvement in the election campaign (28 per cent) and in party activity (10 per cent) is quite high.

Table 4 shows how interested people in Mathura are in politics and public affairs.[10] Overall, 27 per cent of the sample said they were very interested. The Yadavs and Scheduled Castes were the two most interested

Table 3
Political Participation in Uttar Pradesh

Caste/Community	Voted in 1999 LS Election	Participated in Election Campaign	Member of a Political Party	Number
Upper castes	90%	32%	9%	343
Yadavs	84%	28%	10%	102
OBCs	84%	22%	5%	344
Scheduled Castes	91%	23%	6%	272
Muslims	92%	23%	2%	209
Other	93%	24%	–	40
All	89%	26%	6%	1,310

Source: National Election Study 1999, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies Data Unit, Delhi.

Table 4
Political Interest, Sadar Bazaar

Caste/Community	A Great Deal of Interest	Some Interest	No Interest at all	Number
Upper castes	20%	31%	49%	75
Yadavs	39%	30%	30%	66
OBCs	30%	10%	60%	10
Scheduled Castes	41%	18%	41%	22
Muslims	12%	22%	66%	41
Other	30%	10%	60%	10
All	27%	26%	47%	224

Source: Mathura Survey.
Note: Table entries based on all respondents (no information was recorded for one case).

[10] Survey question: Leaving aside the period of elections, how much interest would you say you have in politics and public affairs?

groups, with 39 and 41 per cent respectively, saying they were very interested in politics. However, if we look at all the people who said that they were either very interested, or somewhat interested, in politics, then the Yadavs, with 70 per cent, are significantly more likely than the average to be politically engaged. The material on Yadav political behaviour mirrors the existence of a strong culture of political participation. In the last twenty years the latter has been shaped both by the activities of the Yadav caste associations, and by the 'local political' battle for the pursuit of power. In the next section I explore the particular relation between Yadavs and the Samajwadi Party, and how this is intertwined with the ideology propagated by the AIYM.

IV
The 'awakening' of Mathura's Yadavs and the role of the All India Yadav Mahasabha

In Mathura the Yadavs are viewed as a numerous and strong community. Since my arrival in town, non-Yadav informants kept telling me that my choice of Mathura as a site for my research was an excellent one and this was because the Yadavs were very numerous in town. However, such a claim is far from true. The total Yadav population in Mathura district is around 20,000, which makes them a tiny minority when compared with the numerical strength of the Jat, the Brahman or the Chamar communities. Since 1991, Mathura has been a stronghold of the BJP. The SP, which in Uttar Pradesh is viewed as the party of the Yadavs, does not stand much chance of winning a parliamentary seat in the Mathura constituency. Yet it is viewed as powerful and vocal. During my fieldwork, many local issues such as the lack of water and problems with electricity were politicised and manipulated by local Yadav SP activists and taken as occasions for demonstrations or strikes.

I think that the Yadav community appears numerically strong and politically powerful because of its impressive organisation. It is its political activism and its reputation for aggressiveness and violence that make the community visible. As Dipankar Gupta has argued, 'politics is not only about numbers; it is also about ability to exercise power in a concerted and organised fashion' (Gupta 2000: 171). In the Yadav case, the Yadav caste associations not only shape the ideas of what the Yadav community is, but also promote 'democracy' as an inclusive process and the pursuit of power as a way to gain economic benefits and social status.

At the beginning of the century, each of Mathura's three Yadav neighbourhoods had its own caste association. It was only in the late 1970s that these associations fused together to form the Mathura Yadav Sammelan (MYS), a caste association affiliated to the AIYM. In 1981, the MYS organised the AIYM's forty-eighth conference. Informants generally pointed to this event as the start of Yadav 'awakening' in Mathura. Such local reorganisation and mobilisation should be understood as a consequence of the changes that occurred at the macro-level of the AIYM structure, discussed above.

The ideological basis on which the Mathura Yadav community has been constructed over the last century has gradually acquired its own materiality in everyday social practices. Contemporary Ahir/Yadavs define themselves as 'Krishnavanshi-Yadavs'. Younger generations are not aware that their original caste title was Ahir. The idea of a unique Krishnavanshi kinship category which fuses traditional subdivisions (Yaduvanshi, Nandavanshi and Goallavanshi) into a single endogamous unit is quickly spreading. Intermarriage between different 'endogamous' units is increasingly popular. This process of amalgamation has been gradually accompanied by a parallel homogenisation of the Ahir/Yadav Hindu pantheon: Krishna has now become the main god as well as the main ancestor. Local clan deities are disappearing and losing their functions and powers.[11] This process mirrors what is happening to the multi-layered structure of the clans' mythological accounts. The unifying myth of Krishna not only tells of the origins of the entire Yadav community, but also nullifies the hierarchy and 'cultural' differences existing within the community. The clan narratives that were used as metaphors to express status, and to differentiate each Ahir unit from the others, are changing their meanings and functions. The encompassing Krishna tale legitimates the equality of all members and expresses it through the religious language of descent.

In Mathura, those encompassed by the Yadav *samaj* have largely begun to practise a new, homogenised Yadav-ness. The idea of a united Yadav community is constructed through caste publications (books, pamphlets, newsletters, souvenirs), local newspapers, Yadav caste meetings at the local, regional and national levels, and finally by the appropriation and reinterpretation of localised rituals by local social and political leaders. I focus here only on selective aspects of Yadav political rhetoric, i.e., the

[11] The 'substantial' *Sanskritic* deity, 'Krishna', legitimises in principle the equality between the different subdivisions within the Yadav community. For the elaboration of the concept of 'substantial' divinity amongst the Great Deities, see Fuller (1992: 96).

representation of democratic values as an innate quality of the ancient Yadavs and the representation of the ancestor-god Krishna as the first 'political democratic leader'. To begin with I survey what the Yadavs of Ahir Para tell me they read about their 'democratic' history and culture. I then illustrate what their political and social leaders have to say about the Yadavs' success in the democratic electoral process and how ordinary Yadavs assimilate such rhetoric.

Caste publications

Throughout my fieldwork in Mathura, I was constantly directed to written sources that my informants considered relevant for reconstructing the Yadavs' history. This literature consisted of pamphlets, periodicals, magazines and books in English and Hindi published by local and regional caste associations. Here, I provide extracts from a number of publications collected in Ahir Para. In the Introduction to one of the key texts of Yadav history, the ancient 'democratic' Yadavs are described as follows:

> The fortunes of the Yadavs were greatly affected by two peculiarities of their social and political system—their sustained faith in republicanism, ... and their comparative freedom from orthodoxy, qualities on which a high value is set at the present day ... (R.V.K. Yadav 1959: xi).

> Even in the Vedic age the Yadavs were upholders of the Republican ideals of government .... The Mahabharata furnishes interesting details regarding the functioning of the republic form of government among the Yadavs .... It is now an agreed fact that Sri Krishna, the central figure of the epic narratives tried to defend the republican ideas against the imperialistic movement led by Jarasandha of Magadaha and Kamsa of Mathura (ibid.: 199–200).

This type of historical reconstruction is commonly found in other books whose aim is to portray the glorious and noble Yadav past (K.C. Yadav 1966; Pandey 1968). Moreover, it is commonly found in the publications of the monthly and yearly local caste associations. The following are further examples:

> Yadu (the forefather of Krishna) developed a novel system of governance in his Raj. It was democracy where he ruled with the consent of his people in a much more effective manner than what we are doing

today. And thus claimed the honour to be the first to experiment with democracy in the world ... (*AIYM Platinum Jubilee Year 1924–1999*, 1999: 10–15).

Lord Krishna was a great man and the Yadav community should be proud of the path that he left to them. Lord Krishna gave them three principles: democracy, social justice and commitment to equality. These are the bases of our future. He was a democratic leader. He used to respect the views of his citizens. He used to believe that the person who is elected by the citizens has the right to rule. He was the first person to begin a 'democratic way of governance': but others say that France gave birth to democracy (R.M.S. Yadav 1999: 69–70).

Amusing though such statements may appear, many informants were convinced that the Yadavs were natural vessels of 'democratic' values.

The kind of literature described above—and the number of such publications is astonishingly large—is usually distributed free or at a very low price to the participants of caste association meetings. The content does not present much variation. Yadav self-historiographies draw cumulatively on colonial ethnographies, orientalist literature and Hindu mythical texts such as the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita, together with recent sociological material on the Other Backward Classes Movement and biographical details and achievements of contemporary Yadav politicians. These narratives are marked by a similarity of structure, language and content, and by repetitiveness (a feature characteristic of essentialist rhetoric [Pandey 1995]). Mythical events (in this case also religious beliefs) inform the narratives with religious undertones. Entire sections are then devoted to 'Yadav cultural achievements' and to their 'Outstanding characteristics'. Emphasis is placed on descent. Genealogical charts that trace the bloodline of the present Yadavs to their god Krishna are invariably present. Lists of the contemporary Yadav clans generally follow the mythical genealogical trees.

Caste association meetings and political speeches

The content and rhetoric of the speeches delivered by Yadav social leaders and politicians do not differ greatly from the content of the publications just examined. Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav are at times described by their caste supporters as *avatara*s (incarnations) of

Krishna sent to earth to protect 'the oppressed' and promote social justice. It is the natural duty of the Yadavs as descendents of Krishna, and as Kshatriyas, to protect the weaker sections of the society. The following is an extract from a speech delivered by Laloo Prasad Yadav at a Yadav national conference in December 1999:

> I believe that whenever the name of Krishna appears, it does not make any sense to avoid politics. Lord Krishna challenged the evils. The history of communalism and various epics are revealed by a number of historians. But whatever the Vedas said, they began with the word Yadav ... this is our history ... I tell you the Mahabharata is a true epic. There is a description of a 56 crore Yaduvanshi Army. We can therefore safely say that this Krishna Bhavan is dedicated to 180 million Yadavs (Laloo Prasad Yadav, AIYM Convention, Vaishali, New Delhi, 26 December 1999).

> Lord Krishna's descendants from all over country, the AIYM has achieved the object of bringing all the Yadavs spread all over the country under one title, i.e., Yadav, and the Yadav Mahasabha also inculcated the spirit of unity thereby bringing strength in the collective attempt in the development of India. In the Indian History particularly with reference to the Vedic Period particularly the Yadavs had a great past, a glorious past and Yadavas were known for their bravery and diplomatic wisdom. The Mahabharata period which was the period of Yadavas is known for republican and democratic government (Harmohan Singh Yadav, Presidential Address, AIYM Platinum Jubilee Session, 25 December 1999).

The speeches delivered in the caste association meetings often contain passages which exhort the audience to 'engage in politics' as the most effective vehicle for socio-economic mobility: 'We shall all try to become like Mulayamji and Falooji,' the vice-president of the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Sabha said during a meeting in Agra (1999), adding, 'in every Yadav there is a Mulayam'.

The previous examples were drawn from meetings held at the national and regional levels. I now focus on the content of the political rhetoric used by local social leaders and politicians within Mathura town, and more specifically in the neighbourhood of Ahir Para. Whenever I attended regional and national Yadav caste association meetings, I did so in the retinue of the Yadav social and political leaders from Mathura. Then, on

our return, I was able to observe how the latter reinterpreted and disseminated what they had heard and understood to the inhabitants of Ahir Para. Of the numerous people in the neighbourhood actively engaged in promoting the activities of the AIYM, several hold positions in the organisational structure of the Mahasabha at the state and/or national levels. One of the five secretaries of the AIYM, who is also the president of the SP of Mathura town, lives in Ahir Para. The president of the Uttar Pradesh State Youth Sabha, the vice-president of the AIYM Youth Cell and the coordinator of the MSY also reside in Ahir Para. Locally the actual leadership of the MYS is monopolised by members of the SP, but there are also a number of BJP and Congress supporters.

For the last ten years, local meetings have been regularly organised in the different Yadav neighbourhoods to celebrate Krishna's birthday and other religious festivals. Meetings are also held regularly to discuss the resolutions of the regional and national meetings of the AIYM and/or of the Uttar Pradesh Yadav Mahasabha. Given Mathura's mythological significance as the birthplace of Krishna and as the 'original' home of all the Yadavs of India, the political rhetoric developed by Yadav social and political leaders in Delhi has a parochial and personalistic ring when disseminated in Mathura. Mathura's Yadavs actually live in the places mentioned in the AIYM prefabricated political narratives, and they worship 'the' Krishna that the very same literature describes as their ancestor and 'political democratic leader'.

Furthermore, such representations are locally reinforced by the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism. Hindu fundamentalists use the sacred town of Mathura as a stage for the expression of their nationalistic ideology. Krishna is portrayed as an historical person and his hometown, Mathura, as his historical birthplace. For the Hindu nationalists, Krishna's birthplace is now 'illegally' occupied by a Muslim mosque. The Liberation Movement for the Birthplace of Krishna aims to reclaim this site which, for the local Yadavs, presents 'hard historical data' in evidence of the perennial existence of the Yadav community, the 'autochthonous' inhabitants of Mathura and the descendants of Krishna. Hindu nationalist ideology has thus helped local Yadavs to think about the god Krishna as their 'historical' ancestor.

Each caste meeting in Ahir Para begins with the local leaders exhorting the Yadavs of Mathura town to unity, and to follow the teachings of their ancestor. Local social leaders in Mathura often use episodes from the life of Krishna as metaphors symbolising the god's heroism and his life-long commitment to the defeat of despotism and the promotion of social justice. The following is an extract from a speech delivered on the

occasion of the milk-strike organised in the summer 1999. By portraying Krishna as a trade-union leader, an Ahir Para Yadav leader mobilised Mathura milk sellers to join the strike by saying:

> Sri Krishna prevented the maids from selling butter and milk in the market of Mathura or giving them as tax to the king .... And this is because it was the right of the cowherders to use milk and butter for their personal use. Krishna also successfully organised milk strikes which prevented the supply of milk to Mathura. We shall follow in his footsteps.

These extracts from local speeches should be read as examples of how a particular rhetoric is used locally to address practical issues. This form of rhetoric finds expression not only in verbal discussion, but also in performative rituals.

The killing of Kamsa: A political performance

In the last fifteen years, the MYS has organised a number of religious celebrations. Here, I shall focus only on the Kamsa festival and on the Krishna Lila performance. The Krishna myth narrates how, thousands of years ago, the throne of Mathura was usurped by Krishna's uncle, the tyrannical Kamsa, and how the grown-up Krishna killed Kamsa to liberate his people from Kamsa's illegitimate rule. The *Kamsa Vadh ka Mela* (Festival of Kamsa's destruction), initiated by the MYS fifteen years ago, is portrayed as the celebration of the victory of the democratic Yadavs over an oppressive and despotic monarchy.

This festival, celebrated annually in early November, has been traditionally performed by Chaubes, a community of Brahman priests who act as ritual specialists and guides for the pilgrims visiting the holy towns of Mathura and Braj (Lynch 1996). In 1980, the local Yadav committee decided that it was time for the Yadav community to begin to celebrate what was truly 'their' festival: Krishna was the one who killed Kamsa, and since Krishna was a Yadav, the Kamsa Festival belonged to the Yadavs. For centuries, the Chaubes had illegitimately performed the ritual because the local Yadavs were too poor and oppressed to object. In 1984, the MYS wrote a petition to the Superintendent of Police, who at the time was a Yadav, and obtained permission to celebrate the Kamsa Festival in Sadar Bazaar. In the same year, the Yadavs of Sadar Bazaar began to organise the Krishna Lilas, traditional religious theatrical dramas which enact the life of Krishna.

Ram Yadav, one of the promoters of the Kamsa Festival and of the local Krishna Lilas, pointed out to me that with the Kamsa Festival, Ahir Para's Yadavs sought to assert that Krishna and Balram (Krishna's brother) were Yadavs. During the Kamsa Festival, two children are dressed up as Krishna and Balram and carried around the streets of the town in procession. The children are not merely 'actors' but *become* the two divine persons, to be worshipped as such throughout the procession. Informants told me that only Yadavs, who are the descendants of Krishna, could legitimately represent Krishna and Balram, while the Chaubes, who are not Yadavs, have nothing to do with the two divine brothers.

The same logic is followed in the Krishna Lila celebrations that accompany and follow the Kamsa Festival. The person who acts as Krishna in the performance should be a Yadav. In November 1999, during the Krishna Lila performance in Sadar Bazaar, multiple associations were made between the actors, the story they were enacting, and the genealogical pedigree of the audience, which was largely Yadav. The Krishna Lilas were seen not only as the history of Krishna but also as the history of Mathura's Yadavs, and more specifically of Ahir Para's Yadavs. References to places close to Ahir Para were regularly made in the performance, making the representation appear realistic and almost historical.

Conversations with spectators about these performances support this impression. I overheard the actor who personified Kamsa telling a group of young Yadavs that at Mahadev Ghat, the most important site of worship for the local Yadavs, the Ahirs had raped the mother of Kamsa. Immediately one of the young guys came to tell me about what he had just come to know. He was proud to descend from the people who 'destroyed the imperialist Kamsa' (English phrase). Krishna and the Ahirs killed him and gave people the freedom to govern themselves. 'Social justice' is the message of Krishna, 'and it is also the message of the SP', added his friend Arun, a young SP militant: 'Lord Krishna had always helped the poor and needy Kshatriyas'; 'there is a similarity between the ideas of Mulayam Singh and Lord Krishna,' another young Yadav commented.

V
'Symbolic' representation and 'electoral' representation in Ahir Para

Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav are sometimes portrayed as *avatara*s (incarnations) of Krishna, or as hero-*goonda*-gods, who steal from the rich to give to the poor. As illustrated in the previous section,

during the Kamsa Festival performance the participants explicitly link themselves with their ancestor Krishna, and the latter with Mulayam Singh Yadav. Likewise, when Mulayam Singh Yadav was appointed Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1993, I was told that all the Yadavs of Sadar Bazaar celebrated in the streets of the neighbourhood by screaming 'I am Mulayam'. Such 'identifications' are in line with the AIYM ideology, which portrays the Yadav *samaj* as a 'natural' community with 'natural' representatives. To quote Jonathan Spencer: 'what we have is a kind of politics in which the force of the idea of "representation" had connected it to other areas of popular culture' (Spencer 1997: 12).

In the specific ethnographic case of Ahir Para, such ideas are connected to the local understanding of the relation between Krishna and Yadav political icons, and between local hero cults and contemporary *goonda*-heroes.[12] In Yadav local mythology and local cults, hero-gods who protect and defend the weaker people and the cows are an overwhelming presence. This idea of 'representation' has been locally reinterpreted in a language which has roots in re-invented Yadav 'democratic' political traditions. Accordingly, as a symbol of the Yadav community, Mulayam Singh Yadav embodies those he represents and at the same time those whom he represents embody him. This kind of 'representation' can be independent of elections. Yadav representatives represent Yadavs primarily because they themselves are Yadav and not solely because they are elected to do so. The actual voting is not always considered necessary.

The political ethnography of Ahir Para partly supports such ideas of representation. In Ahir Para, the majority of the Yadavs who belong to a political party are party members of the SP. Overall, of the Yadavs who said that there is 'only one party for their caste', 93 per cent named the SP as being that party (Mathura Election Study 1999). Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh as a whole, in the 1999 general elections, 77 per cent of the Yadavs voted for the SP, and 66 per cent of the Yadavs think that Mulayam Singh Yadav should be the prime minister of India (NES 1999, CSDS). In the light of these data on Yadav caste attachment, the result of the last parliamentary election in Ahir Para may appear contradictory. According to the Mathura survey, in 1999, only 28 per cent of the Yadavs voted for the candidate supported by the SP. In 1998, however, 58 per cent had voted for the SP.

The shift in voting behaviour between 1998 and 1999 has a lot to do with local rivalries and disputes within the community. Voting is used

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[12] For the cultural importance of heroes in Indian politics, see Dickey (1993) and Prince (1989).

locally to express divisions and personal interests. The SP lost support in the last general election not because Ahir Para's Yadavs were no longer close to the Party, but because of rivalries within the community which penalised the local SP leader and thus, indirectly, the SP. I know of people who campaigned for the SP candidate but then did not vote for him. This should be understood as a vote against the local SP leader and his faction, the locally named *Netaji Parivar* (leader's family) and its ally, the *Dudh Parivar* (milk's family). Voting was used in this case to articulate rivalries. It should be added that the fact that the SP was not competitive in Mathura-city electoral politics, and that the candidate was not a Yadav, induced the Ahir Para's Yadavs to privilege clan/faction loyalties over party-caste loyalties in their voting decisions. The shift in Yadav voting behaviour in Ahir Para between the elections of 1998 and 1999 thus involved issues that are not explicitly linked to the political realm, but to personal economic interests and questions of honour.

In fact, the election held in September 1999 was informed by the acrimonies that arose out of two municipality elections, held in April 1998 and April 1999 respectively. In Ahir Para, there are basically three factions which are more or less defined by kinship: the *Netaji Parivar*, the *Dudh Parivar* and the *Chaudhuri Parivar*. Local municipality elections are the arena in which personal issues and economic interests are fought over, since the pursuit of local power is driven by the urge to corner state resources. To be elected to the municipal board has advantages, for a certain budget is assigned yearly to each ward representative for the development of the local area. Part of this money usually ends up directly in the representative's pocket. Furthermore, a ward representative has access to the state administrative machine which provides access to government employment, jobs and contracts. Each of the *parivar*s, therefore, struggles to get one of its members elected in the *Nagar Palika* (municipality board). The ethnography of the municipal by-election for Ward 2, held on 18 April 1999, shows how local elections are used to sort out personal interests as well as questions of honour. Ward 2 includes a part of Ahir Para. This section of the neighbourhood is better known as Regimental Bazaar as it is under the Cantonment Board administration. There are a total of 870 voters in the ward, which is inhabited by Yadavs (300 votes), Dhobi (200 votes), Valmiki (75 votes), Brahmans (50 votes), Brahmans-Carpenters (50 votes), Muslims (100 votes), Christians (60 votes) and others (35 votes).

Arjun Yadav, an advocate and moneylender in his early forties and a member of the *Dudh Parivar*, was elected in 1992. At the time, he defeated

Shiv Yadav, a member of the *Chaudhuri Parivar*. In 1998, he contested again and was beaten by seven votes by Shiv Yadav, who died six months later from a 'heart attack'. The *Chaudhuri Parivar* accused the *Netaji Parivar* and the *Dudh Parivar* of killing him. The stories behind the alleged homicide are highly contradictory. Needless to say, the atmosphere in Ahir Para was incredibly tense, and violent confrontations between the different factions occurred regularly during the course of my fieldwork.

When a by-election was finally called on 27 March 1999, these acrimonies became even more explicit. Shiv Yadav's son, J.B. Yadav, contested against Arjun Yadav. Amongst the other candidates were G.S. Yadav and V. Yadav, both local young BJP activists who tried to create a third front. All the Ahir Para residents were involved in the campaign. The men of the different factions sat in little groups outside their houses with the voting list in their hands, discussing the elections as though planning a war. They looked as if they were really enjoying the 'election game'. Needless to say, all the candidates asked me to campaign for them. They were not only thinking that my support would be of general benefit for them, but particularly of mobilising the Christian votes. 'Who better than a Christian from Italy to do it?' Arjun Yadav said, 'you are the Sonia Gandhi of Sadar Bazaar'.

The election campaign was extremely important because each vote really mattered. The *Chaudhuri Parivar* was confident of being supported by all the Yadavs of their clan (*Javeria*) and by the Dhobis. The Muslims and the *Harijan*s were regarded as 'Arjun' votes. In the evenings, the candidates and their followers canvassed door to door. The *Chaudhuri Parivar* offered saris and cloth in exchange for votes. Vinob Singh, an uncle of the contestant, told me: 'We do not buy votes, we just make presents.' However, Arjun Yadav bought the votes of the Harijans and the Muslims for Rs 200 per vote. The battle for every last vote was a matter both of honour and of interest. Of 870 voters, only five persons did not vote, either because they were in bad health or out of town, the high turn-out reflecting how seriously local people took the election. J.B. Yadav won by a margin of fifty-two votes. The *Chaudhuri Parivar* organised a party to celebrate his victory. In the evening, the younger men of the *parivar* walked through the streets of the bazaar shouting 'J.B. Yadav z*indabad*' ('long live J.B. Yadav') and '*Jai Sri Krishna*' ('hail the victory of Lord Krishna'), shooting in the air with their guns. The election result had partly vindicated the death of J.B. Yadav's father, and the honour of his family was re-established.

Access to state resources is not the only fruit of winning an election. There is the question of honour as well. As others have also acknowledged, factionalism in India is often considered to be a response to 'modern' changes (Dumont 1997: 53). In the case of the Ahir Para Yadavs, the passionate political participation in the municipality election campaign in Ahir Para mirrors the intense feeling of competition and rivalry that exists between the different *parivar*s. This phenomenon is not recent. Rivalries have been described as structurally endemic in communities such as the Jats, the Gujars and the Ahirs in western Uttar Pradesh: 'As nobody within the caste, and no caste by itself, enjoys pre-eminence, the rivalry is perennial there ...'(Gupta 1997: 166). In Ahir Para, informants also explicitly said that rivalries within their community are endemic and not only about material resources. Rivalries are considered ancestral. Paradoxically, the same symbols of Krishna and the ancient democratic Yadavs, which are so often cited as symbols of a successful and united community, were also used locally as metaphors to express the 'primordial' origin of rivalries within the community. Various local tales seek to explain this 'ancestral' phenomenon. Most have the god-ancestor Krishna as protagonist, and narrate how the Yadavs are the cause of the death of their ancestor, and of the endemic rivalries within their community. Amongst these tales, the most commonly known in Ahir Para is the one about the curse of Durvasa Rishi (Sage). The tale goes like this:

A group of Yadav children went to play nearby Durvasa Rishi. They covered their bellies with metal plates (*tasla*) and asked the Rishi what he thought their bellies were covered with. Very annoyed, the Rishi answered: 'whatever it is covering your bellies, that will be the cause of your destruction and endless battles among your people'. The children got scared and went back to the elders and told them about the incident. The elders said the words of the Rishi could not be untrue and ordered the children to destroy the metal plates. With the help of stones, the children broke them into pieces, and then ground them into powder. In the end, only one small piece was left, and they dropped it in the Yamuna river. A fish then ate the metallic piece. When a fisherman opened the fish and found the small piece of iron, he kept it and used it as a spear to hunt animals. He went to the forest to hunt and, taking him for an animal, by mistake he shot the toe of Krishna, who died.

As Vinob Singh said: 'Yadavs will never stop fighting each other, we will never change.' Competition between different factions during the elections is thus perceived locally as an old phenomenon. While formal electoral processes are locally used to express divisions within the community, on the other hand these internal divisions have also indirectly introduced 'democracy' to the neighbourhood. Since the 1960s, the 'democratic' political socialisation of the majority of Ahir Para Yadavs has been mainly carried out through the 'fever' of the municipality elections. Most Yadav males begin their political careers or interest in politics at a very young age by helping their fathers, grandfathers, uncles or cousins in the election campaign for the *Nagar Palika.* This active participation in the local political process also introduces them to city and to district party politics. It is my suggestion, therefore, that the high level of political participation found amongst the Yadavs of Ahir Para has its roots partly in the political 'battles' provoked by rivalries within the community.

In this article, I have shown how endemic factionalism among the Yadavs, as well as their ability 'to do politics' and to succeed in the democratic arena, are all conceived as primordial phenomena. This perception partly informs the way in which a number of Yadavs in Mathura town conceptualise 'democracy', as well as their role in formal democratic processes. The ethnographic exploration of the culture of political participation of the Yadavs in the Ahir Para/Sadar Bazaar locality illustrates, therefore, how 'culture re-enters the political stage' (Spencer 1997: 12) in an urban neighbourhood in western Uttar Pradesh. Such an exploration suggests that the interaction between caste and democratic political processes cannot be reduced to a simplistic model. Different castes have different economic and political histories and different social statuses. Their cultural constitution can be different as well, and this can influence the way their members engage with modern politics. The successful formation of the Yadav community and the political activism of its members can be partly linked to their descent-centred view of caste, to their horizontal organisation, to their factionalism and to their cultural understandings of 'the past' and 'the political'. Ahir/Yadavs' cultural constitution, together with the impressive organisational capacity of the Yadav caste association network, have helped the Yadav community to adapt to the 'modern' political world, and are at the base of statements such as 'we are a caste of politicians'.

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Jains, caste and hierarchy in north Gujarat

John E. Cort

Scholarship on caste has paid insufficient attention to alternative ideologies of caste, such as found in Jainism, and to understandings and practices of caste among the merchant castes that occupy a dominant position in the so-called middle ranges of caste hierarchies. This article looks at caste practice from the perspective of the Jain merchant castes of north Gujarat. Jain castes are excellent examples of the middle-range castes that have always created intractable problems for theories of caste. This article looks at understandings of inter-caste rankings between Jain merchants and non-Jain Brāhmaṇs, and shows how different religious understandings of purity combined with a merchant valorisation of mercantile activity results in the Jain merchants ranking themselves higher than Brāhmaṇ non-merchants. It looks at intra-Jain and inter-caste interactions, and shows how merchant values of an urban and mercantile lifestyle are ranked higher than a rural and agricultural lifestyle. It then looks at intra-Jain, intra-merchant level practices, and shows how wealth and urban residence result in a superior ranking. In conclusion, the article argues for an understanding of caste that does not assume a single ideology and ranking system across the subcontinent. Instead the work of Charles Malamoud, T.N. Madan and Rodney Needham is used to advance an understanding of caste that starts with a sensitivity to contexts of time, place and person.

The subject of caste among the Jains has been approached by scholars in one of two ways, both of which have been inadequate. At one pole is the Jainological position, which distinguishes sharply between 'Jainism'

as a religio-philosophical system and 'Jains' as a social community. This position, as seen in the following statement of Vilas A. Sangave (1980: 72–73), views caste as a social institution that is foreign to 'Jainism' *per se*:

> Jaina religion as such does not recognize the castes in the Jaina community. They were not found in the Jaina community from the very beginning. They are comparatively of a recent growth .... [T]he caste-system among the Jainas is a social, and not religious, institution.

At the other pole is an anthropological approach in which Jains are reduced to merely one among many Indian (or Hindu) castes, and any specific Jain practice or ideology of caste is ignored. As one among many examples we can take G. Morris Carstairs' study of 'a community of high-caste Hindus' in Mewar, *The twice-born*. Carstairs (1967: 16) mentions that in the village he studied, the Baniyā merchants were almost exclusively Jains, but never stops to consider the effect of the Jain religious ideology upon his sociological conclusions.[1]

A somewhat more nuanced, but still unsatisfying, version of this anthropological approach is found in Marie-Claude Mahias's book on foodways among Digambar Jains in Delhi. In her discussion of Jain castes, in the context of patterns of food transaction and notions of purity and pollution, she takes as a given the Bouglé-Dumont three-part definition of castes: they do not share equally or reciprocally in matters of food and marriage; they can be ranked hierarchically according to a criterion

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[1] His approach is even more problematic than I have indicated. He does not say specifically whether the Jains of Deoli are Śvetāmbar or Digambar, although indications are that they are Śvetāmbar. (A further confusion arises in that he describes the lay Jains as image-worshipping, but from his description it is clear that the mendicants who visit the village are either Śvetāmbar Sthānakvāsī or Śvetāmbar Terāpanthī; both of these sects are staunchly opposed to image-worship.) Whereas Digambar Jains of both north and south India wear the *janoī* (Hindi *janeū*; Sanskrit *yajñopavīta*), or sacred thread, and have internalised some aspects of a Brāhmaṇical ideology of caste, Śvetāmbar Jains tend to be scornful of the *janoī* and the associated Brāhmaṇical ideology of a second birth. Carstairs never stops to ponder the adequacy of his title in a situation where one-third of his 'community' denies the importance of a Brāhmaṇical second-birth, and instead says that the only valid way to become 'twice-born' is through *dīkṣā* (initiation) into mendicancy.

See also Susan Bayly (1999: 221), whose otherwise insightful discussion of historical changes among merchant and peasant castes in Gujarat is marred by her inaccurate depiction of the merchants in urban Gujarat as being almost exclusively Vaiṣṇava Hindus, when in fact they are as likely to be Jain as Vaiṣṇava.

of purity; and they follow traditional specialisations of occupation (1985: 37–64).[2] She then juxtaposes to this model some data from her research. She thereby concludes that the Jains do follow the broader Indian, Brāhmaṇical rules of purity and pollution, but neglects to investigate adequately the ways in which, in the Jain context, societal (*sāmājik*) Brāhmaṇical rules of purity are often encompassed by religious (*dhārmik*) Jain rules of purity.

A further problem is that general theories of caste have almost always downplayed or ignored merchant castes.[3] Theoretical discussions have focused on the relationships of Brāhmaṇs to kings, Brāhmaṇs to Untouchables, Brāhmaṇical householders to renouncers, and dominant landed castes to other local castes. These are all relationships in which hierarchy can be clearly demonstrated, and so lend themselves to neat theorising. But merchant castes, in which the Jains are important or predominant in many parts of India, belong to the middle range of most caste hierarchies, and these middle ranges—what Nicholas Dirks (2001: 70) terms 'the great muddle in the middle'—have usually posed such intractable problems to the various theories that scholars prefer to skip over them quickly. Jonathan Parry (1979: 56) mentions that merchants are important landholders in Kangra, but he instead chooses to focus on the Rājpūts and Brāhmaṇs, whom he characterises as the dominant castes in the area. Gloria Raheja (1988b: 19) acknowledges that in the village of Pahansu in northern India the Baniyā merchant households are the only ones that do not engage in a complicated economy of prestations with the dominant landed Gūjars, but never pauses to consider the implications of this for her depiction of the Gūjars as unquestionably dominant. Nor does she consider it important that the Baniyās are Jain (ibid.: 17). Elsewhere (ibid.: 3), she says that there are four castes in the area of her study that are the chief landholding castes, one of which is the Baniyās, and then in the very next sentence indicates that she is interested only in the relative positions of Gūjars, Rājpūts and Jāṭs. A third example is the anti-Dumontian polemic of Declan Quigley (1993, 1994, 1995), who advances a theory that kingship is central to the caste system.[4] In the conclusion to his argument (1993: 154) he presents a detailed figure of the world of caste relations in Nepal from a merchant perspective, and notes that this is a different

[2] See Bouglé (1971) and Dumont (1980: 42–46).

[3] This point is also made strongly by Dipankar Gupta (2000: 116–47).

[4] Quigley's theory is expressly indebted to Hocart (1950), and to a lesser extent to Raheja (1988b); for a strikingly similar argument that also rests upon the conclusions of Hocart and Raheja, see Behura (1993).

perspective from that of the dominant landowners, but then proceeds for the rest of his discussion to ignore the implications of this for his theory.

In this article I look at the practice of caste in north Gujarat from the perspective of the Śvetāmbar Mūrtipūjak Jain Vāṇiyā merchant castes of the city of Patan.[5] Patan is a trading and commercial city in north Gujarat with a population of a little over 100,000.[6] Patan has been a centre of Gujarati Jains since its founding in the eighth century under the guidance of a Jain mendicant and its later ascendancy as the capital of Gujarat under the Cāvaḍā, Solaṅkī and Vāghelā dynasties from the 8th to the 14th centuries. Patan Jains, now resident primarily in Bombay, continue to be one of the most important among the Gujarati Jain communities.

The lengthy list of qualifiers of the subject group of this article is important, for an assumption in this article is that the practice and ideology of caste look different from different perspectives. Merchant castes have occupied a dominant social and cultural position in Gujarat for at least the past millennium. Merchants there have not been socially ostracised as they have in north India (Fox 1967: 313–14);[7] nor has the identity of the Vāṇiyā been as unstable as in Rajasthan, where there tends to be an ambivalent relationship of powerful attraction and repulsion between the Baniyās and the landed Rājpūts (Babb 1999, 2004). In mainland Gujarat there has been a pronounced absence of Rājpūts (or other castes successfully claiming Kṣatriya status) for the past five centuries; those Rājpūts who live in mainland Gujarat, such as the Parmārs in the districts of Baroda and the Panchmahals, while claiming Kṣatriya status, are listed as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and neither interdine nor intermarry with Rājpūts in Saurashtra and Kacch.[8] The most prestigious caste of Brāhmaṇs, the Nāgar Brāhmaṇs, are prestigious largely because

[5] A subtle semantic difference exists between the cognate terms, Vāṇiyā and Baniyā, when used in Gujarati. Both words are derived from the Sanskrit *vāṇij*. In Gujarati, Vāṇiyā refers to the Gujarati merchant castes (but not castes of Sindhi origin such as Lohāṇās and Bhāṭiyās), whereas Baniyā refers to the Marwari equivalents of those same castes. When used by a native Gujarati speaker, Baniyā has a slightly derogatory undertone, as Gujarati Vāṇiyās consider Marwari Baniyās more miserly (*kanjūs*) and less sophisticated than themselves. See also Zwicker (1982: A-75, C-69).

[6] See Cort (2001: 31–60) for a fuller discussion of Patan and the Patan Jain community.

[7] On this, see also Lamb (1959: 29) and Tripathi and Mehta (1984: 153–54). This north Indian ostracisation of merchants may well have been a product of late-medieval attitudes, in particular those of the Mughal court, and may not represent earlier mediaeval and classical attitudes. See Ambirajan (1991) and Pearson (1976).

[8] See also Lobo (1989, 1995) on the low-caste Koḷī Kṣatriyas of north Gujarat, who claim the Rājpūt name of Solaṅkī.

of their success in commercial activities. The rise to a position of social prominence of the agricultural Paṭels over the past two centuries has seen them emulate the Vāṇiyās, not Brāhmaṇs or Rājpūts. Gujarat, therefore, presents us with very different economic and social structures from most other parts of India, and it should therefore not be surprising to see different expressions and practices of caste there as well.[9]

In particular, in this article I look at caste practice from four different but nested foci. The broadest is that of inter-religious and inter-caste relations, between Jain Vāṇiyās and non-Jain Brāhmaṇs. The other three foci are all within the Jain community. The first is that of intra-religious but inter-caste relations, between Jain Vāṇiyās and Jain non-Vāṇiyās. The remaining two foci are within the Vāṇiyā perspective: inter-Vāṇiyā relations among 20 and 10 Śrīmālīs, 20 and 10 Osvāls, and 20 and 10 Porvāls; and then intra-20 Śrīmālī relations among different groupings. An analysis of these levels of caste practice shows that different principles of hierarchy are at work. Purity, which Louis Dumont argues is the predominant principle of hierarchical ordering, is found only in a limited range of interactions, and its definition is contested. More important as ranking principles are wealth, means of livelihood and place of residence. Further, since the dominance of the Vāṇiyā castes is based on commercial and not landed power, many of the kingly expressions of hierarchy found elsewhere in India, which scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Declan Quigley, and Gloria Raheja have argued are essential to the ideology of caste, are noticeably absent. Finally, we see that horizontal separation among castes is as important in the practice of caste as is vertical hierarchy.

In an important but often overlooked discussion of Louis Dumont's theories in the context of caste in Gujarat, A.M. Shah (1982) has pointed out that Dumont tended to overemphasise the principle of hierarchy based upon purity in comparison to the principle of separation or division.[10] I am in agreement with Shah that a theory of hierarchy based on purity is of only limited use in explaining the interaction and intra-action among castes in north Gujarat. When we look at the interactions and intra-actions of castes in north Gujarat, we find that in many cases the principle of

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[9] A close reading of an insightful essay by Tripathi and Mehta (1984) on the class basis of Gujarati society, with traders of various castes at the top of the class hierarchy, indicates that in pre-modern Gujarat the social hierarchy may well have been based more on the socio-economic factors of class than on the ritual factors of caste.

[10] The term used by Bouglé, on whose work Dumont based his analysis, was 'repulsion'; following Shah, and the English translators of Dumont, I use the more generalised term 'separation'.

separation is more operative than the principle of hierarchy (see also Haynes 1991: 55 and Gupta 2000: 15–53). Further, while hierarchy is often present, it is not necessarily hierarchy based on purity and pollution, or on landed power. The operative factors are oftentimes other values, such as the distinction between urban and rural culture, or merchant values of independence, honour and credit-worthiness.[11]

I
Caste in Gujarat: Nested contexts

The Gujarati word most generally translated as 'caste' is *jñāti* (also spelled *nāt* and *nyāt*). It is derived from the Sanskrit root √*jñā*, meaning a 'known person' and, therefore, by extension a 'kinsman' (Monier-Williams 1899: 425). It is functionally equivalent to the Hindi word *jāti*. *Jñāti*, and to my knowledge never *jāti*, is the word used in inscriptions and manuscript colophons throughout mediaeval times in Gujarat.[12] Despite the near homonymy of the two words, their derivations are totally separate, as *jāti* is derived from another Sanskrit root, √*jan*, meaning 'birth'. I am not aware of any significant difference in the use of the two words, nor of any historical reason for the use of the different words in the different areas.[13]

In conversation Gujaratis use the words 'caste' or *jñāti* to refer to several different social levels; which one the speaker is referring to will quickly be evident from the context. We can view these as a set of nested boxes, in which the same categorical term or proper name is used by a

[11] While there are many aspects of his theories that I criticise in this article, I obviously start within a framework that views the work of Louis Dumont as still important in our academic understanding of caste in South Asia. On this see the comment by Susan Bayly, 'The social scientists who will probably have the most enduring impact on the field are therefore those who have taken Dumont's formulations seriously rather than dismissing them altogether' (1999: 23). In oral comments on the conference version of this article, McKim Marriott urged a rejection of a Dumontian starting point for this article, and the use instead of an ethnosociological approach based on the 'Hindu' categories of the three *guṇa*s. I find the use of Sāṃkhya philosophical categories extremely problematic for an understanding of Jain social ordering. Starting from a modified Dumontian framework reflects more appropriately the ways the Jains view and experience their social locations.

[12] One occasionally also finds the elevated word *vaṃś*.

[13] Further south, the words for caste in Marathi are both *jāt*, from *jāti* (personal communication from Gary Tubb), and *jñāti* (Śāstrī 1996). To the north, one finds both *jāti* and *nyāt* used in the various dialects of Rajasthani. The group of people referred to by *jñāti* in Gujarati is very different from that referred to by the same word in Bengali (Inden and Nicholas 1977: 8–11).

Gujarati to refer to ever more narrowly defined social units in defining himself or herself in answer to the question, 'Who are you and what is your caste?' At the broadest level we find units such as Vāṇiyā, Paṭel, Brāhmaṇ and Koḷī.[14] These units have only the broadest of social cohesion, and appear as single units only to the outside observer. They do not serve to define either whom one can marry or with whom one can dine. They operate more on the level of rhetoric and ideology than on-the-ground social reality, although in recent decades they have started to gain a social reality due to the effects of migration to cities and the growth of 'caste'-based voting blocs.

The next level is that of units that generally will dine with each other, but not intermarry. Such divisions in Gujarat among Brāhmaṇs and Vāṇiyās (and some other communities) tend to be named after places, which are the reputed places of origin of the castes. Thus, there are *jñāti*s such as Śrīmālī Vāṇiyā (from Śrīmāl in Marwar) and Ḍīsāvāl Brāhmaṇ (from Ḍīsā in north Gujarat). However, given the broad geographical spread of some of these groups, this level also oftentimes functions more on the level of ideology than social reality.

The most narrowly-defined level is made up of marriage groups, usually endogamous, sometimes called *goḷ* ('circle') or *ekḍā* ('unit'). These are the units within which traditionally people sought marriage partners, and which might also have informal organisational features.[15]

II
Jains and Brāhmaṇs: Purity reconsidered

According to Dumont's theory of caste, caste ranking is based upon the contrast between purity and impurity, which is maintained by strict control over formal ritual transactions. Marriages are contracted only within a narrowly-defined caste group, and in some cases wives can be taken from castes of close but lower rank. Transactions of food are also closely

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[14] The four (plus one) *varṇa* units of Brāhmaṇ, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra (plus Untouchable) operate at an even greater level of abstraction. One rarely encounters these terms, however, except in very theoretical discourse, or when a person is advancing an argument within a social and political context where he wants to foreground the Brāhmaṇical ideological ranking inherent in the terms.

[15] This discussion is based in part on that of A.M. Shah (1982: 4–7). He also discusses an occasional fourth level, called *taḍ* ('split'). I have not come across any reference to such groups in my research in north Gujarat, nor have I found any reference to such units in the fieldwork notes of Thomas Zwicker, who did fieldwork on Jains in a set of villages just southwest of Patan.

controlled. Only raw, uncooked foodstuffs, which are relatively resistant to pollution, can go from lower to higher, while cooked foods go only from higher to lower. A ranking of castes in a particular village can be calculated to a high degree of accuracy through analysing food transactions (Marriott 1968).

An undue emphasis in the literature on food and marriage transactions has contributed to a Brāhmaṇical slant in Dumont's theory. But these are not the only media of transaction and interaction, and looking at other media can sometimes result in a different view of the overall hierarchy.[16]

Hierarchy in Gujarat is as much a matter of socio-economic status (which cannot be separated from moral status; see Cort 1991) as it is a matter of ritual purity. T.B. Naik (1957: 232) has succinctly stated that status in Gujarat is a matter of 'money and more money' (see Pocock 1954: 201, 1957a: 305). In this he does, however, overstate the material basis of socio-economic status, for how a merchant earns his money is also important. While it is accepted that everyone has to operate within the black economy as well as the white, there are practices that can destroy a person's (and family's) prestige at the same time that they earn money. The rare cases of Jains who have been involved in the manufacture or trade of items that involve animal products are perhaps the most obvious examples of such practices, but on a number of occasions I heard comments denigrating a Jain merchant for overly sharp or underhanded business dealings. Douglas Haynes observes of the Jain (and Hindu) merchants in Surat in south Gujarat, 'integrity in business dealings contributed to a merchant's or banker's social standing' (1991: 56). In Ahmedabad, several times I was told the story of a prominent Jain businessman and leader of many religious organisations, who was a partner before World War II in the first Western-style hotel in the city. When people realised that he was an investor in an establishment that served non-vegetarian food, he had to sell his interest in it, for such a source of income was incompatible with his socio-religious standing as a Jain.

Throughout Gujarat, the Vāṇiyās have traditionally been important and powerful castes due to their wealth.[17] When the Paṭels started to achieve economic success in the mid-19th century as successful farmers,

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[16] The same point has been made in reviews of Dumont by Berreman (1971); Bose (1971: 408); Kantowsky (1971); Kolenda (1973: 123); Tambiah (1972: 833) and others. See also Levinson (1982), who employs verbal usage of honorifics to elucidate a caste ranking in a village in Tamilnadu.

[17] Vāṇiyās are not the only merchant castes in Gujarat. Throughout Gujarat one also finds Sonīs (Goldsmiths; they are predominantly Hindu; see Enthoven 1920–22: III,

and then as successful industrialists and merchants, the caste-grouping they chose to emulate in order to raise their status was not the Brāhmaṇs or the Rājpūts, but the Vāṇiyās (see Michaelson 1983: 126; Pocock 1972: 32; Shah and Shroff 1959: 62–63). Unlike in Rajasthan, Saurashtra and Kacch, the Rājpūts in central and north (mainland) Gujarat have not been rulers since the late 16th century, and in many places since the early 14th century (Shah 1964: 85–86). Instead they have been less powerful agriculturalists. They, therefore, have not provided a model of high power status for the upwardly mobile Paṭels to emulate.[18] Similarly, the highest status Brāhmaṇs in Gujarat have been the Nāgar Brāhmaṇs, not because of any ritual or scholarly qualifications, but because they are the one *jñāti* of Brāhmaṇs that has been able to compete successfully with the Vāṇiyās as merchants. Pearson (1976: 21, 130) says that during Mughal times many Nāgar Brāhmaṇs were *śarāf*s (shroffs, bankers), who played a vital role in governmental finances, and whose role in the mobilisation of credit and capital was essential to Gujarat's prosperity.[19] Pocock (1957b: 292) also notes that '[a] reason for the lack of respect for Brāhmans is that few Brāhmans are traders and most prefer a regular and assured salary to the hazards of commercial life'. Vāṇiyās tend to look down on Brāhmaṇs who follow priestly roles, whether in family or temple roles, and characterise them as glorified beggars who are dependent upon others for their livelihood.[20] Here Vāṇiyā values of work and self-sufficiency coincide with the general Jain belief that only mendicants, and not house-holders, should be dependent upon others for alms (see Jaini 1985: 86–87). The primary socio-moral value of the merchant, his *pratiṣṭhā* or *ābrū* ('worth' or 'credit'), is directly tied to the number of dependents he can support (see Bayly 1983: 369–93; Cort 1991; Haynes 1987, 1991: 56–60).

344–48); Ṭhakkars, also known as Bhāṭiyās (ibid.: I, 133–45); and Lohāṇās or Luhāṇās (ibid.: II, 381–84; Thakur 1959; Markovits 2000: 46–47). The Ṭhakkars are from Kacch and Sind, and while they are now Vaiṣṇav, Tambs-Lyche (1997: 245) notes they were 'until recently often non-vegetarian'. There are also several Muslim merchant castes, such as the Khojās, Memaṇs (Memons) and Voras; on these see Engineer (1989). Note also, as I will discuss below, that not all Jains are Vāṇiyās; among their numbers are members of several middle-ranking castes such as Bhāvsārs, Ghāncīs, Ramīs, Sālvīs and Sāṇḍesarās, and in recent years many tribal Parmārs have converted to Jainism in eastern Gujarat (Ahmed 1999).

[18] See Kothari and Maru (1965, 1970); Shah (1975) and Weiner (1967: 95–110) for discussions of conflict between Saurashtrian and Gujarati Rājpūts precisely over the issue of the Gujarati Rājpūts' low status.

[19] See also Spodek (1974: 459) on the political role of Nāgars in Saurashtra.

[20] Compare J.P. Parry's depiction of the low opinion most people hold of the Brāhmaṇ ritualists of Banaras (1994: 34).

To be a salaried worker, or to be dependent upon *dakṣiṇā*-type payments for ritual services, is to be in a situation lacking in *pratiṣṭhā* and, therefore, to have low socio-economic status.[21]

Mrs Sinclair Stevenson (1920: 42) and Harald Tambs-Lyche (1997: 210) note that Nāgar Brāhmaṇs do not serve as priests, and so are not in a position of ritual service. Their occupational independence means that they do not depend upon the donations of others, and Stevenson (1920: 83, 127) notes that they are particular never to receive any form of alms or anything that might be construed as such. Gloria Raheja (1988b) has analysed ways that receiving gifts denotes a questionable ritual status, so we see here that the Nāgars' adoption of more financially independent livelihoods—a strategy leading to increased status in Gujarat—can also be seen as a means of protecting themselves from ritual acts that would indicate lower ritual status. It is this perception of Brāhmaṇs as being of low status due to their dependence on others that is behind the insistence of one Nāgar in a casual conversation that his caste was just Nāgar, *not* Nāgar Brāhmaṇ; Tambs-Lyche (1997: 209) notes a similar ambiguity toward Brāhmaṇ status among Nāgars in Saurashtra. Spodek (1974: 459) also simply refers to Nāgars, not Nāgar Brāhmaṇs.

The claims of the Brāhmaṇs to hierarchical superiority over the Vāṇiyās rests upon their claim to superior purity, a purity based upon and necessary for their performance of the Vedic sacrifice. This emerges quite clearly from Veena Das's study of the *Dharmāraṇya Purāṇa*, the caste-*purāṇa* of the Moḍh Brāhmaṇs and Moḍh Vāṇiyās (Das 1982: 18–90). This text is obviously the creation of the Moḍh Brāhmaṇs, and describes the creation of the Vāṇiks (Vāṇiyās), who are throughout lumped together with Śūdras. They are created by the celestial cow Kāmadhenu to serve the Brāhmaṇs.[22] Kāmadhenu kicked the earth with her hooves, 'and from this earth arose thirty-six thousand Vanikas who were ready to serve, had the shikha (top-knot) and the sacred thread, and were inclined towards giving charity' (ibid.: 20). Das observes that throughout the text the Jain Vāṇiyās are shown attacking 'the special position of Brāhmans as holders of inherent ritual merit within the conceptual scheme of Hinduism' (ibid.: 87).[23]

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[21] See also Tambs-Lyche (1997: 225–26) on the Vāṇiyā emphasis on independence over service.

[22] See also Bayly (1999: 217), who writes that Brāhmaṇical texts 'often portray handlers of money and goods as little more than Shudras, and certainly not as persons of quality'.

[23] While at least some Moḍh Vāṇiyās were Jain at the time of the composition of this *purāṇa* (14th–15th century), and I have found inscriptional evidence of Moḍh Jains from the 14th and 16th centuries, contemporary Moḍh Vāṇiyās are exclusively Hindu.

For the Brāhmaṇs, purity is a primary, religious (*dhārmik*) and onto-logical value. The purity of the Brāhmaṇs derives in part from their very creation. The Modh Brāhmaṇs, for example, were created by the gods in order to transform the place Dharmāraṇya from 'mere physical space' into a holy *tīrtha* (Das 1982: 32). The Śrīmālī Brāhmaṇs are the sons of Ṛṣis who come from throughout the universe to reside in and sanctify Śrīmāla, the city Viśvakarmā built for Lakṣmī (Parmar 1990: 14–15). Similar stories are found for most every Brāhmaṇ caste.[24]

Brāhmaṇical purity is also a matter of the ideal ritualised Brāhmaṇical lifestyle. It is protected and increased by both the required daily rituals (*nityakarma*s) and the required lifecycle rites (*saṃskāra*s). As Patrick Olivelle (1998) has shown in his study of the language of purity in the Brāhmaṇical *dharmaśāstra*s, the Brāhmaṇ ideologues understood that it is impossible to reside in a state of permanent purity; the ritual life of a Brāhmaṇ is designed to enable him to recover the purity that is lost through the inevitable biological processes of human embodiment. This purity is inextricably linked with the performance of the Vedic sacrifices, even though throughout history few Brāhmaṇs have actually been professional practitioners of the Vedic sacrificial rituals.

The Jains have consistently denied the efficacy and validity of the Vedic sacrifice. In fact, many stories of the origins of Jain castes stress that the Vedic sacrifice is nothing but a religious excuse for a barbecue, and is a violent act that is inherent to Brāhmaṇical ritualism but is the very opposite of true religion.[25] For the Jains, purity as defined by the Brāhmaṇs is a secondary, social (*sāmājik*) value, without any ultimate soteriological importance (see also Jaini 1985). Brāhmaṇical purity is for the Jains a matter of karma and the body, and, therefore, a matter of an impermanent and devalued realm that is ultimately to be transcended by the elimination of karma and the release from the body of the innately pure soul (*ātmā*, *jīva*). To give as one example from among countless similar expressions, the 17th-century Jain philosopher and poet Mahopādhyāy Yaśovijay writes, in a liturgy sung frequently by Gujarati Jains, 'The purity which obstructs karma is found in the stopping of desires.'[26] The primary purity for the Jains is that which leads one further along the path to liberation, the *mokṣamārg*.[27] According to Jain values,

[24] See Śāstrī 1996 for the stories of the origin of dozens of Brāhmaṇ castes, largely taken from mediaeval Sanskrit *purāṇa*s.

[25] On this see Babb (1998, 1999, 2002, 2004).

[26] 'Avāñcchakpaṇe karm āvaraṇ śuddhi.' Yaśovijay (1984: 269).

[27] See Cort (2001: 16–30) for a depiction of the Jain ideology of the path to liberation.

purity is not inherited by birth as a Brāhmaṇ, but rather earned through practice and renunciation as a mendicant, or by following ascetic practices as a layperson.

We see here that a significant problem with Dumont's formulation, but one largely overlooked even by his critics, is that he never stops to define what he means by purity in South Asian terms. He essentialises purity and assumes that it is one and the same thing in all contexts. But clearly this is not the case, as there are competing understandings of the meaning of purity within South Asia. In the Jain context the Brāhmaṇical definition of purity is hierarchically encompassed by a Jain definition, for Brāhmaṇical purity is social (*sāmājik*) while only Jain purity is religious (*dhārmik*).[28]

Let me give two examples to amplify this. In neighbourhoods in Patan with a predominantly Jain population, a feast is held for the congregation of the Jain temple as part of its annual flag-changing ceremony. All the residents of the neighbourhood, Jain and non-Jain (generally Brāhmaṇs, Paṭels and Ṭhakkars [non-Vāṇiyā merchants]) alike, are invited. For a non-Jain not to attend would be an insult to the Jains, the dominant caste of the neighbourhood. The food is cooked by Brāhmaṇs, and so can be accepted by Brāhmaṇs attending the feast. The reason I was told for hiring Brāhmaṇ cooks rests only in part upon the purity of the Brāhmaṇs (and the dietary purity of the putatively vegetarian Brāhmaṇs is why lower-caste cooks, who are more likely not to be strict vegetarians, would not be hired); it also rests upon the notion that the Brāhmaṇs who cook such feasts are naturally skilled at such work, which no Jain would take upon himself, since it is a menial task. Several Jains in response to my questions insisted that it was not absolutely necessary that only Brāhmaṇs be hired to cook. Significantly, however, all the food is Jain food, i.e., in accordance with the Jain rules of food purity. These rules are based not upon any Brāhmaṇical theory, but rather the Jain theory of *ahiṃsā*, non-violence. Much food that is acceptable to Brāhmaṇs is unacceptable to Jains either because it is a root-crop (which according to Jain biology is a vast soul-colony), or because it contains too many seeds (and again thereby contains innumerable souls). Both Jains and Brāhmaṇs accept the food because it is cooked by a Brāhmaṇ; but the Jains accept it for the additional reason that it is Jain food cooked according to the laws of

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[28] See Lath (1991: 26–30) for a discussion of a similar distinction, made by the 10th-century South Indian Digambar Somadevasūri, within the dharma of a householder between duties that are worldly (*laukika*) and so incumbent upon all people, and those that are transcendent (*pāralaukika*) and so specific to Jains.

ahiṃsā. According to the Brāhmaṇical hierarchical food-transactional model of caste, Jains should accept all food from Brāhmaṇs; in practice they accept only Jain food, whether it is cooked by Brāhmaṇs or others of suitably high caste. The Jains' reasons for not accepting food cooked by people of low caste are not based upon Brāhmaṇical notions of differences in the ontological purity of different castes, but rather on the belief that lower-caste people are more likely to eat meat or to be involved with unacceptably harmful occupations. Eating food cooked by such persons would involve the eater in *hiṃsā*, violence. The underlying ideology of purity here is not a Brāhmaṇical one, but rather a Jain one of *ahiṃsā*.

The other example concerns the use of food in the ritual transactions (*pūjā*) in a Jain temple. Many scholars have argued that the offering of food to a Hindu deity in *pūjā* and its transformation into *prasād* by being tasted by the deity is intimately related to superior–subordinate relations in the purity-based caste hierarchy.[29] It is precisely such a transaction, however, that is impossible in the Jain context of *pūjā* to a Jina, for the Jina is by orthodox Jain definition not present in the image, and is *anahārī*, 'not eating'.[30] The food offerings before a Jina are only symbolic acts affecting the inner karmic status of the offerant. This food is not to be consumed by a Jain as *prasād*; for so much as a grain of rice which has been offered before the Jina to touch one's lips even accidentally is a ritual fault (*aśātnā*) that must be expiated (*prayaścitt*). Only those who have lower status upon the karmic *mokṣamārg*—those who do not have sufficient *samyaktva*, or 'right faith' in the truth of the Jain teachings— can consume such food, and it is precisely the fact that they consume these food offerings that renders the status of the non-Jain temple *pujārī*s low from a Jain perspective. Since many *pujārī*s (and one should note that the *pujārī* in a Jain temple is not a ritual intermediary, but simply an

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[29] See, among others, Babb (1975: 31–67); Harper (1964); Pocock (1973: 61–62); Sharma (1970); see also Fuller (1979) and (1988) and Toomey (1994: 5–8), who summarise the scholarly debates on the issue. There are actually two different arguments advanced on this issue. One is that hierarchical caste interactions are social reflections of divine–human relations to which concepts of purity and pollution are central. The other is that the divine–human relations in worship are modelled on inter-caste interaction. In both positions, however, the two forms of interaction are seen as dialectically related.

[30] The Jinas, also called Tīrthaṅkars, are the souls that attained enlightenment, taught and established the Jain religion, and then attained liberation. They now exist in limitless bliss, power, awareness and knowledge at the top of the universe. But because they are *vītrāg*, totally without any passions, they are by orthodox definition unresponsive to the petitions of the worshipper. I am simplifying here what is in fact a rather complex and subtle theological issue; see Babb (1988) and Cort (2001: 142–85).

employee who performs non-essential janitorial services) in Jain temples are Brāhmaṇs (as well as members of other middle and high castes), from a Jain perspective by extension all Brāhmaṇs are prospective eaters of food offered in a temple and, therefore, according to the Jain *mokṣamārg* ideology, are lower than Jains.[31] For Jains, the source of purity is not consumption of *prasād*, but rather renunciation of karma, which includes renunciation of the consumption of food.

III
Jain merchants and Jain non-merchants: A hierarchy of class

Let us now turn to the question of ranking within the Jain congregation, for we see that here issues of purity largely disappear, to be replaced by issues of class, occupation, wealth and residence that are central to merchant self-identity. There are eight *jñāti*s of Jains among the roughly 12,000 Śvetāmbar Mūrtipūjak Jains of Patan.[32] At the core of the Patan Jain community, as perceived by Patan Jains themselves in terms of social rank and prestige, are the six Vāṇiyā *jñāti*s of the Viśā Śrīmālīs, Daśā Śrīmālīs, Viśā Porvāls,[33] Daśā Porvāls, Viśā Osvāls and Daśā Osvāls. As I discuss below, '*viśā*' means 20 and '*daśā*' means 10; for simplicity's sake, I write them as 20 and 10. All contain both Jains and Vaiṣṇavs (usually Puṣṭimārg Vaiṣṇavs).[34] Inter-religious marriage used to be common, with the woman adopting the religious tradition of her husband. One aspect of the 20th-century reform movement among Śvetāmbar Jains was an effort to encourage intra-religious (*sādharmik*) marriage, so

[31] The status of Brāhmaṇ *pujārī*s at Hindu temples is also quite complex; see Fuller (1984: 49–71) and Heesterman (1985: 26–44). See Jaini (1985: 87) for a discussion of the similarly low status of the Jain Brāhmaṇs among South Indian Digambar Jains.

[32] This information is compiled from Pāṭaṇ Jain Maṇḍaḷ (1982), a listing of Mūrtipūjak Jains whose *mūl-vatan* ('root residence', i.e., ancestral home) is Patan. Most of these Jains now live elsewhere than Patan, and many of the Jains who reside in Patan have their *mūl-vatan*s elsewhere.

[33] Also spelled Porvāḍ, both derived from the mediaeval Prāgvāṭa.

[34] The Puṣṭimārg is the Vaiṣṇav lineage (*sampradāy*) founded in the early 16th century by Vallabhācārya; see Barz (1976); Bennett (1993) and Pocock (1973: 94–121). According to the literature (e.g., Enthoven 1920–22: III, 414) the Jains are called 'Śrāvak Vāṇiyās' and the Hindus 'Meśrī Vāṇiyās', although the terms 'Śrāvak' and 'Meśrī' or 'Mesrī' are encountered in conversation more frequently in Marwar than in Gujarat. 'Śrāvak' is the technical term for a Jain layman. 'Meśrī' is derived from Maheśvarī, an important non-Jain trading caste in Rajasthan.

nowadays inter-religious marriage is much rarer (see Cort 2000). Jains form the overwhelming majority of these castes in north Gujarat; in 1921, in the northern Kadi district of Baroda state, the area around Patan, Jains constituted 92.6 per cent of the Śrīmālīs, 88.3 per cent of the Porvāls and 97.8 per cent of the Osvāls (Desai and Clarke 1923: 189–90). According to a 1982 residence list of Patan Jains, the Jain population of these six *jñāti*s was as follows (Pāṭaṇ Jain Maṇḍal 1982):

20 Śrīmālī	6,010
20 Porvāl	1,640
10 Śrīmālī	1,280
10 Osvāl	965
10 Porvāl	735
20 Osvāl	500

In general, members of these six *jñāti*s resided jointly in the various Jain neighbourhoods in the centre of Patan, and no neighbourhood was composed solely of members of one *jñāti*. In this Patan differs from Jamnagar, as reported by Banks (1992: Map 2.3), where each of the four main Jain *jñāti*s has its own residential area.[35] In Patan, members of these six *jñāti*s were moneylenders, shopkeepers, wholesale merchants, speculators and jewellers. In Bombay they have concentrated in industry and wholesale commerce; more recently, some have begun moving into stock market brokering and the diamond business.

Slightly lower in status rank than these six *jñāti*s are two *jñāti*s unique to Patan, the Sālvīs and Sāṇḍesarās.[36] The Sālvīs were traditionally weavers, primarily of the famous double-ikat *paṭoḷu*, but also of other cloth. The Sāṇḍesarās were traditionally landlords and, at the lower economic scale, farmers. The Sālvīs and Sāṇḍesarās have intermarried with each other, and have had hypergamous relations as bride takers with Levā Paṭels[37]

[35] I suspect that Ahmedabad, as reported by Gillion (1968: 25), was similar to Patan. See also Doshi (1974: 41–45); while he seems to indicate that the Jain neighbourhood (*pol*) he studied was inhabited by members of a single caste, the fact that he calls this caste 'Jain' indicates that he is not sufficiently aware of the different Vāṇiyā castes.

[36] These two castes also contain both Jains and Vaiṣṇavs (although not necessarily Puṣṭimārg); see Cort (2001: 58).

[37] The Paṭels are the dominant agricultural caste throughout Gujarat, with Levā Paṭels found mostly in central Gujarat and Kaḍvā Paṭels found in north Gujarat. In recent decades they have also become powerful in industry and commerce. Formerly they were known as Kaṇbī, and later took to calling themselves Pāṭīdār as part of the rise of the

of several neighbouring villages. Marriage relations with the Paṭels now go in both directions, as the social and caste status of the Paṭels has risen dramatically in the past 150 years (Pocock 1955, 1972). While inter-dining between these two castes and the Vāṇiyā castes poses no problem, inter-marriage is still rare, occurring only at the highest socio-economic levels in Bombay and Ahmedabad. They traditionally tended to imitate the Vāṇiyās in dress, names and behaviour, and in Bombay some have even adopted the distinctively Vāṇiyā surname Śāh (Shah).

The Sāṇḍesarās and Sālvīs are considered to be lower by the Vāṇiyā castes. In part this is a matter of wealth, for on the whole the Vāṇiyās are wealthier than the Sāṇḍesarās and Sālvīs. But another factor in the hier-archical ranking of the two groups concerns the perceived superiority of an urban (*nāgarik*) Vāṇiyā identity over a rural (*gāṃḍiyā*) peasant one. Many Vāṇiyās identify the Sāṇḍesarās and Sālvīs as converted Paṭels. This identification is acknowledged by the Sāṇḍesarās, but is denied by the Sālvīs, who claim to be weavers brought to Patan in the 11th century by King Mūlarāja I (Elliot 1883: 59–60) or in the 12th century by King Kumārapāla (Bühler and Fischer 1979: I, 253–54). But these verbal denials are outweighed by the fact that Sālvīs intermarry with Paṭels. What we see here is that trade and commercial livelihoods (*dhandho*, *vepār*) are valued over agricultural livelihoods (*khetī*). That many Vāṇiyās derived much of their livelihood from agriculture (as *zamīndār*s, or land-lords), and many Sāṇḍesarās and Sālvīs used their agricultural earnings to engage in commerce, does not change the perception of the Vāṇiyās as being superior urban merchants and the Sāṇḍesarās and Sālvīs as inferior rural peasants.

There is another division within the Patan Jain community that reflects both caste and sect separation and hierarchy. There is a moderate-sized Śvetāmbar Sthānakvāsī community in Patan. This sect is opposed to the entire cult of temples and images that is central to the Mūrtipūjak (Image-worshiper) sect.[38] The subject of whether or not temples and images are appropriate to Jainism has been the source of periodic debate between the two groups for several centuries. But in Patan the primary distinction between the two groups is social and caste-based, not sectarian and ideo-logical. While there are a few Vāṇiyā families in the Patan Sthānakvāsī congregation, the vast majority of the Sthānakvāsīs in Patan are of the

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caste in status (see Pocock 1972). They are generally known as Paṭels (and identify themselves as such) after the surname most common in the caste.

[38] See Dundas (1992: 211–18) and Flügel (2000) on the Sthānakvāsīs.

Bhāvsār (Printer) and Ramī (Mālī, Gardener) castes.[39] These middle-level (and predominantly lower-middle class) castes are considered to be lower by Vāṇiyās. We thus find, from the Mūrtipūjak Vāṇiyā perspective, a dual hierarchy, of inferior caste (on the basis of wealth) and inferior sect (on the basis of theology).[40]

IV
Jain merchants: Wealth, hierarchy, separation

Among the Jain Vāṇiyās of Patan there would appear to be subunits called 20 and 10 among Śrīmālīs, Porvāls and Osvāls. In common parlance 20 in India indicates a whole, and so 10 is a half. These names would appear, therefore, to indicate a numerically designated hierarchical ranking of units within the Vāṇiyā castes of Śrīmālīs, Porvāls and Osvāls. They are usually discussed this way in the literature.[41] Other names for these units also appear to indicate a hierarchical ranking. Mediaeval image inscriptions and manuscript colophons often refer to the caste of the donor or patron in terms of the major (*vṛddhi*) and minor (*laghu*) branches (*śākhā*) or offspring (*santānīya*). In everyday language, they can be called big brother (*baṛe bhāī*) and little brother (*choṭe bhāī*) or big gentleman (*baṛe sājan*) and little gentleman (*choṭe sājan*).[42] But this appearance of a relationship between the 20 and 10 units is deceptive. Traditionally in Patan each of the six units formed an endogamous group. In terms of marriage exchange, the six castes were separate with no marked hierarchy. Furthermore, since there was also complete inter-dining, there was in practice no observable status hierarchy.[43]

[39] Banks (1992: 110) reports a somewhat similar situation in Jamnagar; while the Sthānakvāsī congregation there is dominated by 20 Śrīmālīs, there are also Bhāvsārs and Khatrīs (Weavers).

[40] Elsewhere many Sthānakvāsīs are of the same castes as Mūrtipūjaks. In areas not marked by sectarian rivalry, there is often extensive intermarriage between the two sects. For example, in Jodhpur Osvāl Mūrtipūjaks and Osvāl Sthānakvāsīs regularly intermarry. But several Mūrtipūjaks in conversation in Jodhpur said that most Mūrtipūjak families there resist marrying their daughters into Terāpanth families, for the latter sect (on which see Dundas 1992: 218–24 and Flügel 1995–96) has a reputation for ideological staunchness, and Terāpanth families often insist that an inmarrying woman abandon the temple and image cult.

[41] See for example Shah (1982: 7), who calls these 'status categories'.

[42] See Loḍhā (1953: 55). *Sājan* is a synonym for *mahājan*, a common term for a Baniyā merchant in Rajasthani.

[43] Again, see also Shah (1982: 7).

This may not have always been the case, however. The stories told of the origins of the 20–10 distinction refer to a hierarchy based upon purity of marriage practices (in particular, widow remarriage[44]), and practised in terms of both marriage and food transactions. Of the Porvāls, a story dating from the early 14th century relates that the famous 13th-century ministers of state, Vastupāla and Tejaḥpāla, were the sons of Aśvarāja, a Porvāl man, and Kumāradevī, a widow. Those who dined with Vastupāla and Tejaḥpāla became the minor branch (*laghu śākhā*) or 10 Porvāls, while those who refused to dine with them were the purer major branch (*vṛddha śākhā*) or 20 Porvāls (Sandesara 1953: 26–27; Sangave 1980: 88).[45] The division of Osvāls into 20 and 10 is attributed to the division between those who did and did not dine with the two sons of an Osvāl widow who lived with a Jain 'priest' (Sangave 1991: 85).[46] The distinction between 20 and 10 Śrīmālīs is said to have resulted from the Śrīmālī Vāṇiyās being created from the purer right and more polluted left sides, respectively, of the garland of the goddess Mahālakṣmī (ibid.: 87). Another account says that a Śrīmālī man married a widow; those who dined with him became 10, and those who refused to dine with him remained 20 (Miśra 1993). Similarly, according to a genealogical document, the creation of 10 Śrīmālīs in Pāṭaṇ came about in 1385 ce when a 20 Śrīmālī man married a widow (Jayantvijay 1936: 207, 213).[47]

The stories indicate a complete commensal and connubial separation between the 20 and 10 units of a caste. In practice, however, at least as reported by R.E. Enthoven (1920–22: III, 414–38) and Jñānsundar (in Guṇsundar 1939: 565) from the early 20th century, there was inter-dining between the 20 and 10 units. In terms of food transactions, therefore, no hierarchy was in evidence. Since there was no intermarriage among the units, here the relationship was one of separation, and again not of

[44] Sangave (1980: 91) reports a similar distinction among the Digambar Parvār caste in central India into the 8 and 4 branches, so named because the former does not allow marriage within eight degrees, while the latter, more lax unit only forbids marriage within four degrees. Similarly, he ascribes the origin of the 20–10 distinction among the Digambar Agravāls to the former being the offspring of the daughters-in-law of Agrasen, the founder of the caste, and the latter the offspring of their servant women. While these distinctions do not involve widow remarriage, they do still revolve around the legitimacy of offspring.

[45] Jñānsundar (in Guṇsundar 1939: II, 560–68) cites this story as the origin for the entire 20–10 institution, for he says that the division occurred in all of the eighty-four merchant castes that were invited to the wedding feast for Vastupāla and Tejaḥpāla.

[46] Presumably by 'priest' Sangave means a Jain monk.

[47] See also Lālan (1923: 42–44), who simply says that the Osvāl and Porvāl 10s practise widow remarriage, while the 20s do not.

hierarchy. Nor do Vāṇiyās today perceive the caste names as necessarily indicative of any practical hierarchy. I was told the story of the origin of the 10–20 distinction by several 10 Porvāls, who then regaled me with accounts of the greatness of Vastupāla and Tejaḥpāla and, therefore, by extension of the entire caste. They certainly did not evince any sense of inferiority; rather, they expressed great pride in their caste.

In everyday parlance, however, the terms 20 and 10 are used as general status indicators. Thus, when speaking of the 'lower' conduct of a different group of Jains, many people will often refer to them as '10s'. Such conduct, which is usually subjectively evaluated, includes following an occupation such as agriculture (which has low status among Jains because of its association with *hiṃsā*, 'injury') or being a salaried employee or small shopkeeper (seen as occupations of last resort, without the potential for large material gain found in independent occupations such as speculation or wholesale trading). It can also refer to people who resist modern social customs such as education for women or allowing the boy and girl a say in a marriage arrangement. It can even refer simply to residence in a village as opposed to a city.[48] Sangave (1980: 87–88) says that in the Śrīmālī and Porvāl castes, 20s are mostly Jain and 10s are mostly Vaiṣṇav; I suspect that here his Jain informants were using 20 and 10 to mark their perception of the superiority of Jainism to Vaiṣṇavism. In a similar vein, one account of the origin of the 20–10 distinction among Osvāls says that the 20 Osvāls are descendants of the original Rājpūt converts to Jainism, while the 10 Osvāls are descended from later converts (Tripathi 1981: 9). In conversation the usage of the term 10 to indicate a status judgement has no necessary relationship to the actual caste of the person or party being described. Banks (1992: 51–52) reports a similar usage of the 20–10 terminology to indicate general status ranking in Jāmnagar. I never came across any unit called Pañca (5), although many people assured me that there were such *jñāti*s, and it is found in much of the literature.[49] I attribute the statements on the existence of these 5 units to

[48] See also Banks (1992: 52). Singhi (1991: 140) says that in Sirohi, in southern Rajasthan, 10 Osvāls are associated with business, and 20 Osvāls with service in the royal court. This reflects a specifically Rajasthani Osvāl hierarchy, in which governmental service was valued over independent commerce. See Vidal (1997: 161–62). In a comprehensive 1896 census study of the castes in Marwar state, Osvāls are listed not in the C Class of traders, but in the B Class of professionals, due to their preference for service in the royal court; see Devī Prasād (1896) and Singh (1894).

[49] Cottam Ellis (1991: 84) lists 5 as a subdivision of the Agrawal caste in Rajasthan in a chart, although not in the text of her essay. It is not clear if the chart refers to ideological or ethnographic data.

the generalised usage of 20 and 10: if 20 and 10 indicate relative status, then by the logic of the system there should be still lower groups, which the mathematical logic requires be called 5. Similarly, Sangave (1980: 85) reports even lower units, called Aḍhaiyā (2½). But as I indicated above, the hierarchical relationship between, say, the 20 Śrīmālīs and the 10 Śrīmālīs exists only on an ideological level.[50] From the perspective of the outside observer, these two castes are no more related than either of them are with the 20 Osvāls or 10 Porvāls, and therefore I refer to each of them as a *jñāti*, and count the total number of Vāṇiyā Jain *jñāti*s in Pāṭaṇ as six.[51]

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[50] Zwicker provides possibly contradictory evidence at two places in his field notes. One academic informant in Ahmedabad (possibly a non-Jain) said that the Vāṇiyā castes could be ranked hypergamously as follows (Zwicker 1984–85: 7/5/85.2):

20 Osvāl
10 Osvāl
20 Śrīmālī
10 Śrīmālī
20 Porvāl
10 Porvāl

There is no indication, however, that this informant was basing his statement on observed behaviour rather than a more generalised use of 20 and 10, combined with the local ranking of the castes in Ahmedabad, which I discuss below.

The other instance (Zwicker 1984–85: 10/21/85.7), of hypergamy between 20 Śrīmālīs and 10 Śrīmālīs, coming in a discussion of inter-*goḷ* hypergamy among 10 Śrīmālīs, and inter-regional hypergamy among Śrīmālīs in general, is much more problematic for my discussion.

Vilas Sangave (1991: 233–34) reports that among Digambar Jains of North India, 10s traditionally suffered from religious restrictions vis-à-vis the 20s. For example, in some communities there were restrictions on the rights (*adhikār*) of 10s to worship in temples. For an extended discussion of this by an important Digambar reformer, see Mukhtār (1963: 93–103); see also Nyāytīrth (1935). Such restrictions were not mirrored among Śvetāmbars. Jñānsundar (in Guṇsundar 1939: 564) says that the ban on interdining did not extend to specifically Jain religious activities, such as the congregational meals I have described above.

[51] The shifting nature of these units was frequently apparent in conversation with Patan Jains. Many, especially non-Vāṇiyā Jains, would refer to there being three castes, the Śrīmālī, Porvāl and Osvāl. Many among the numerically and socially dominant Śrīmālīs would tell me that there are four Vāṇiyā castes in Patan: 20, 10, Porvāl and Osvāl, with the speaker assuming the identity of Śrīmālī for the first two. Many Śrīmālīs were ignorant of the existence of 20 and 10 castes of Porvāls and Osvāls. Porvāls and Osvāls were aware of the 20 and 10 distinction among Śrīmālīs and their own castes, but not necessarily among the other non-Śrīmālī caste.

The relevance of any previous hierarchical implications of the distinction between 20 and 10 is increasingly slight. Many younger Jains, especially those who have migrated to Bombay or overseas, are not even aware of the 20–10 difference. Caste endogamy has been eroding among the Vāṇiyā castes for several generations, and while intra-caste marriage may be preferred, factors of class and geography are oftentimes given precedence in arranging marriage alliances. The external perception of the Vāṇiyā castes as a single unit is slowly beginning to become a social reality. I suspect that there has always been some marriage among Vāṇiyā castes, especially given their long history of migrations. Rather than attempt to arrange a marriage in one's former place of residence, many immigrants must have arranged marriages in their new locales. Migration might also be one factor in the development of the 20–10 distinction, as newcomers with a particular caste name would be ranked lower than long-time residents with the same caste name.[52]

Among the Vāṇiyā castes in Patan the 20 Śrīmālī were considered by Patan Jains to be at the top of the social hierarchy due to their economic success. Historical evidence from inscriptions and colophons seems to indicate that in earlier centuries the Porvāls were atop the Patan Jain hierarchy. A count of *jñāti*s of Jains resident in Patan mentioned in inscriptions from the Caulukya dynasty (11th–13th centuries) finds 100 Porvāls, thirty-one Osvāls, and only twenty-three Śrīmālīs (Sankalia 1949: 205–45). Similarly, many of the most important Jains in the history of mediaeval Patan, such as Vastupāla, Tejaḥpāla, Vimala Śāha and Nīnā, were Porvāls. In Ahmedabad the 20 Osvāls for centuries have been the socio-economic elite due to their success as jewellers, and in modern times they have been able to retain that superiority by becoming successful mill-owners and industrialists. A ranking of the Ahmedabad Jains reported by Zwicker (1984–85: 7/5/85.2) makes clear the linkage between social status and economic success: Osvāls are superior because they are mill-owners and wholesale merchants, then come Śrīmālīs who are retail merchants, and lastly are the Porvāls, who are small shopkeepers. Thus we see again a social hierarchy based not on Brāhmaṇical conceptions of purity, nor on Rājpūt conceptions of landed dominance, but instead on merchant values of wealth and scale of independent business. As with other hierarchical rankings we have seen, any effect of this ranking is mitigated by the fact that the three castes inter-dine, and traditionally were endogamous. In terms of food transactions the Jain caste interactions were marked by equality, and in terms of marriage transactions they were marked by separation.

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[52] Laidlaw (1995: 114) makes the same point.

V
Marriage circles: A hierarchy of urban over rural

While traditionally the castes such as 20 Śrīmālī were endogamous units, their size and geographic spread meant that more manageable sub-divisions developed as the operative units. According to the 1931 Census, the last census for which castewise demographic information is available, Baroda State (in the Northern District of which Patan was located) had 34,172 Śrīmālīs, 7,867 Porvāls and 3,505 Osvāls (Mukerjea 1932: 387). The Vāṇiyā castes were probably always divided into loosely defined subunits, hierarchically ranked on the basis of wealth, status and urban residence (the three being, as we have seen, inextricably intertwined). Enthoven (1920–22: III, 437–38) reports seven geographically defined endogamous but inter-dining divisions of the 20 Śrīmālīs in Gujarat, and three of the 10 Śrīmālīs.[53] Jain Vāṇiyā castes in Patan had hypergamous relations with the Jains of the surrounding villages, brides going from the villages to Patan. Zwicker (1984–85: 3/25/85.1, 10/21/85.7) reports that among 20 Śrīmālīs in the villages and small towns in the region of Vadhiyar to the southwest of Patan, there was a general pattern of giving daughters to the east, towards Ahmedabad. Dasada daughters went to Mandal, Mandal daughters went to Viramgam and Sanand, and Viramgam and Sanand daughters went to Ahmedabad. In other words, 20 Śrīmālīs were hypergamously ranked, with the more prosperous and urban east being higher and the less prosperous and more rural, desert west being lower.

In the early years of the 20th century, as a result of the increasing difficulty of finding wives for the men in the villages, Jains formed endogamous associations known as *gol*s, or 'circles' (called in English 'caste', and sometimes in Gujarati loosely referred to as *jñāti*).[54] These *gol*s seem largely to have supplanted the above-mentioned divisions listed by Enthoven. Thus, among 20 Śrīmālīs there was a *gol* of thirty-seven villages between Radhanpur and Viramgam,[55] a *gol* of thirty-six villages around Mandal, a *gol* of 108 villages between Canasma and Mehsana, a *gol* of forty-two villages between Mehsana and Vijapur, and another *gol*

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[53] These are: 20 Śrīmālī: Ahmedabadi, Kathori, Palanpuri, Patani, Sorathi, Talabda and Tharadiya; 10 Śrīmālī: Horasath, Canapahua, Idadiya.

[54] See Enthoven (1920–22: III, 414). See also Banks (1992: 59–61) and Michaelson (1983: 134–35) on the prestige of urban over rural residence.

[55] This was the *gol* studied by Thomas Zwicker.

between Viramgam and Sanand. In addition, the 20 Śrīmālīs of larger towns such as Patan and Radhanpur formed endogamous units. Similarly, among 10 Śrīmālīs in north Gujarat there were *gol*s of thirty-two, thirty-five and forty-two villages.[56] Membership in these circles was never definitively fixed due to the constant migrations of the Vāṇiyās, and by now they have largely disappeared.[57]

The clearest information on the reason for the formal establishment of these *gol*s in the late 19th and early 20th centuries comes from the work of Maureen Michaelson (1979 and 1983) and John Zurwan (1975, 1976, 1977) on two *gol*s of 20 Osvāls in the area around Jamnagar in Saurashtra (see also Banks 1992: 48–50). The Hālārī 20 Osvāls lived in villages between Jamnagar and Khambhaliya, where they were predominantly farmers. The Kacchī or Jamnagarī 20 Osvāls lived in Jamnagar city, and were merchants and traders. Because of their greater wealth, and the higher cultural status of commerce over farming and urban over rural living, both castes considered the Kacchī 20 Osvāls superior to the Hālārī Osvāls. Marriage relationships between the two groups were hypergamous, women going from the Hālārīs to the Kacchīs. In the latter part of the 19th century Hālārī Osvāls started emigrating in large numbers, first to Bombay, and then to East Africa, where they made much money. As a result, the Hālārī Osvāls felt that their status had improved, and that this improved status should be recognised by the Kacchīs giving wives to them. But the Kacchī Osvāls continued to maintain hypergamous relationships with the Hālārī Osvāls, and in the famine of 1899–1901 tried to emphasise further their superiority by giving bride-price (*kanyā-vikriyā*) for Hālārī Osvāl women. Accepting brides in return for bride-price is a statement of much greater social distance than is accepting brides but refusing to give brides in return. The latter practice admits of affinal relations between the two groups, whereas paying bride-price does not admit of affinity. In other words, whereas the latter practice establishes the possibility of an on-going relationship, the former is a one-time commercial transaction. As Jonathan P. Parry (1979: 243) has explained in discussing dowry and bride-price among Rājpūts in Kangra, '[Bride-price] is thoroughly demeaning to the recipient since its acceptance flatly contradicts the ideology of *dan* [prestation]. Dowry is a gift which accompanies the gift of a virgin [*kanyā-dān*]. Bride-price is

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[56] Information on these *gol*s comes from both my own notes and those of Zwicker.

[57] These Gujarati Vāṇiyā marriage circles were geographically endogamous, in contrast to the Tamil clan-based marriage circles discussed by Karve (1965: 216–17) and Burkhart (1978).

explicitly a commercial transaction to which the verb *bechna* ('to sell') and the noun *mul* ('price') is applied.'[58] In reaction to this humiliating shift from dowry to bride-price, which deprived them of the opportunity to gain merit through *kanyā-dān*, and on the basis of their self-perception of increased status due their increased wealth, the Hālārī Osvāls broke off all marriage relations with the Kacchī Osvāls, and set up their own marriage circle.[59]

A brief written history of a *goḷ* in Vadhiyar, the 37 Samāj ('Society of 37 [Villages]'), states clearly that it was formed in 1915 in reaction to the scarcity of brides in the villages due to the bride-giving of the village Jains to the urban Jains of Radhanpur and Ahmedabad (Śāh 1981). It is unclear if there was a similar economic catalyst as in the case of the Hālārī 20 Osvāls, but since the major migration from the villages of the 37 Samāj to Bombay and Ahmedabad, and therefore the increase in socio-economic status, did not occur until after Independence in 1947, I doubt that there was.

In the past thirty to fifty years, the endogamy of the *goḷ*s has largely broken down.[60] The main cause for this has been the large-scale migration of Jains from north Gujarat to Bombay, and in the case of Jains from the 37 Samāj, to Ahmedabad. To a slight extent, the socio-economic niches formerly occupied by these Jains have been filled by Jain immigrants from further north in Gujarat (in the case of Patan) and the Vagad area of Kacch (in the villages of the 37 Samāj), but these new immigrants have for the most part maintained marriage relationships with the areas from

[58] See also Parry (1973: 327); on the superiority of groom-giving to bride-giving, see Khare (1976: 190–91, 204, 224–25).

[59] None of the authors explains why the Kacchīs instigated the shift from dowry to bride-price nor precisely why this shift was so unacceptable to the Hālārīs. My explanation is based on my readings of Parry and Pocock, and my understanding of the cultural logic underlying the different types of marriage transactions. See also Stevenson (1920: 56), who equates bride-price with the low *āsura* form of marriage, and notes that in the early 20th century it was practised by some Jains in Saurashtra, 'though much condemned by reformers'.

[60] The past several years has seen the growth of a new institution, annual 'group marriages' (*samūh lagna*). In the 37 Samāj these need not be *goḷ*-endogamous; only one person of the couple must be from the *goḷ*. The families pay only a minimal fee, and the *goḷ* covers all the additional expenses, and provides each couple with gifts of household implements. The purpose of these group marriages is to help poor families faced with demands for ever-increasing dowry and the difficulty of finding brides for village men. A *samūh lagna* of the 37 Samāj I attended in March 1986, at Shankheshvar, the Jain pilgrimage centre in the heart of the 37 Samāj area, included twenty-four couples.

which they migrated. Many older people still consider an intra-*goḷ* marriage preferable to an extra-*goḷ* marriage, but it is not a matter of great concern to those of marrying age. In Patan, which never had formal *goḷ* institutions (but note that Patan was one of the earlier seven subdivisions of 20 Śrīmālīs), the endogamy of the six formerly endogamous *jñāti*s has also largely broken down over the past thirty years, again due to the changed circumstances among residents of Bombay. Several Patan Jains resident in Bombay were not even aware that their spouses were of different *jñāti*s until I queried them on the subject. What we are witnessing is the amalgamation of the formerly endogamous units of the Gujarati Vāṇiyās into a new, larger endogamous unit, in a process also described by Pauline Kolenda (1978: 122–24). What was formerly the fictive identity by an outsider of the six Vāṇiyā *jñāti*s as a single entity, which one might call 'Jain' or 'Shah' (after the dominant Vāṇiyā surname), is in the metropolis becoming a social reality.

Village-to-Patan hypergamous wife-giving has been replaced in recent years by Patan-to-Bombay hypergamous wife-giving. Families resident in Patan say that it is increasingly difficult to find brides for their sons, regardless of the economic prospects or style of living of the Patan family. Families are unwilling to give daughters from Bombay to Patan, while families in Patan prefer to give daughters to Bombay-based families. Oftentimes, a family living in Patan can find a bride only if the boy promises to migrate to Bombay. The situation is even more difficult for families that still live in the villages. In recent years the large number of Jains who have migrated to Europe and North America has created yet another superior hypergamous situation among Jain Vāṇiyās, with girls going almost entirely from India abroad, not the other direction.

Formerly, one unit of exogamy within the Vāṇiyā *jñāti*s was the *aṭak*, or 'surname'.[61] Among the Jains of the 37 Samāj, who are more closely tied to their north Gujarati roots, *aṭak* exogamy is still largely maintained, while many Patan Jains are not even aware of the existence of the *aṭak*s.[62]

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[61] Vāṇiyās do not, and did not in the past, practice village exogamy, nor in Patan was neighbourhood exogamy required.

[62] Zurwan (1976: 142–43) reports a similar growing ignorance of the rules of *aṭak*-exogamy among Hālārī 20 Osvāls resident in East Africa. Michaelson (1983: 262) provides somewhat contradictory evidence concerning *aṭak*s: she describes *aṭak*s as unimportant kinship categories, saying there is no rule of *aṭak*-exogamy, only the rule of generational separation. This may also reflect the extremely residual status of *aṭak*s among contemporary Vāṇiyās.
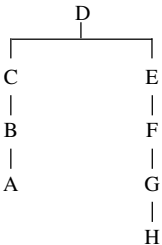
There is no exogamous unit operative among Patan Jains. When negotiating a potential marriage, the parents investigate two factors to determine if the marriage is acceptable or not.[63] One is the range of social and economic factors discussed above. The other is that the two individuals not be related by seven or fewer generations (or in some instances, five).[64]

We see here a significant difference between merchant castes in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Among Rajasthani Baniyās, the patriclan (often but not always *gotra*) is a primary caste unit. Most 'family names' are in fact patriclan names. The patriclans are exogamous. There is no equivalent unit among Gujarati Vāṇiyās. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. In image inscriptions and manuscript colophons from Gujarat dating back as far as the 12th century, I have not found a single instance of the patriclan of a Śrīmālī or a Porvāl being mentioned, and in only a minority of the instances where the donor is an Osvāl is the patriclan mentioned.[65] In inscriptions and colophons from Rajasthan, on the other hand, the patriclan is mentioned almost without fail.

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[63] Some informants mentioned a third factor: that the two families do not have the same lineage deity (*gotraj*, *kuldevtā*), usually a goddess (*kūḷdevī*), but sometimes a male deity (*vīr*). These deities are worshipped soon after the marriage, so that the bride can officially change allegiance from her natal deity to her husband's deity. Others, however, denied that the deities must be different, and I met several couples who had the same natal *gotraj*s.

[64] The generations are counted backward and forward, including the two people under consideration. In the following example, if seven generations is the exogamous unit, A and G could not marry, while A and H could marry:

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              D
        ┌───────────┐
        C           E
        |           |
        B           F
        |           |
        A           G
                    |
                    H
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[65] It is possible that the genealogists (*vahīvañcā* or *kūḷguru/kalgār*) of the Vāṇiyās had clear notions of *gotra*s or *kūḷ*s among the Vāṇiyās. The genealogists for north Gujarati Vāṇiyās lived mostly in Marwar, and came to their north Gujarati clients at most annually to update the genealogies. This relationship has declined sharply in the past forty years, and many Vāṇiyās have no idea who their family genealogist was. For an example of a medieval text about a *kūḷ* of 20 Śrīmālīs throughout southern Marwar and northern Gujarat, see Jayantvijay (1936).

VI
Caste in Gujarat

As we have seen, the nature of practices among and within castes in north Gujarat presents us with a different perspective than that of most previous studies of caste in South Asia. Four factors might be at play in explaining these differences. The first is the effect of time: north Gujarati society as I have observed it from 1985 to 2000 is clearly very different from what it was even thirty years ago, much less a century ago. As a large number of studies have shown, caste has changed greatly over the centuries, due to the effects of colonialism and more recently independence, urbanisation and globalisation (see Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001; Fuller 1996).

A second factor is that Patan is a city. Caste interaction has always been quite different in the city than in the village, but general theories of caste have taken village society as the norm. The residential segregation practised in cities has meant that commensal and ritual relationships have been matters more of difference than of hierarchy, for these were practised in segregated neighbourhoods, not the shared public space. The public space was shaped more by economic than ritual hierarchies. Furthermore, in Gujarat at least, for many centuries local control of cities has been in the hands of the *mahājan*s or merchant councils, and headed by the hereditary *nagarśeṭh* or chief merchant.[66] Patan has not been the residence of a king since the founding of Ahmedabad in 1411, with the exception of a few decades in the early 18th century when it was the capital of Muslim Babi and then Maratha Gaekwad rulers. But even during these brief periods effective control of the city remained in the hands of the local merchant *mahājan* as headed by the *nagarśeṭh*. Patan, in common with most cities in mainland Gujarat, has not seen dominant landed Rājpūts for five to seven centuries, nor have the rulers (Muslims, Gaekwads, and then elsewhere in Gujarat the British) relied upon Brāhmaṇs for much advice in caste matters. The cities of Gujarat are unlike the cities of Rajasthan that were centred upon the founding royal court and citadel, the 'mesocosmic' cities of the Kathmandu valley on which Quigley (1995; in turn, he relies upon Levy 1990) bases his conclusions, or the 'rurban' settlements founded by local Rājpūt landed elites in northern India in emulation of the king's court on which Fox (1970) bases his conclusions.

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[66] On *mahājan*s see Mehta (1984), Misra (1981) and Spodek (1974: 463); on the institution of the *nagarśeṭh* see Tripathi and Mehta (1978).

They are not the sites of intensified ritual with its attendant hierarchical expressions of purity and royal power. The cities of Gujarat have been much more open spaces, dominated by the commercial concerns of the merchant elites. This is perhaps symbolised most clearly in Patan by the fact that the city lacked any significant fortifying wall until the 14th century (Mehta 1983); the walled units were the residential neighbourhoods, each one inhabited by people from a small number of more or less equal castes. Activity indicative of caste hierarchy consisted largely of urban–rural marriage transactions, and economic interactions in the market. The hierarchical principles at work here were those of urbanity and economic prowess, not ritual purity or landed power.

As Shah (1982: 8, 25–26) and Pocock (1957b: 290) have pointed out, caste interaction in urban India places less emphasis on hierarchy and more on separation and difference. While Pocock elsewhere has said that the traditional Indian city 'provided the ground for maximum caste activity' (Pocock 1960: 67), I would argue that caste interaction in the city has usually emphasised separation over hierarchy. As in the modern city, in the traditional Gujarati city purity was more a matter of the home and the private sphere, with the public sphere of social intercourse being a neutral arena. Whereas village-wide feasts and other occasions in which hierarchy is clearly demarcated occur with some frequency in a village, equivalent city-wide occasions are (and were) extremely rare. Such public events are more likely to involve either a caste or a neighbourhood; in either case, a commensal group.

A third factor is that of region. Gujarat is very different from many other regions of South Asia in basic matters such as concern for pollution, social etiquette, the role of women, and the social location of Brāhmaṇs and Rājpūts. Due to climatic uncertainty, the economy of north Gujarat has always been based more on trade and pastoralism than on settled agriculture. Furthermore, Gujarat is an area inhabited by many groups which problematise the definitions of 'caste' and 'tribe', and as a result the practice of caste takes a distinctive shape.[67] It may well be that a combination of regional climate, economy and culture has shaped caste practice in ways different from elsewhere in South Asia.

The fourth factor is that of sectarian ideology. As we have seen, Jain and Brāhmaṇ attitudes to caste, hierarchy and pollution are sharply different. Jain mythology evinces a theory that caste originated as a division

[67] See Unnithan (1994) and Unnithan-Kumar (1997) for relevant discussions of the problematic nature of the distinction between 'caste' and 'tribe' in Sirohi in southern Rajasthan, an area that has extensive cultural continuities with northern Gujarat.

of labour instituted by Ṛṣabh, the first king of this era. The Brāhmaṇ caste was created later, by his son Bharat. While the Brāhmaṇs were originally just Jain laity, over time their tradition was corrupted into the current Brāhmaṇ caste.[68] Jains have in other ways derided Brāhmaṇ claims to superiority. Jinas are always born in Kṣatriya families. This is underscored by the well-known Śvetāmbar story that due to a slight karmic fault, Mahāvīr at first was conceived in the womb of a Brāhmaṇ woman, one of the ten miraculous exceptions to the laws of karma. But, to underscore that a Brāhmaṇ is unworthy of bearing a Jina, Mahāvīr's embryo was then transferred to the womb of a Kṣatriya woman at the intervention of several deities. Jains recognise that Brāhmaṇs are generally literate, and respect them for this (literacy being highly prized by Jains and Vāṇiyās); but in Jain eyes this does not mean that Brāhmaṇs are naturally superior in any way. On the contrary, Jains argue that Brāhmaṇs usually employ their learning in the service of others, and are willing to live on fixed wages given by someone else, rather than test their acumen in the marketplace where one's socio-moral worth can be validated by financial success.

VII
Conclusion

The stories given to explain the division of Vāṇiyā castes into units designated by the ranking names of 20 and 10 (and, putatively, 5 and 2½) would appear to indicate ranking according to Brāhmaṇical codes of purity in marriage, but this is not the basis of any observable ranking among the *jñāti*s. The observable ranking is based instead on economic success and urban residence. The growth and development of the *goḷ*s, the marriage circles, are, as we have seen, the direct result of urban–rural hypergamy. However, this hypergamy is based not upon purity, but again upon socio-economic status and preference for an urban lifestyle. The cultural response to this hypergamy was not any sort of Brāhmaṇical Sanskritisation, based on concepts of a ritually purer lifestyle, but separation by severing marriage ties and raising of status by improving economic standing. Within the Jain congregation, the Vāṇiyā castes are ranked

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[68] See Hemacandra (1931: 155, 343–45). This is a simplified Śvetāmbar version of a Digambar story told at greater length by Jinasena; see Jaini (1985). See also Phūlcandra (1963) for a distinctively Jain ideology of caste posited by a 20th-century Digambar social activist.

higher than non-merchant castes, not on the basis of purity of conduct (as they all adhere to the Jain norms of purity in terms of karma and *ahiṃsā*), but again on the basis of economic location and a perceived more urbane style of living.

In all of these instances, we find in Gujarat a valuation of economic values over those of either purity or land-based power; the superior ranking of the economically successful Nāgar Brāhmaṇs among Brāhmaṇ *jñāti*s underscores the central importance of socio-economic status. In contexts where the underlying values are those of the Jain religious ideology of the *mokṣamārg*, we have seen that Jain-specific concepts of purity are ranked superior to Brāhmaṇical concepts, and the sphere of religion (*dharm*, *mokṣamārg*) is considered hierarchically superior to that of society (*samāj*).

When we compare the practice of caste in north Gujarat with the findings of scholars from other parts of India, we find a greater emphasis on separation, and that hierarchy operates on values of economic power and urban residence rather than either Brāhmaṇical purity or Kṣatriya-Rājpūt landed power. This does not, necessarily, lead to a conclusion that the other scholars have been wrong in their analyses because they have omitted a crucial factor. I am not trying in this article to establish the true structure of a single caste system in South Asia by showing that there is a hitherto overlooked principle at work.[69] Instead, I argue that we need to abandon the attempt to locate a single ideology behind the practice of caste throughout the subcontinent.[70]

I take my lead in this proposition from the work of three scholars, Charles Malamoud, T.N. Madan and Rodney Needham. In his insightful textual study of the three plus one 'aims of man' (*puruṣārtha*), Malamoud (1982) advances the theory that in ancient Indian culture there is not a

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[69] This has been the approach of most post-Dumontian scholarship. Dumont posited a single principle of Brāhmaṇical purity as the generative principle of caste hierarchy. Raheja (1988a, 1988b) posited two principles by juxtaposing Brāhmaṇical purity to the landed power of the dominant caste. Quigley (1993, 1994, 1995) took her analysis further, and posited that the landed power of the king (either in person, or in the successor institution of the dominant landed caste) was the generative principle. Burghart (1978) and Das (1982) posited a structure of three competing ideologies, those of the king, the Brāhmaṇ and the ascetic renouncer. Lerche (1993) proposed a different tripartite scheme, of Brāhmaṇical power, kingly power of overlords, and kingly power of the local dominant caste. Further examples could be added. All of these accept Dumont's theory as a given; they then try to change the generative principle of the structure, but not the underlying decontextualised structural premises of the theory itself.

[70] This point also underlies Dipankar Gupta's (2000) 'interrogation' of caste.

single value that takes precedence over all others and is, therefore, generative of the cultural system. Instead, he argues, each of the three values of *dharma* (ethics and morality), *artha* (economics and politics) and *kāma* (aesthetics and sensuality) can, depending on the context, provide an 'explanatory framework' for understanding all of the four values (the three plus *mokṣa*). He terms this a 'revolving hierarchy'. If we apply Malamoud's insight to the study of caste, we can see that within South Asian societies there are a number of factors—Brāhmaṇical and Jain ideologies of purity, Rājpūt (and other) expressions of kingly power, dominant landed-caste expressions of a localised courtly power, merchant valuations of wealth and economic independence, urban valuation of city over rural life, and others—each of which, depending on the context, is generative of a hierarchically ranked value system that encompasses all (or nearly all) of the relevant society and culture. But no hierarchical ranking is permanent; situations change, and so the relevant hierarchy also changes, in a revolving, never-ending sequence of contexts.

The qualification of context is crucial to the application of Malamoud's theory. Since in his essay he deals primarily with textual sources, the three contexts he lists are (*i*) the specific situation of the relevant person or people; (*ii*) the doctrine at hand; and (*iii*) the semantic level of the discussion. But another triad of contextual factors, deriving from astrology, is commonly found throughout South Asia, as T.N. Madan (1987: 48–71) reminds us in his study of auspiciousness and purity among Kashmiri Pandits. These three are the relevant time (*kāla*), place (*sthāna*, *deśa*) and person, understood to be a 'vessel' (*pātra*) to be shaped by the context. This might seem to be an overly simple statement, but any analysis of caste in South Asia needs to be aware that any specific expression of caste practice will be determined by these three factors. In my article I have explored the practice in north Gujarat. Caste practices are very different as close as Saurashtra and Kacch, and as far away as Nepal, the north Indian plains, and Tamil Nadu. Most of my information comes from the 20th century, and in particular the post-World War II period, and even more particularly the past two decades. Caste practices were different during the turmoil of the 18th century, the height of the Gujarati Sultanate in the 15th century, and the height of the Caulukya kingdom in the 12th century, and in the past century there have been profound transformations in caste practice due to the ever increasing effects of urbanisation and globalisation. Here the observations of Lawrence Babb (2004: Ch. 7) and David Hardiman (1996: 233) on what the latter calls 'Baniyaization' are relevant. This has become a preferred strategy of

social mobility for many castes in western India in the changed socio-economic contexts of capitalism and democracy. Finally, in my article I have been concerned with looking at caste practice from the perspective of Jain Vāṇiyās. Studies that started from the perspective of Brāhmaṇs, Paṭels, Rabārīs, Ṭhākarḍās or tribals[71] would present very different portraits of caste practices, and different interpretations of caste interactions with Vāṇiyās.

Perhaps a grand theory of caste practice is a chimera.[72] The variables are so many that any attempt to account for all of them results in something like a pre-Copernican model of the solar system, which tries to account for so many anomalies that it loses coherence and interpretive value. For all that there are significant social and cultural continuities in South Asia, perhaps the social and cultural unity of the area is at best a heuristic fiction and at worst a political agenda. But caste practices clearly exist, and have existed in South Asia for over 2,000 years. Any adequate understanding of South Asia must involve the study of caste.[73]

Here is where I think that Rodney Needham's (1975) contribution of the concept of 'polythetic classification' can be useful.[74] A polythetic grouping—a concept that Needham borrows from the natural sciences—is one in which organisms are grouped together not because they all share any single trait, but because they have a significant number of shared traits. There is no single feature that is essential for membership in the group, and without which an individual is excluded from the group. Applying this concept to caste in South Asia, I would argue, would put an end to attempts to devise a single grand theory of caste, or to identify

[71] Rabārīs, nomadic in most parts of western India, are settled agriculturalists in north Gujarat. Ṭhakarḍās, also known as Koḷīs, are low-caste agriculturalists; these two, together with Paṭels, are numerically the predominant agriculturalists in northern Gujarat. For tribal and peasant views of Jain Vāṇiyā dominance in eastern Gujarat, see Hardiman (1987, 1996); and in southern Rajasthan, see Unnithan-Kumar (1997: 238–63) and Vidal (1997: 157–81).

[72] In this my conclusion echoes those of Bayly (1999: 365), who asserts, 'no one model or explanatory formula can account for either the durability or the dynamism of caste', and Dirks (2001: 79), who writes, 'perhaps all that can be generalized is the extent to which caste has always been a contingent social phenomenon'.

[73] This same point is argued eloquently by Susan Bayly in her magisterial study of caste. See her concluding sentence (1999: 382): 'if one is to do justice to India's complex history, and to its contemporary culture and politics, caste must be neither disregarded nor downplayed—its power has simply been too compelling and enduring'.

[74] This point was also made by Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1986) in a short essay that has been ignored in subsequent scholarship.

a single generative principle that accounts for all caste practice. Instead, we find that there are a number of values expressed by South Asian caste practices, no one of which is present in all instances, but that together make caste a polythetic family of social and cultural practices that is distinctly South Asian. Viewing caste as a polythetic category fits in with Susan Bayly's observation, 'the social scientists who appear to have the most persuasive models of caste as a conceptual system are those ... who emphasise a multidimensional array of themes, ideals and principles' (1999: 25–26). It also is a flexible enough model to accommodate the wide array of caste expressions due to historical change and regional variety that Bayly so eloquently details in her historical study of caste.[75]

The caste practices of the Jain Vāṇiyās of north Gujarat, as we have seen, share much with caste practices elsewhere in South Asia. At the same time, however, there are distinctly north Gujarati, Jain and Vāṇiyā expressions embodied in these practices; they are not exactly the same as elsewhere in South Asia. They reveal a specificity of time, place and actor. To try to explain these practices by means of theories imported from elsewhere in South Asia results in at best an out-of-focus portrait. At the same time, because of what is shared with practices elsewhere in the subcontinent, an understanding of caste practice among the Jains depends upon an understanding of caste in the larger South Asian culture, as I have shown in this article. Finally, incorporating the features of caste practices among the Jains of north Gujarat into our broader theorising about case in South Asia results in a changed, and refined, understanding of caste.

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[75] This conclusion echoes those of the contributors to McGilvray (1982), an important volume that unfortunately seems to have had too little impact on theorisation about caste.

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Hierarchy, difference and the caste system: A study of rural Bihar

Gaurang R. Sahay

This article seeks to contribute to the conceptual understanding of caste in the light of field data collected from four villages of Bihar. Against the background of two major theoretical positions, the 'hierarchy' thesis and the 'difference' thesis, the article confirms the empirical validity of the 'difference' thesis by demonstrating that castes in these villages have their own ideologies, revealed mainly in diverse and discrete origin tales that contest their hierarchisation on a continuous vertical scale. This does not mean that castes do not hierarchise themselves in respect to one another, but that each caste has a discrete notion of caste hierarchy. Caste members are proud of their caste ideology, and it is this which gives salience to their identity. The phenomenon of caste conflict and struggle for power makes quite clear that castes operate in the villages as separate groups, independent of an all-encompassing caste hierarchy. This apart, there is no specific relationship between caste and occupation, calling into question attempts to hierarchise castes on the basis of occupation. This has implications for the prevailing understanding of the jajmani system.

This article seeks to contribute to the conceptual understanding of caste through field material from four villages of Buxar district of rural Bihar. These villages have been chosen with some caution so that they are representative in a number of ways. Care has also been taken to see that the major castes of this region are adequately represented in the chosen villages. This empirical investigation was carried out against the background

of two major theoretical inputs on the nature of caste, which I will call, for the sake of convenience, the 'hierarchy' thesis and the 'difference' thesis.

I
Hierarchy versus *difference*

The hierarchy thesis derives primarily from the work of Louis Dumont. According to Dumont, the caste system hierarchises Hindus on the basis of an ideology of purity and pollution. This concentration on ritual status is what makes the caste hierarchy a true hierarchy. Considerations of economics and politics are secondary in this scheme of things. Dumont goes on to argue that this hierarchy positions castes in such a way that the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole (Dumont 1988: 66). Further, Dumont asserts, all castes acquiesce in this hierarchy which has universal consensus within Hindu society. Consequently, the fundamental opposition in the caste hierarchy is between the pure Brahmin and the impure Untouchable. Such a hierarchy orders castes from Brahmin at the apex to the lowest Untouchable on a single continuous scale. Secular attributes such as wealth and power are extrinsic to this hierarchy and, if they play a role at all, it is only at the interstitial levels. The two poles remain unchanged and unchallenged.

Homo hierarchicus inspired much scholarly attention, including by Moffatt (1979), Madan (1971) and Milner (1994), along with a special number of *Contributions to Indian sociology*. It also attracted its share of detractors. Berreman (1991) was one of the first to point out that Dumont's understanding of caste was more textual than contextual. Berreman felt that Dumont's view of caste was biased towards the Brahminical interpretation, and did not take into account other points of view. Then came the Kshatriya reaction, notably, Dirks (1987) and Quigley (1993), which emphasised that it was not the Brahmin but the Kshatriya who was the lynchpin of the caste system. This point of view essentially displaced the ritually superior Brahmin with the politically superior king. What remained untheorised, however, was the empirical reality that the assumption of Kshatriya status did not mean unquestioned supremacy over others in the world of caste. The Kshatriya hierarchy is also not a consensual hierarchy, as caste disputes continue to call on different and incommensurate notions of superiority and inferiority as intellectual and ideological support.

Against the 'hierarchy' thesis, Dipankar Gupta argues that over-emphasis on any single hierarchy, whether Brahmin or Kshatriya, ignores the fact that there is no caste that is not proud of its legacy, beliefs and practices. It is for this reason, he urges, that castes should first be apprehended in terms of 'discrete categories', attentive to what each caste considers to be its intrinsic worth. The discrete character of caste is best reflected in the fact that castes believe in their separate and contradictory origin tales, and adhere to different and heterogeneous ideologies. Caste members perform their caste-specific rituals and worship their caste-specific deities. Castes, even the so-called lower castes, always 'justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences' (Gupta 1991: 137). He goes on to argue that: 'only after we accept castes as discrete are we in a position to understand why castes equally pure refrain from merging their identities' (ibid.: 130), resulting in the formation of multiple hierarchies that more often than not are in conflict with one another. Only thus can one appreciate the extent of symbolic prestige that each caste attaches to itself, which in turn provides the requisite energy to uphold caste dignity in moments of crisis and tension. It is also true, as Gupta concedes, that not all these hierarchies are actually operational on the ground. Many of them remain introverted by virtue of the fact that they cannot be bolstered by economic and political power (Gupta 2000: 127). So the hierarchy that actually gets to work its will on others in a caste society is the hierarchy of the economically and politically powerful. This does not mean, however, that other hierarchies are not there, waiting in the wings, as it were, to claim their rightful place in the sun. Understanding multiple hierarchies through discrete caste categories also helps us account theoretically for caste wars and caste competition in contemporary India. A single hierarchy, whether Brahmin or Kshatriya, is a bit too parlous to accommodate the multiple nodes along which castes can, and do, operate.

II
The field

The four villages of Buxar district of Bihar selected for this study were Unwas, Basantpur, Bishrampur and Bharchakia. These villages, needless to say, are primarily agrarian; apart from agriculture there is hardly any other economic activity that takes place there. Most of the off-farm economic operations are also based on agriculture and involve either the

buying or selling of agricultural products. Though there are many similarities among the villages, they are also dissimilar in some important respects, i.e., in terms of size, history, composition and the placement of castes. Two of these villages, Unwas and Basantpur, are very old while the other two, Bishrampur and Bharchakia, are of relatively recent origin. The villages are also of different sizes. Unwas and Basantpur have many more castes residing in them than is the case with Bishrampur and Bharchakia. 'Forward Castes' dominate Unwas and Basantpur economically, while Bishrampur and Bharchakia are economically dominated by 'Backward Castes'. While Bishrampur and Bharchakia are almost spatially divided on the basis of caste, Unwas and Basantpur are not so neatly divided. Taken together, these villages have twenty-four castes between them. Five of them—Brahmin, Rajput, Kayastha, Mahabrahman and Bhumihar—belong to the 'Forward Caste' category. Fifteen of them—Koeri, Yadav, Nonia, Bania, Bhar, Rajbhar, Kamkar, Paneri, Nau, Bind, Gond, Lohar, Bari, Kohar and Sonar—can be termed as 'Backward Castes'. The remaining four, viz., Chamar, Dusadh, Dhobi and Dom, belong to the 'Scheduled Caste' category. Seven Muslim households also reside in one of the villages (Unwas). The existence of a good number of castes belonging to all the three caste categories provides a representative rural situation for a study of this nature.

III
Castes, ideologies and origin tales

Subjects in the caste system do not belong to a single set representing one all-pervasive and elaborated ideology, but to different sets with many different ideologies. Among other things, the existence of multiple caste ideologies is exemplified in the origin tales of various castes. Gupta rightly remarks that: 'Like the Brahman who must go back to the original division in the Purusasukta, each caste has its own theory explaining its origin' (Gupta 1991: 121). In the villages studied, the castes tell origin tales to prove that their history has been glorious right from the very beginning, and that their style or way of life has been purer, or not less pure, in religious terms. On the basis of their origin tales, the villagers claim that they have descended from one or another of the Hindu gods—Surya, Chandrma, Chitragupta, Brahma, etc.—implying that they belong to either the Brahmin, the Kshatriya or the Vaisya varnas. None of the castes in the villages denies the religious basis of its origin. Two of the origin tales—*Chitragupta Katha* and *Shri Chanwar Puran*—are available in

printed form, while the others constitute a significant part of the oral tradition of the individual castes. Their origin tales differ markedly from the Brahminical versions that we find in the Puranas, Manusmriti, Purusasukta and other orthodox Brahminical texts. The question of the historical authenticity of their origin tales is irrelevant because ideology is not confined to proven historical facts.

Members of the Chamar caste claim that they belong to the *Chanwar vansh* (lineage) which had ruled over a large kingdom for many years. The first king of this lineage was Chamundarai, descended from the Sun, the god of light. Thus, those who belong to this lineage are, in fact, Suryavanshi. The Chamars believe that they lost their kingdom and came to occupy a lower position in society because the last king of this lineage committed a blunder by disobeying the lineage norms and rules. They regained their earlier Kshatriya status only with the emergence of saint Raidas—the reincarnation of the Sun—as a member of their caste. The Chamars claim that since they belong to a Kshatriya lineage and have originated from the Sun, they are as pure as any other caste. The Chamars cite the *Shri Chanwar Puran*, a religious text, to substantiate their belief. Members of the Chamar caste believe in the authenticity of this text, which they read out during their caste ceremonies and ritual performances. The local Brahmins, on the other hand, vehemently deny its religious authenticity and authority.

There is another religious text, entitled *Chitragupta Katha*, which deals with the origin of the Kayastha caste. According to this text, all the Kayastha sub-castes (Srivastava, Mathur, Saxena, Bhatnagar, Gaur, Karna and Ambastha) are the children of lord Chitragupta, who himself emerged out of the light of wisdom that emanated from the body of Lord Brahma—the creator of this universe. The Kayasthas not only believe in this text but also worship lord Chitragupta once a year on a fixed date of the Hindu calendar, i.e., on the second day of *Shukla paksha* (moon rising period) of the month of *Kartik* (roughly November). From the Kayastha point of view, those who have originated from Lord Brahma's light of wisdom cannot be impure or less pure than any other caste.

Similarly, the Yadavas or Yaduvanshis believe that they are true Kshatriyas because their forefather is Yadu, while the Rajputs or Raghuvanshis claim descent from his brother, Raghu. Both Raghuvanshis and Yaduvanshis believe that they belong to the lineage of Manu. The Yadavas concede that they have been occupying a lower politico-economic position than Rajputs for a long time. The reason was that Yadu, their forefather, had disobeyed the unjustified demands of his father who, in the capacity

of the king of a large kingdom, disinherited him and did not allow him to act as a prince. Nonetheless, the Yadavas argue that since they belong to the lineage of Manu, they are not at all impure or less pure than any other caste.

Likewise, the Nonias claim that they are Kshatriyas belonging to the lineage of Prithaviraj Chauhan, the last Hindu king of Delhi. They believe that their forefathers had opposed the Muslim invaders, particularly Muhammad Ghori, who attacked Delhi and eventually defeated and killed Prithaviraj Chauhan. The Nonias were, therefore, suppressed and deprived of their land, their main source of wealth and livelihood in the villages, by the Muslim rulers. That is why, they argue, their political and economic position in society has gone down. This does not mean, however, that they have ceased to consider themselves a pure caste belonging to the Kshatriya varna. William Rowe has also recorded a similar story provided by the Nonias in his village study (Rowe 1991).

The Bhumihars claim that, though they have been performing the Kshatriya role in society, they belong to the Brahmin varna. They believe that they are traditionally a powerful landowning Brahmin caste that had long back stopped performing the roles of a purohit (priest). They claim descent from those Brahmins who performed the consecration rituals for Ajat Shatru, who had achieved kingship by dishonouring and killing his father, Bimbasara. In return, king Ajat Shatru donated large landholdings to the Brahmins. Other Brahmins opposed this act, and socially differentiated themselves from the former. This is why, the Bhumihars argue, they do not have marriage relationships with the Brahmins. However, they claim that they belong to the Brahmin varna, and are as pure as other Brahmins and purer than other castes.

The Rajbhars believe that they belong to the Kshatriya varna because they constitute a sub-caste of the Rajput. They claim that they too are Raghuvanshis belonging to the lineage of king Raghu. They argue that the difference between them and other Rajputs is not a caste difference, but a class one. The Rajputs maintain the difference because they occupy a higher position in the agrarian economic structure. However, they assert that rich Rajbhar families have always established marriage relationships with the Rajputs. They cite some examples to prove their point, one of them being the marriage relationship between the Rajbhars and Rajputs of two different villages, viz., Lodhas and Basantpur. Though Lodhas does not constitute the field of this study, it belongs to the same area and locality.

The Koeris in the villages call themselves Kushwahas, believing that they are the descendents of Kush, the second son of Lord Rama. Since Lord Rama and his son Kush were Suryavanshis, the Koeris believe that they belong to the same lineage. As Suryavanshis of the lineage of Lord Rama, the Koeris argue that they have never been involved in polluting occupations and have always followed a pure style of life characterised by vegetarianism and truthfulness. They argue that they have performed the Kshatriya role quite successfully. They cite the establishment of the Maurya Empire as an example to substantiate their belief, claiming that they are a pure caste, no less pure than any other caste, and with a distinct identity.

The Bania caste in the villages is internally quite a differentiated one constituting some sub-castes, most notably the Kalwar and Teli. However, all of them believe that they are the direct descendents of Lord Shiva. They maintain that their style of life has always been ascetic and *sattavic* (truthful), characterised by vegetarianism. Therefore, they claim that they are more pure than, or as pure as, any other caste including the Brahmins. They argue that, apart from creating and earning wealth, they have also successfully performed the role of Kshatriya, a notable example being the establishment of the Gupta Empire.

Castes in the villages publicly demonstrate their belief in these separate origin tales by worshipping the originators or the main representatives of their castes in the form of deities. The organisation and celebration of the Goverdhan Puja by the Yadavas, the Chitragupta Puja by the Kayasthas, the Raidas Puja by the Chamars, and the Vishwakarma Puja by the Lohars are good examples of this. It also needs to be noted that, apart from worshipping their own caste-specific deities separately and independently, the different castes worship some common Hindu deities together.

The origin tales make it quite clear that most of the castes in the villages associate themselves with the Kshatriya varna category, and none of them with the Shudra category. Such a position taken by castes, including those belonging to the 'Scheduled Caste' category, should not be construed as a case of 'Sanskritisation' guided by an all-encompassing ideology based on the religious principle of purity and pollution. In fact, it is a case of the operation of the Kshatriya principle in the villages where power plays a more important role in the formation and realisation of the caste hierarchy (see Gupta 2000: Ch. 5). That is why most of the castes claim that they belong to the Kshatriya varna. The phenomena of caste conflicts and power struggles (addressed in this article) substantiate this view.

The castes whose origin tales have been outlined above are quite prominent in all the three categories of castes ('Forward', 'Backward' and 'Scheduled'), suggesting that all castes in the villages, including the depressed lower castes, consider themselves pure in religious terms. Gupta rightly remarks that 'The discrete character of castes and individual caste ideologies, as reflected in their tales of origin, make it possible for those belonging to the depressed subaltern castes not to see themselves [as] intrinsically impure or despicable' (2000: 117). The castes that are depressed in the villages, such as the 'Scheduled Castes' and many 'Backward Castes', believe that their present condition is an outcome either of misdeeds committed by their forefathers or of elite caste (such as Brahmin) chicanery (see Fuller 1992; Gupta 2000). They maintain that those who consider them less pure or impure impose on them certain rules, ideologies, ritual practices and styles of life.

Different castes represent different ideologies but have certain common values. That is why the various castes, apart from worshipping caste-specific deities separately and independently, worship some common deities together as well. This apart, all castes without exception value and justify the ritualised social practice of endogamy. They believe that since they have different origins, they are biologically different. This brings us back to Gupta's point that castes, even the so-called lower castes, always 'justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences' (1991: 137). Though the practice of endogamy is universally observed in the villages, the manner in which it is practised is not always identical, and may differ among the castes. The practice of endogamy enables castes to maintain their discrete character and different identities even if all consider themselves equally pure in religious terms.

IV
Limits of Sanskritisation

The point that castes subscribe to their own ideologies and accordingly position themselves in the structure of the caste system is further substantiated by the absence of Sanskritisation in the villages. The concept of Sanskritisation in Indian sociology, as defined by M.N. Srinivas, refers to:

a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste or tribal or other group changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, frequently, 'twice born' caste. Generally such changes are followed

by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that trad-
itionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community
(Srinivas 1966: 6).

Srinivas further adds that though all lower or 'non-twice born' castes
want to Sanskritise themselves, only some of them, whose economic
and political conditions have improved, succeed. To quote him: 'While
the sources of mobility lay in the political and economic systems, San-
skritisation provided a traditional idiom for the expression of such mo-
bility' (Srinivas 1991: 315). Thus, the concept of Sanskritisation is based
on the understanding that in the caste hierarchy, lower or 'non-twice
born' castes do not value their own customs, rituals, ideologies and styles
of life. That is why they always try to give them up by imitating the cus-
toms, rituals, ideology and way of life of a higher 'twice born' caste.

Regardless of what may have happened in the past, castes with eco-
nomic and political power do not think of Sanskritising their style of life
but instead re-emphasise their discrete character by highlighting the super-
iority of their own ideologies, customs, rituals and styles of life. They
are not at all ashamed of their identities, but on the contrary, feel proud
of them. This is substantiated by the fact that some of the so-called lower
castes in the villages have achieved so much economic and/or political
(voting) power that, if they wished, they could Sanskritise themselves.
However, they do not feel inferior and, therefore, do not feel the need to
Sanskritise. The Yadav and Chamar in Unwas and Basantpur, and the
Koeri in Bishrampur and Bharchakia, can be cited as examples.

In Unwas, the Yadav is economically the second most powerful caste
after the Brahmin. In terms of numerical or voting power, the Yadavas
are third after the Brahmins and Chamars in Unwas, though the latter lag
far behind in terms of achieving economic power. In Basantpur, the Yadav
caste is placed second in terms of achieving both economic and political
power. Members of the Chamar caste outnumber all other castes in Basant-
pur and thus have considerable political power. However, as in Unwas,
the Chamars are economically weak. In Basantpur, the Rajputs are eco-
nomically the most powerful caste. In Bharchakia and Bishrampur, the
Koeri caste is the most powerful in every sense of the term.

Since the villages are spatially very close, people belonging to various
castes of the different villages are interrelated in many ways. For instance,
labourers of one village hire out their labour power in another village of
the study area. Likewise, landowners of one village lease out their land
for cultivation to the peasants of another village. The villages are also

culturally and politically interrelated. Apart from Basantpur, the other three villages are part of the same Village Panchayat. In Parliamentary and Legislative Assembly elections they vote for the same set of candidates. Even if we take the four villages of the study area as one social whole, the economic and political or numerical conditions of the Yadav, Chamar and Koeri castes remain more or less the same.

Table 1 shows that out of a total of 483 households, the Koeri, Chamar and Yadav castes are represented in the villages by eighty-six (17.8 per cent), eighty-one (16.8 per cent) and forty-seven (9.7 per cent) households respectively. Apart from these three so-called lower castes, there is another lower caste, the Nonia, which is also represented by a substantial number of households (forty-seven [9.7 per cent] households), on par with the Yadavas. Thus, the Koeri and Chamar in the villages have more voting power because they are the most populous castes. However, the Koeris exercise more political power in the villages because in the Unwas Village Panchayat, which constitutes eleven villages, the Koeris have greater voting power than any other caste. In this respect, they are followed by the Yadavas and Chamars (in that order). The political power of these castes in this area is reflected in the fact that in the last Village Panchayat election, held in 2001, almost all the elected candidates for various posts, such as those of Mukhia (head of the Village Panchayat), Ward Member, Block Development Councillor and District Council Member, belong to the Koeri, Chamar and Yadav castes. The person elected for the most important post in the Village Panchayat, that of the Mukhia, was a Koeri, while the Upmukhia (sub-head) belongs to the Yadav caste. The better economic condition of the Koeri and Yadav castes, in comparison to other numerous lower castes such as the Chamar and Nonia (see Table 1), helps them substantially in acquiring political power.

The economic condition of a caste in the villages is mainly determined by its ownership of land (the most important force of production), as well as of modern agricultural machinery such as pumpsets, threshers and tractors. Agriculture is the main occupation, and most of the off-farm trading activities are connected with the buying and selling of agricultural products. From Table 1 we see that the Koeri, Yadav and Chamar castes own 322.16 (21.1 per cent), 212.82 (13.9 per cent) and 34.94 (2.3 per cent) acres of land respectively, out of 1,529.68 acres. The Koeri, Yadav and Chamar own thirty-seven (25.9 per cent), twenty-six (18.2 per cent) and eighteen (12.6 per cent) pumpsets respectively, out of the total 143. Out of forty-nine threshers, twenty (40.8 per cent), two (4.1 per cent) and one (2 per cent) threshers are owned by the Koeri, Yadav

and Chamar castes respectively. So far as tractor ownership is concerned, the table shows that the Keori and Yadav castes own two (10 per cent) tractors each.

Table 1
Caste and Ownership of Land, Pumpsets, Threshers and Tractors*

Caste	Number of Households	Land (in acres)	Number of Pumpsets	Number of Threshers	Number of Tractors
Koeri	86 (17.8)	322.16 (21.1)	37 (25.9)	20 (40.8)	2 (10)
Chamar	81 (16.8)	34.94 (2.3)	18 (12.6)	1 (2)	0
Brahmin	50 (10.4)	535.74 (35.2)	27 (18.9)	9 (18.4)	6 (30)
Yadav	47 (9.7)	212.82 (13.9)	26 (18.2)	2 (4.1)	2 (10)
Nonia	47 (9.7)	13.70 (0.9)	3 (2.1)	2 (4.1)	1 (5)
Bania	30 (6.2)	96.37 (6.3)	9 (6.3)	9 (18.4)	6 (30)
Bhar	22 (4.6)	4.05 (0.3)	2 (1.4)	0	0
Kamkar	16 (3.3)	17.27 (1.1)	0	0	0
Rajput	16 (3.3)	173.73 (11.4)	14 (9.8)	2 (4.1)	2 (10)
Dhobi	10 (2.1)	1.18 (0.1)	0	0	0
Gond	10 (2.1)	0	0	0	0
Kohar	9 (1.9)	7.49 (0.5)	0	0	0
Nau	8 (1.7)	11.92 (0.8)	0	0	0
Lohar	8 (1.7)	4.28 (0.3)	0	1 (2)	0
Kayastha	7 (1.4)	32.48 (2.1)	0	1 (2)	1 (5)
Dusadh	7 (1.4)	4.98 (0.3)	3 (2.1)	1 (2)	0
Paneri	6 (1.2)	0	0	0	0
Rajbhar	5 (1)	11.87 (0.8)	1 (0.7)	1 (2)	0
Mahabrahman	3 (0.6)	16.87 (1.1)	1 (0.7)	0	0
Bhumihar	2 (0.4)	18.75 (1.2)	2 (1.4)	0	0
Bari	2 (0.4)	0	0	0	0
Sonar	2 (0.4)	0.62 (0.04)	0	0	0
Bind	1 (0.2)	0	0	0	0
Dom	1 (0.2)	0	0	0	0
Muslim	7 (1.4)	8.46 (0.6)	0	0	0
Total	**483**	**1,530**	**143**	**49**	**20**

Note: * Figures within parentheses indicate percentage of the total households, land, pumpsets, threshers and tractors.

Table 1 makes it clear that, in terms of land ownership, the Koeri caste has second place. The Koeris also own more pumpsets and threshers than any other caste. There are only two castes, the Brahmins and Bania, who own more tractors than the Koeris. The Yadavas are the third biggest landholding caste in the villages. They are also third in the ownership of pumpsets, just behind the Brahmins. Economically, the Chamar caste is far behind, though it owns a substantial number of pumpsets.

Thus, it is quite clear that the Koeri, Yadav and Chamar, three so-called lower castes, are economically and politically powerful enough to Sanskritise themselves, but do not do so. They observe their own caste-specific customs, rituals and deity worship, have their own caste-specific ideologies, and do not assume the sacred thread. They are avowedly anti-Brahminical. In fact, most of the Koeri and several of the Yadav families do not avail of the services of a Brahmin purohit. Their purohits belong to the Koeri caste. They do not disapprove of widow remarriage; many of them practise and promote non-vegetarianism; they do not make *chandan* (the liquid form of sandalwood) marks on their foreheads, nor grow the *tiki* (a long lock of hair).

V
Multiple caste hierarchies, caste conflict and struggle for power

The fact that various castes in the villages differentiate themselves from one another on the basis of their discrete origin tales, ideologies and ritualised social practices does not mean that they do not hierarchise themselves in respect to one another. In fact, each caste has a notion of caste hierarchy which is constantly contested by other castes. As Gupta rightly remarks: 'Any notion of hierarchy is arbitrary and is valid from the perspective of a certain individual caste' (Gupta 1991: 30). Or, as Gellner puts it:

claims to high status are based on multiple criteria which in many cases conflict or are evaluated differently. In Newar society there is ample scope for opposing views and contested rankings between castes of similar status. Within caste too ... the ranking of lower order groups is also contested .... In different localities the same caste may be ranked and treated differently .... Consequently, any attempt to combine all Newars into a single list is inevitably artificial. At the very least, we need to talk of several sub-regional hierarchies (Gellner 1999: 13–14; see also Bughart 1978; Quigley 1993; Whelpton 1991).

The existence of discrete castes and their multiple hierarchies is corroborated by the conflict among castes and their struggle for power in the villages. To quote Gupta again:

> Conflicts arise on a far more general scale in caste societies because
> of the existence of multiple caste hierarchies, which are all separate
> and 'equal' and support their positions through their own caste ideolo-
> gies (Gupta 1991: 18).

In fact, caste conflict in the villages of Bihar is a general and regular
phenomenon. It has become a part of the everyday life of the villagers,
as has the phenomenon of 'caste armies' such as the Ranvir Sena, Lorik
Sena, Brahmarshi Sena, Sunlight Sena, Bhumi Sena, etc. The villagers
of my study area reported to me that caste conflicts on a large scale gen-
erally take place between the major or numerically more powerful castes
(such as the Brahmin, Rajput, Chamar, Koeri, Yadav and Nonia) because
both parties have the means to sustain the conflict.

In Unwas, fighting between the Brahmins and the Yadavas, or between
the Brahmins and the Chamars, is quite a regular and widely-known
phenomenon. In Basantpur, the Rajputs and the Yadavas, and the Rajputs
and the Chamars, have fought against one another more than once in the
recent past. In Bishrampur, there had reportedly been instances of fighting
between the Koeris and the Nonias, though I did not personally observe
one during my fieldwork. I describe here some of the major cases of
caste conflict that I heard of.

In Unwas, a few years back, some elderly members of the Chamar
caste were beaten up thoroughly with thick bamboo sticks by the Brah-
mins because the Chamars were fishing in a public pond situated in an
area populated mainly by the Brahmins and the Yadavas. The Chamars
went to court for justice. When they realised that they would not get
justice in the near future, they beat up some of the Brahmins in the same
manner in their part of the village, and withdrew the case. More recently,
the Chamars and the Brahmins of Unwas had fought against one another
because some Chamars had tried to establish control over a large piece
of public land for farming, an act which was violently opposed by the
Brahmins because the plot in question was alongside their plots. A serious
conflict had also taken place between the Brahmins and the Yadavas in
Unwas when a Yadav youth eloped with and married a Brahmin girl.
The girl belonged to the most prominent Brahmin family of Unwas,
whereas the boy's family was economically much weaker. There were
huge protests from the Brahmins, but the Yadav of Unwas successfully
protected the couple. This conflict is still continuing. Likewise, despite
protests from the Brahmins, a Kayastha of Unwas married a Brahmin

girl of another village who was related to a Brahmin family of Unwas. Marrying a girl of another caste, particularly one from the same village, is considered a great offence to the girl's caste. The Kayastha is a minor caste in the village but the family concerned is closely associated with the Yadavas. In Basantpur, the violent disputes between the Rajputs and the Yadavas and between the Rajputs and the Chamars have been over the control of public land and the control of polling booths during elections.

During my fieldwork I observed many instances in Unwas of conflict between families belonging to different castes over various issues ranging from the possession of public land to temple entry. In one case, a conflict broke out between a Paneri family and a Mahabrahman family over the encroachment by the Mahabrahman family on public land. In the ensuing physical confrontation, a member of the Paneri family was rather seriously injured. The Paneri family filed a complaint with the police against some members of the Mahabrahman family. The police station is located in a block village, Itarhi, 8 kms north of Unwas. In other instance, a Rajbhar was badly beaten up by some members of the Brahmin family. The Brahmins were not successful in their attempt to settle the conflict at the village level through a compromise, and the victim resorted to police assistance. In a third case, there was a scuffle between members of a Bania family and a Yadav family over the price of an item in the Bania's shop, in the course of which a Yadav woman was injured. The Yadavas beat up the Bania thoroughly and complained to the police, who arrested the Bania. In another case, there was a serious conflict between a Koeri family and some Yadavas over the control and ownership of a plot of public land. No attempt was made to settle the dispute at the village level and both parties went to court to settle the dispute. Another example is of a conflict between a Chamar family and a Brahmin family over the diversion of canal water. In the ensuing confrontation, the Chamars beat up a Brahmin. This apart, two young students belonging to the Kamkar and Brahmin castes had a fight on their way to school. After the father of the Brahmin student beat up the other student, some Kamkars, in an attempt to take revenge, captured the Brahmin the next day outside the village and thrashed him. Similar instances of caste conflicts also took place in other villages, where castes fought each other without obeying any preordained and privileged hierarchy.

Not only do the castes in the villages engage in violent conflicts with each other, they also compete for political power. The competition among castes for political power is best revealed during elections: Village

Panchayat, Legislative Assembly and Parliamentary. In order to maximise their chances of securing political power through elections, castes in the villages make alignments and re-alignments with one another. However, when castes make such alignments they do not follow any hierarchical caste principle. Their alignments depend entirely upon the demands of the situation and may differ markedly from the Village Panchayat election to the Parliamentary and Legislative elections, or from one election to another.

During the Village Panchayat elections held in Bihar in 2001, the major or numerically powerful castes did not make alignments with each other for political power, but sought alignment with the less populous castes of any caste category in the villages. This is because all the major castes put up candidates for various posts in the Panchayat election. In the recent demarcation of the Panchayats, Unwas, Bishrampur and Bharchakia belong to the same Village Panchayat, known as the Unwas Village Panchayat, whereas Basantpur is a part of the Harpur Village Panchayat. Koeri, Yadav, Chamar and Brahmin are the major castes in the Unwas Village Panchayat, whereas Rajput, Yadav and Chamar are the major castes in the Harpur Village Panchayat. Almost all the candidates who fought the election in both the Panchayats for the posts of Mukhia, Ward member, Block Development Councillor, and District Council Member belong to these major castes. There were few candidates belonging to the less populous castes. Such candidates depended substantially on their personal relationships with fellow villagers for votes.

In a Village Panchayat, Mukhia is the most important post. In Unwas Village Panchayat, the candidate who was elected to the post of Mukhia was a Koeri, the most populous caste in the Panchayat. In Harpur Village Panchayat, the successful candidate for the post of Mukhia was a Rajput, Rajput being one of the major castes represented in the Panchayat.

However, my observation of the Parliamentary and Assembly elections in Bihar in 1999 and 2000 suggests that caste alignments in the villages during these elections differ significantly from those of the Village Panchayat election. The villages constitute a part of the Buxar Parliamentary and Assembly constituencies. At the time of election, five political parties commanded keen support from the people in the villages: the Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) and the Indian People's Front (IPF). In the Parliamentary election, the CPI and the RJD supported the CPI(M) candidate, while in both elections the Janta Dal and the Samta Party supported the BJP candidate. In other

words, there was an electoral alliance between the CPI and the CPI(M) in the Parliamentary election, between the CPI, the CPI(M) and the RJD in the Assembly election, and between the BJP, the Janta Dal and the Samta Party in both elections.

Unlike the Panchayat election, where major castes were aligned against each other, some major or numerically powerful castes voted for the same candidate in the Parliamentary and Assembly elections. The Chamar, Koeri, Yadav, Brahmin, Rajput and Nonia, the major castes in the villages, are also numerically powerful at the constituency level. Almost all the Brahmins and most of the Rajputs voted for the BJP candidate, while most of the Yadavas and Koeris voted for the RJD candidate, who also received a large number of votes from other major castes, excepting Brahmins (though the RJD candidate was himself a Brahmin). The Chamars, Nonias, Koeris and Yadavas also voted heavily for the CPI candidate in the villages. The CPI(M) candidate received most of the votes of the major castes, excepting Brahmin and Rajput, in the Assembly election. The IPF candidate in the Assembly election was heavily supported by the Chamar and Nonia castes and to some extent by the Koeri caste. Among the less populous castes, the Kayastha, Bhumihar and Mahabrahman voted only for the BJP candidate. Most of the other less populous castes, such as the Bania, Rajbhar, Bhar, Kamkar, Paneri, Lohar, Nau, Gond, Kohar, Dusadh and Dhobi voted for a variety of candidates. However, most of their votes went to either the RJD candidate or the CPI candidate in the Parliamentary election, and to the CPI(M) candidate in the Assembly election. Thus, unlike the Village Panchayat election, the Parliamentary and Legislative Assembly elections did not demonstrate any clear-cut caste alignments, since more than one major caste voted for the same candidate and most of the castes voted for several different candidates. However, in terms of the 'Forward Caste', 'Backward Caste' and 'Scheduled Caste' categories, it is evident that the BJP candidate derived his major support from the 'Forward Castes' such as the Brahmin, Rajput, Kayastha, Bhumihar and Mahabrahman; the RJD, CPI and CPI(M) candidates received most of their votes from the 'Backward Castes' and 'Scheduled Castes'; and the IPF candidate was supported mainly by the Chamar, a 'Scheduled Caste'. After the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report by the state government, political parties (excepting the IPF) have been using these categories to mobilise the villagers politically, generating intense competition among castes.

VI
Caste, occupation and muddled status

In this section, I discuss the rural and urban occupations of the villagers in relation to the reckoning of caste status. I should clarify that people are not restricted in their choice of occupation by their caste affiliations. The important occupations in the villages are fairly widely distributed among castes, and people of different castes are involved in the same occupations. This is substantiated by the following facts.

There are four generalised occupations in the villages: agricultural farming, salaried occupations, business, and wage labour. The occupation of agricultural farming includes work such as polishing, planting, transplanting, fertilising the fields with chemicals and pesticides, irrigating the fields, harvesting and threshing. Salaried occupation includes both government and non-government services outside the villages. Business in the villages is limited to trading in agricultural products and running various kinds of stores (general stores, saloons, sweets and tea shops, laundries, cloth shops, betel shops, etc.). Eight of the 483 village households have temporarily left the villages, and I have no information about their occupations. Of the remaining 475 households, almost half the households are involved in more than one occupation. There are 103 households which are involved exclusively in agricultural farming, twenty households are involved only in salaried occupations, and twenty-eight households are involved solely in business activities. Ninety-seven households survive on wage labour alone (see Table 2).

Table 2 confirms that agricultural farming is the most widespread occupation in the villages, involving 318 of 475 households and practised by almost all castes. Only three castes of twenty-five caste groups, including the Muslim community, are not involved in agriculture. These three castes —Sonar, Dom and Bind—are numerically small, so-called lower castes, comprising only four families. Fifteen of the remaining twenty-two castes including the Muslims (Brahmin, Rajput, Bhumihar, Mahabrahman, Yadav, Koeri, Rajbhar, Kamkar, Nonia, Bania, Nau, Lohar, Dhobi and Dusadh) have 50 per cent or more of their households engaged in agricultural farming. Fewer than 50 per cent of the households of the remaining seven castes (Kayastha, Bania, Bhar, Gond, Paneri, Lohar and Chamar) are engaged in agriculture. These castes belong both to the so-called upper and lower caste categories, or 'Forward Caste', 'Backward Caste' and 'Scheduled Caste' communities.

Table 2
*Caste and Occupation**

Caste	Number of Households	Agriculture	Salaried Occupation	Business	Wage Labour
Koeri	84	75 (89.3)	25 (29.8)	13 (15.5)	17 (20.2)
Chamar	81	38 (46.9)	10 (12.3)	4 (4.9)	78 (96.3)
Brahmin	48	39 (81.3)	24 (50.0)	5 (10.4)	0
Yadav	47	43 (91.5)	15 (31.9)	5 (10.6)	10 (21.3)
Nonia	47	33 (70.2)	2 (4.3)	3 (6.4)	35 (74.5)
Bania	29	12 (41.4)	2 (6.9)	22 (75.9)	6 (20.7)
Bhar	22	7 (31.8)	1 (4.5)	0	18 (81.8)
Kamkar	15	8 (53.3)	4 (26.7)	1 (6.6)	8 (53.3)
Rajput	16	14 (87.5)	9 (56.3)	4 (25.0)	0
Dhobi	10	7 (70.0)	2 (20.0)	8 (80.0)	5 (50.0)
Gond	10	4 (40.0)	0	1 (10.0)	10 (100.0)
Kohar	9	8 (88.9)	1 (11.1)	2 (22.2)	5 (55.5)
Nau	8	5 (62.5)	2 (25.0)	4 (50.0)	0
Lohar	8	3 (37.5)	1 (12.5)	3 (37.5)	4 (50.0)
Dusadh	7	6 (85.7)	0	1 (14.3)	7 (100.0)
Paneri	6	1 (16.7)	0	3 (50.0)	2 (33.3)
Kayastha	5	2 (40.0)	2 (40.0)	3 (60.0)	1 (20.0)
Rajbhar	5	3 (60.0)	1 (20.0)	0	3 (60.0)
Mahabrahman	3	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	0
Bhumihar	2	1 (50.0)	2 (100.0)	0	0
Bari	2	1 (50.0)	2 (100.0)	0	1 (50.0)
Sonar	2	0	1 (50.0)	2 (100.0)	0
Bind	1	0	1 (100.0)	0	0
Dom	1	0	0	1 (100.0)	0
Muslim	7	6 (85.7)	1 (14.3)	4 (57.1)	1 (14.3)
Total	**475**	**318**	**109**	**91**	**211**

Note: * Figures within parentheses indicate percentage of the total households of the concerned caste.

In this Table the total number of households is different from Table 1. This is because eight households, who own land in the villages, have temporarily migrated to other places.

Salaried government or non-government service as an occupation is fairly widespread in the villages. Table 2 shows that 109 of 475 households have at least one member employed in a salaried occupation, while only four of twenty-five castes including the Muslims (Gond, Paneri, Dusadh and Dom) have no members employed in monthly paid services. There are twenty-two families in all that belong to these four castes. Half or more of the households of six castes (Brahmin, Rajput, Bhumihar, Bind, Bari and Sonar) have at least one member employed in a salaried occupation outside the village. Out of these six castes, Brahmin, Rajput and

Bhumihar belong to the 'Forward Caste' or so-called upper-caste category, but three are very small, 'Backward Castes', comprising only five households. The members of the Bari and Bind castes perform meagerly paid jobs. The table clearly reveals that those castes whose economic condition is better have more households represented in salaried government or non-government work. (Regarding the economic condition of the castes, see Table 1.)

Table 2 also demonstrates that business activities are not limited to just a few castes in the villages. Ninety-one of 475 households carry out business activities. There are only five castes (Bhumihar, Bind, Rajbhar, Bhar and Bari), constituting thirty-two households altogether, that are not involved in business. All other castes and the Muslim community are involved in business. There are nine castes, including the Muslim community, of which half or more of the households are involved in business. These castes are Kayastha, Mahabrahman, Bania, Paneri, Nau, Sonar, Dhobi, Dom and Muslim, out of which the Kayastha and Mahabrahman belong to the 'Forward Caste' category, the Bania, Paneri, Nau and Sonar to the 'Backward Caste' category, and the Dhobi and the Dom to the 'Scheduled Caste' category. That is, both the so-called 'twice born' and the 'non-twice born' castes are represented in this grouping. A substantial proportion of the other eleven castes is also involved in business. In other words, business as an occupation is fairly widespread among the various castes of the villages.

As far as wage labour is concerned, 211 of 475 households in the villages are involved in this. Eight castes (Brahmin, Rajput, Bhumihar, Mahabrahman, Bind, Nau, Sonar and Dom), comprising eighty-one households, do not engage in wage labour (see Table 2). In the case of eleven castes (Rajbhar, Bhar, Kamkar, Gond, Nonia, Lohar, Bari, Kohar, Dhobi, Chamar and Dusadh), over half the households hire out their labour power for daily wages. None of these castes belong to the 'Forward Caste' category, and there is only one person from any of the 'Forward Castes', a Kayastha, who is engaged in wage labour. Out of these eleven castes, Rajbhar, Bhar, Kamkar, Gond, Nonia, Lohar, Bari and Kohar belong to the 'Backward Caste' category, whereas Dhobi, Chamar and Dusadh are 'Scheduled Castes'. A number of members of households of the other six castes, including the Muslim community, also perform wage labour. In sum, wage labour as an occupation is fairly widespread in the villages and, cutting across caste lines, is the second most generalised occupation.

Since all four major occupations are fairly generalised and widely practised by families belonging to the various castes, occupation is not a ground for hierarchising castes or differentiating them from one another. Significantly, when a person starts practising an occupation which is not considered to be his traditional caste occupation or which is not sanctioned by a Brahminical text such as the Manusmriti, he is not condemned or punished by his caste fellows or by other sections of society. For instance, when Brahmins took to ploughing their fields or opened betel or tobacco shops, they were not looked down upon or penalised in any manner for following non-traditional or non-sanctioned occupations. Occupation appears to be determined, first and foremost, by the instrumental rationality of the logic of economic profit and loss. This is also underscored by the way the jajmani system is practised in the villages.

VII
The jajmani system: A family-based institution

The jajmani system no longer provides a basic framework for the division of labour in the villages. It does not determine the occupation of the villagers belonging to different castes, nor does the system encompass each and every individual family or household of a caste. The degree and manner of participation by the families of a caste in the system varies quite a lot. It would be logical and factually correct to say that the individual family or household, not the caste, is the fundamental basis of the jajmani system in the villages, and that economic motivations are primary in the operation of the system.

Four terms are used to designate the persons who are implicated in the jajmani system: jajman, purohit, Mahabrahman and pauni. The term jajman denotes a person who avails of the different services of the purohit, pauni and Mahabrahman and, in return, pays them in both cash and kind. The purohits perform rituals and worship deities on behalf of the jajman. The Mahabrahman also performs rites or rituals for the jajman, but only death-related ones, which are performed for ten days continuously after a funeral. These rituals are meant to provide peace and comfort to the departed soul, and to purify his/her family members. The pauni performs manual work for the jajman, such as washing clothes, shaving, cutting hair, etc., and is generally paid in kind.

The wage for a pauni's services is locally called *bani*. Though the jajmans are supposed to pay a fixed wage for the services of a pauni, this is not invariably the case. The jajmans who ask frequently for the services

of a pauni pay more. This apart, rich jajmans pay more to get their work done expeditiously. The wage for the services of the purohit and the Mahabrahman is locally called *dan-dakshina*, a payment that varies from one household to another depending upon the amount and number of rituals or rites performed. Rich jajmans pay the purohit and Mahabrahman more in an attempt to ensure that rituals are conducted efficiently, as well as to incur greater *punya* (blessing) for themselves. The purohit and Mahabrahman are paid immediately, while paunis are generally paid once a year, during or soon after harvesting.

In the villages, jajmans belong to all castes, whereas purohits, Maha-brahmans and paunis belong to certain specific castes. The work of the purohit is generally performed by the Brahmins, though there is a Koeri family which also acts as purohits. Out of the 464 jajman households in the villages, fifty-one of them, mostly Koeri, employed the Koeri purohit to perform rituals. In Dumont's scheme of things, the role of a purohit is a pure act, meant to be performed only by the Brahmins, the purest caste. Death-related rituals is performed by only one caste, the Mahabrahman. However, the jajman who employs the services of the Koeri purohit also uses him to carry out the work of the Mahabrahman.

Paunis, in the proper sense of the term, belong to only five castes (Nau, Dhobi, Lohar, Bari and Mallah), because they are paid for their services at fixed points of time in a year. Some Chamars, Paneris, Kohars and Dusadhs also act as paunis by performing their traditional caste occupations, but are paid the required wage, depending on the services they provide, when the work is done.

Basically, the jajmani system does not denote a relationship between various castes, but between individual families. Neither are all Brahmin families purohits, nor are all pauni caste families paunis, which would have been the case if the primary component of the jajmani system was caste. In the villages, 187 individual families belong to the Brahmin, Maha-brahman and pauni castes, but only fifty-six of them provide their services to the jajman. Thus, most of the Brahmin and pauni caste families do not provide the services of purohit and pauni to the jajmans; either they have stopped performing their traditional caste occupations, or have com-mercialised them. Though none of the Kamkar households supply water to the jajmans, all the Mahabrahman families provide their services to the jajmans.

While almost all families are jajmans, they do not all ask for the same kind of services. For instance, out of 464 jajman households, 197 use the services of the Lohar (ironsmith), who repairs mainly traditional agricultural

tools and machinery; the Dhobi (washerman) serves only 157 households; and the Nau (barber), 237 jajman households. The Mallah (boatman) serves only ninety-one households during floods, and the Bari, who makes leaf dishes, serves only thirty-five jajman households. All jajman families use the services of a purohit but, as mentioned, fifty-one avail the services of a purohit of the Koeri caste.

A large number of jajman households, 142 in all, do not ask for the services of any of the paunis as they get such jobs done commercially on payment. In other words, 30.4 per cent of the total 464 jajman households in the villages do not ask a pauni for his services, though they use the services of the purohit and Mahabrahman. Only fifteen individual families ask for all the different services of the purohit, Mahabrahman and pauni (Lohar, Dhobi, Nau, Mallah and Bari castes). Nineteen households do not have a regular purohit and Mahabrahman family attached to them, but keep on changing them.

The households that provide the services of pauni, purohit and Mahabrahman expect only economic benefits from the relationship. That is why those who consider their traditional caste occupations less prestigious and economically inadequate have given them up at the earliest opportunity. The economically better-positioned families of the Brahmin and pauni castes do not perform their caste occupations, even though, as Dumont records, the work of the purohit is considered the most pure in religious terms. Clearly, notions of purity and impurity do not guide the behaviour of the people in such matters (see Table 2). Indeed, there are two households belonging to the Chamar and Bari castes that perform the traditional work of the Nau caste, while one household of the Rajbhar caste performs the traditional work of the Chamar caste. When a pauni and purohit feel that a jajman does not pay adequately, they stop providing their services and, in reverse, there are many jajmans who have themselves stopped accepting the services of some or all of the paunis. They argue that the services of paunis are costlier, inadequate and undesirable. Some of the jajmans argue that they avail the services of paunis only because they do not have ready cash to pay for such services (paunis are paid once or twice a year), or because some of the paunis' work (like repairing traditional agricultural implements) is of a technical or specialised nature. The work of paunis, purohits and Mahabrahmans is quite remunerative, particularly when compared with wage labour in the villages

(though calculating the money equivalence is difficult because there is no fixed amount of time that a pauni or a purohit or a Mahabrahman is supposed to spend for a jajman in a year). The households which provide the services of pauni, purohit or Mahabrahman are generally involved in other occupations as well.

VIII
Conclusion

I would like to conclude this article by reiterating that the nature of the caste system in the villages is characterised by difference, in the following senses. First, all castes have their own ideologies, as is evident in the diverse and discrete origin tales of castes that do not endorse the hier-archisation of castes on a continuous vertical scale. This does not mean that castes in the villages do not hierarchise themselves in respect to one another, but that each caste has a discrete and contested notion of caste hierarchy, and no hierarchy has complete sway over the villages. Second, the absence of Sanskritisation in the villages suggests that caste members do consider their ideology pure when compared to others. They do change or modify their ideology, but not necessarily by emulating the beliefs and rituals of higher status castes. Third, the phenomena of conflict and power struggles among castes indicate that they do not share an all-encompassing ideology. None of the castes controls or is able to impose its own ideology on other castes. Fourth, the distribution of the major occupations among various castes denies a specific relationship between caste and occupation as a basis for hierarchising castes: villagers have unrestricted access to the available occupations. Fifth, this consideration applies also to the jajmani system in the villages. The jajmani system no longer provides a basic framework for the division of labour. Ideas of religious purity and pollution do not underlie and perpetuate this system. Economic considerations determine the behaviour of the jajmans, puro-hits, Mahabrahmans and paunis or kamins who constitute the system. In other words, the fundamental unit of the social system is not caste, but the individual family. Many households of the pauni (kamin) and purohit castes have stopped performing their traditional caste occupations, and most of the jajmans have also ceased using the services of some or all of the paunis.

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Replication or dissent? Culture and institutions among 'Untouchable' Scheduled Castes in Karnataka

G.K. Karanth

The idea of replication of what Dumont considered the 'essential principle' of the Indian caste system has tended to deny the existence of cultural autonomy among the very low castes, especially the former Untouchable castes. It was argued that former Untouchable castes replicate the dominant social order within their communities. By drawing on empirical evidence from a Karnataka village, this article attempts to refute the idea of a passive acceptance of a low and subordinate status by the former Untouchable castes. It aims to show that the apparent replication may also be viewed as one of the ways of articulating an independent cultural identity, besides demonstrating dissent against the hegemonic social order. In the process, the article makes an attempt to refocus the Dumontian discourse from 'replication and consensus' to 'hegemony and dissent'.

In his influential work on the caste system in India, Louis Dumont highlighted its 'essential principle' in terms of hierarchy, based on the notions of purity and pollution. This principle is pervasive and encompasses all castes, from 'A to Z' (1980: 149). It is claimed that by participating in such an ideology-based system the participants are legitimising their respective positions, a sign of consensus. This seminal work by Dumont has had a

profound impact on scholarship on the caste system in India. So signifi-
cant has been his thesis, that 'in many instances the authors themselves
may not be aware of their indebtedness to Dumont' (Gupta 2000: 62).
One conscious effort to apply and extend Dumont's thesis has been by
Michael Moffatt, the publication of whose monograph (1979) provided
an impetus for the revival of studies on the culture and autonomy of
some of the lowest castes in India. Several others have attempted to find
further evidence of, or to question the phenomenon of replication of the
dominant social order within the 'excluded' communities of the former
Untouchables.[1] Much of the literature pertains to the Tamil-speaking
areas of India and elsewhere (e.g., Caplan 1980; Deliège 1988, 1992,
1993a, 1993b, 1994; Dube 1998; McGilvray 1983; Mosse 1986, 1994;
Vincentnathan 1987), although there are contributions from other parts
of the subcontinent as well (e.g., Gellner 1995; Patwardhan 1973).

Despite the contiguity of the two states, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu
have important differences with respect to the 'social construction of
subordination' (Mosse 1994) of the former Untouchable castes. An
attempt is made in this article to draw together some empirical evidence
from a Karnataka village, concentrating on the theme of 'replication and
consensus'. The article argues that, by stressing institutional similarities
among the Untouchable castes and the so-called 'higher' castes, scholars
like Dumont and Moffatt attribute a passive acceptance of low status by
the former. On the contrary, I hope to show how replication may also be
seen as a way of establishing an independent cultural identity as well as
expressing dissent against the hegemony of the dominant social order.
Such dissent, however, does not go unchallenged, and the article points
both to the hegemonic dominance of the upper castes and to the means
which are at the disposal of Untouchable castes to achieve cultural
autonomy.

The article is divided into four sections. The first discusses Moffatt's
hypothesis. This is followed by an introduction to the Untouchable castes
of Rajapura, the village from where my evidence is drawn. In the third
section, I present some examples to show how replication is not neces-
sarily consensus, and how, even over a period of time, dissent has been
possible for the Untouchable castes. In the final section, I conclude that
the apparent similarities in cultural institutions between the ex-Untouchable

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[1] No offence is meant in using the term Untouchable. With a view to be precise and
enable comparison, the use of caste names has been in the form in which people prefer
to identify themselves. No disrespect is intended either to the people of the respective
castes or to the law of the land.

castes and the rest are not necessarily replication arising out of consensus, but also can be read as forms of protest.

I
Replication and consensus

During the year 1972, Michael Moffatt studied a village not very far from Chennai (formerly Madras) city, and concluded that within the Untouchable communities there was a replication of the 'entire set of institutions and of ranked relations from which they have been excluded by the higher castes by reasons of their extreme lowness' (1979: 5). Such a replication takes place when these castes are excluded 'for reason of their collective impurity from particular relations with higher beings (both human and divine)' (ibid.: 4). Following Dumont (1980), Moffatt found a 'cultural consensus from the top to the bottom of a local hierarchy, a consensus very much participated in by the Untouchables', which consists of 'deeper and often unarticulated construction of cultural identities' (Moffatt 1979: 3–4). Moffatt further argued that complementary behaviour is only a weaker indicator of consensus, for they might be acting in accord with the definitions and norms of the total system because of the power of higher castes. The stronger indicator is when they replicate.

Gupta (2000: 54–85) lists a number of problems associated with Moffatt's extension of the Dumontian thesis. First, Moffatt groups all the Untouchable communities together, as if there is solidarity among them sufficient to replicate that from which they have been excluded. (Indeed, one of the bases for Deliège's refutation of Moffatt's hypothesis [1992] is lack of evidence for such solidarity.) One might accept the hypothesis of replication of a ranked order among the different Untouchable castes if they had been in agreement among themselves about their status in relation to each other, but what one finds, as shown later in this article, is that there is no consensus among the Untouchable castes as to who is higher or who lower, and that the different elements of the Untouchable communities generally do not interact with each other. There are no clearly defined rules legitimising the differential status between the different 'Harijan/Dalit' and former Untouchable castes.

Second, there are problems in accepting the notions of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' as Moffatt conceptualises them. They presuppose a mutually exclusive experience of certain castes. There are at least two features among the different Untouchable castes that render the application of notions of inclusion and exclusion much more complex. Let us first ask

what makes up 'inclusion'. Since Moffatt, Deliège (1992) and Mosse (1994) use the Jajmani roles played by the different Untouchable castes as evidence either for or against the hypotheses of inclusion, exclusion, replication and consensus, I shall base my arguments in that context. Does the inclusion of a *few households* from the different Untouchable castes locally into the network of the exchange of goods and services imply the *inclusion of the whole community*? The rendering of services and supply of goods were customarily obligatory for certain castes in most multi-caste village communities. The Untouchable castes are included in the sense that they have a role to play in rendering services, while they are 'excluded' in the sense that they do not receive services from the other castes.[2] One finds certain differences between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in terms of inclusion and exclusion in the context of the village as a whole, and the households in particular. Unlike Tamil Nadu, in the old Mysore region it was not the case that *each* landowning upper-caste household had an Untouchable caste household customarily assigned to serve in a range of contexts. In Tamil Nadu, every single Harijan household had an *aiyavitu* to which it was customarily assigned, in addition to their serving the village as a whole, whereas in Karnataka, or at least in the old Mysore region, a few village-oriented service specialisations were assigned to a few Untouchable caste households. The service relationships did not 'include' the entire population or households of the caste specialising in an occupation. How does one view such castes? Are they to be seen as 'included' in the sense Moffatt does, even if only a few households have a role to play in a village's equivalent of Jajmani relations? Or, should they be treated as 'excluded', since a majority of households in the caste do not have any role to play in it?

Moffatt's work does not throw light on the paradoxical nature of the social changes that have occurred in Tamil Nadu since the beginning of the 20th century. Many of the dominant castes in Tamil Nadu were non-Brahmans who took an active part in the non-Brahman and Dravidian movements. These movements had questioned and rejected the Brahmanical supremacy and the cultural hegemony of a Brahmanical social order. Yet the subordination of Untouchable castes and the replication of a social order were based on the principles of caste hierarchy, on notions of purity and pollution. How does one explain the replication of hierarchy by the Untouchable castes? From which social order were they excluded: the one rejected by the dominant landowning castes in the villages or the

[2] Mosse (1994: 75) recognises this difference in the context of his Tamil Nadu village.

one replicated by such castes? These are some questions that remain unanswered in Moffatt's treatment of the Tamil Nadu data.

Finally, the notions of inclusion and exclusion, and the accompanying replication and consensus as outlined by Moffatt or as critiqued by Deliège (1992, 1993a), both conceal important changes that have been sweeping the countryside for the last few decades. Whether or not there are similar or parallel institutions among the former Untouchable castes, a search for replication obscures the rejection of the caste ideology as imposed on the concerned caste. It is perhaps for this reason that Moffatt asserts that the Untouchables do not possess a sub-culture of their own, and that they act in accordance with the idea of their being subordinated to the other castes in the dominant social order. Contrariwise, it is also perhaps for this reason that Deliège interprets the lack of interaction among the different Harijan communities (notably the Pallars and Paraiyars) as being indicative of the absence of hierarchy among them.

The discourse on 'replication and consensus' originating in the work of Dumont and Moffatt conceals efforts on the part of the former Untouchable castes to forge an identity of their own in contradiction to the dominant social order.

II
The 'Untouchable' Scheduled Castes in Rajapura

In this article I seek to shift the discourse from 'replication and consensus' to hegemony and dissent. Such a shift allows scope for dealing with historical changes, at least change within living memory, in conceptions of self among the former Untouchable castes both in the past and the present. The hegemony referred to is that of the locally dominant castes. Despite the several criticisms levelled against the concept of dominant caste in India (see, e.g., Dube 1968; Dumont 1980; Gardner 1968; Oommen 1970), the phenomenon of castes operating in rural society as dominant groups is well documented. In a later statement, the author of the concept, M.N. Srinivas, wrote that 'post-independent India, certainly at the regional if not state level, is an India of dominant castes' (Srinivas 1987: 11).

At the risk of over-simplification, it may be stated that dominant castes prescribe and enforce locally a pattern of inter-caste relationships. Such a pattern, while not altogether at variance with that found in the region, regulates the internal social order of the village over which its dominance operates, ensuring that the different designated castes render the customary services to the other eligible castes under the Jajmani system of

exchange of services and goods; the management of the use of common property resources; the conduct of village community events such as the festival of the village deity, the festival of the cattle, etc.; and the maintenance of the relationship of the community with external institutions and society at large. The dominant castes in multi-caste villages have usually provided the model for the other castes of upward social mobility, whether in terms of Sanskritisation or through the pursuit of new economic opportunities. In terms of Sanskritisation, the dominant castes themselves may have had others as their own reference model, this in turn becoming the model for the other castes. As a model in economic terms, it may be argued that the dominant castes lead in the adoption of innovative methods of agriculture, education and off-farm and urban employment. Their success sets a model for the rest to follow. The dominant castes played important roles as arbitrators of disputes between individuals within a caste or between castes. While thus directing village affairs, the dominant caste usually derived advantages for itself from the subordination of the others. However, a given caste did not always hold a decisive dominance: castes that were close to it in terms of numerical and economic preponderance always posed a challenge to its dominance (Charsley 1998). Competition came from other upwardly mobile castes whose economic fortunes had improved through land reforms or the purchase of land, urban education, employment and the new economic and political opportunities. A typical response to the competition for dominance was by way of forging old or new alliances with other subordinate castes, or a 'withdrawal' of the caste from exercising dominance (Barnett 1973). It is not suggested that castes, dominant or otherwise, had no factions within themselves.

This is an appropriate place to introduce the concept of hegemony and to refer to the hegemony of the dominant caste. Used here to refer to the dominant castes, the concept of hegemony has by and large been used in the context of classes. It is not suggested that caste and class are interchangeable, but, considering the role and interests of the dominant castes in rural society, it is possible to speak of the hegemony of the dominant castes. According to Gramsci, the hegemony of the ruling class results not only from their domination over the material forces of production, but also their replication of domination at the level of ideas. Thus the hegemony of the ruling class controls the 'ideological' sectors of the society: culture, religion, education and media (Femia 1975).

Is it possible to apply the notion of hegemony to the consequences of the dominance of a caste over the others in a village or a region? If yes, how and to what extent does the dominant caste establish hegemony

over others? I argue here that the dominant castes had, and continue even to this day to have, hegemony over others. To illustrate this, I shall give an account of the lives of a few former Untouchable castes that are subjected to the dominance of the Okkaliga caste in a Karnataka village. Given their sheer numbers, their preponderance in terms of landownership, and the strength of their political representation in the region, the Okkaligas reproduce hegemony over all others in the village. Rajapura village had twelve different castes during the years 1978–84, but by 1987 the number had been reduced to eleven. Okkaligas are the most numerous among them both in terms of households and population: 119 households (60.7 per cent of households in the village) and 721 persons (67.3 per cent of the village population), during 1987. They owned 82.7 per cent of the land.

In most villages of Magadi taluk in Bangalore Rural District, in which Rajapura is located, an Okkaliga held the hereditary office of the village headman (*patel*). The Okkaligas take pride in being agriculturists, and in maintaining a minimum of *gowdaalike*.[3] The term *Gowda* is often the suffix of a caste name among the Okkaligas, although other castes also use the term. However, in the form *gowdaalike*, it stands for rule by the headman and village elders to maintain a certain village culture and livelihood pattern irrespective of the caste of the headman. The concept is useful in describing the cultural management in a village community.[4] For instance, it was not uncommon to find the former headman and other village elders being questioned by fellow villagers as to why there had been no annual painting of the temple walls, why contributions of food and money had not been made by certain households for the different temple festivals, the reason for the delay in making public announcements about the need to muzzle the cattle being taken out to graze at certain times of the year, or why the caste specialists had not been rendering their services properly. If the responses given by the leaders were not satisfactory, an adverse comment on their style of *gowdaalike* is made. The expression is essentially cultural in connotation, rather than economic or political.[5]

[3] I am thankful to Ruedi Hogger and Ruedi Baumgartner, discussions with whom clarified for me the notion of *gowdaalike.*

[4] In the villages of Andhra Pradesh dominated by Reddys, I have come across the expression 'Reddythanam', referring to what is being described here as *gowdaalike*.

[5] In several villages that I have visited in the taluk, I found *gowdaalike* to be a main concern among those I spoke to. Many lamented that *nagarikate* (urbanism, but also modernity or civilisation) had swept away the old ways of *gowdaalike*. Likewise, while

In their religious orientation, Okkaligas in this region are affiliated to both Vaishnava and Veerasaiva orders. For instance, their house-gods, names of persons, or the temples to which they were affiliated (*okkalu*) indicate the influence of both Veerasaivism and Vaishnavism. In either case, their models for religious behaviour were those of the vegetarian upper castes (Brahmans or Veerasaivas). Most do not eat meat on Mondays and Saturdays. In recent years some have given up meat eating on Thursdays as well, a special day for the devotees of Raghavendra Swami, a 16th-century sage. I am mentioning some of these features of Okkaligas, the dominant caste in Rajapura, because these in turn have become the model for the other 'dependent' castes in the village. Thus the festival of Siva (Sivarathri) and of his vehicle Nandi (bull) is celebrated as a community affair, indicating the saivite influence. The other castes all participate in the communal dining on the following day, and each makes a contribution towards the celebration of the festival.

The only castes that were ritually higher than the Okkaligas were the Lingayats (three households in 1981 and four during 1994–95), and the Marathas. Notwithstanding their higher ritual status, their social and economic position in the village has been quite fragile. Ideally, the offices of priest in two of the three temples are hereditary, but this has not been the practice for the last fifty or sixty years. The older Lingayat priests have had to move out owing to one or another dispute with the dominant caste in the village. I met one former priest, now living in Magadi town, who explained his leaving Rajapura owing to what he claimed to be excessive interference by the Okkaligas in running the temples. One temple has an endowment of 12 acres of land, which elsewhere would customarily be cultivated by the priest. In Rajapura, the priest is allowed to cultivate only 2½ acres, while cultivation rights to the rest are being auctioned annually. The priest thought this was one of the ways by which Okkaligas undermined the importance of other castes. Additionally, two of the three Maratha households have sold their lands to Okkaligas since I first went to Rajapura, and the local people now speculate that the Marathas, too, might soon migrate to Bangalore or elsewhere.

Rajapura has five castes that are classified as Scheduled Castes in Karnataka: Lambanis, Oddas (Bovis), Koramas, Holeyas and Madigas. A brief account of these castes is necessary to indicate that, although not

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referring to different villages, people often make a comment as to whether or not *gowdaalike* had remained there. I must hasten to add that the conception of *gowdaalike* is not only used in reference to the village leaders, but also of others, particularly women.

all of them are Untouchable castes, they too are in varying degrees of in-
clusion and exclusion in the cultural life of the village. The Koramas call
themselves Korama-Settys, and are mainly engaged as basket makers.
There were three households of their caste during 1978–81, which had
become four of twenty-three persons by 1994–95. Koramas did not have
a traditional obligation either to serve the village or the landowning house-
holds under the Jajmani network of relations (locally referred to as *adade*),
but did receive the services of the priest (both Lingayats and Okkaligas),
barbers and smiths for a fee.

Oddas were seven households during 1978–81, the number rising to
nine during 1994–95 with a population of forty-two persons. They all
belonged to the sub-caste 'Mannu Oddas', meaning earth workers.[6] As
such they do not suffer Untouchability in the village, although the castes
above them in the hierarchy (i.e., Okkaligas, Lingayats, Maratha, Achari
[blacksmith], Kumbara [potter] and Madivala [washermen]) do not accept
cooked food from them. They can enter into the Lingayat and Okkaliga
houses, but not into the interiors of the house, such as the kitchen or the
shrine. A few women among them worked as house maids for wealthy
Okkaliga landowners. Their work included fetching water from the well
for bathing, washing vessels and clothes, and cleaning the house. Oddas
lead a marginal existence in Rajapura, due both to their low-caste status
and their economic dependence on the other upper castes. They are not
included in the network of *adade* relations despite their ownership of
land. However, they are eligible to receive the services of the barber,
smith and priests on cash payment.

Lambanis share a few features in common with the two other Scheduled
Castes, namely Holeyas and Madigas, marking them off from the Korama
and Odda castes. First, they constitute a sizeable number both in terms
of households and population. There were fourteen Lambani households
with forty-three members during 1981, which had risen to sixteen house-
holds and seventy members by 1995. Second, they too are treated by the
upper castes with the same contempt or derogatory caste stereotypes as
are the Holeyas and Madigas. For instance, the general attitude is that

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[6] The Oddas prefer to call themselves Bovis because the official list of Scheduled
Castes includes Bovis but not Oddas. In order to get caste certificates as Bovis (and
therefore be eligible to be SCs), they prefer Bovi as their caste name, rather than Odda.
However, there are some internal divisions among the Oddas (alias Bovis) based on the
work they do: Kallu Oddas are the stone workers, while the Mannu Oddas are earth
workers. Neil Armstrong (1998) reports from Mahepura in the district of Chitradurga
that the Oddas call themselves Sacha Oddas, meaning the pure or the original Oddas.

'anything goes with the Lambanis', 'the standards of sexual morals are too low among them', 'their women are flirts', and the like. Third, unlike the Oddas and Koramas, but in common with the Holeyas and Madigas, the Lambanis constitute one of the main sources of agricultural labour for the landowners in the village. Indeed, long after many Odda and Korama men had ceased to work as bonded labourers, the Lambanis had continued to work in this capacity. Finally, the Lambanis were sought for political support, being better rewarded for it than the Koramas and Oddas. For two successive terms between 1978 and 1990, a Lambani leader had been elected to the village Panchayat and the Mandal Panchayat. This had become a source of frustration for the Holeyas and Madigas who competed with the Lambanis to be sponsored by the dominant caste leaders as Scheduled Caste candidates for election to local bodies. The extremes of factional rivalry among Okkaligas that become evident prior to and during elections get reflected more or less to the same degree among these castes as well. Unlike the Holeyas and Madigas, the Lambanis are not treated as Untouchables. They were able to enter the temples, and they were served by the local barber, smith and priests, though not under the system of *adade.* Of late, many Okkaliga men eat food cooked by the Lambanis on special occasions like weddings or festivals.[7] The Lambanis can enter the houses of upper castes as freely as any visitor of another caste.

Lambanis have by and large remained free from the cultural influence of the upper castes, including that of Lingayats and Okkaligas. Liquor consumption is indiscreet, for instance. Second, among the three castes, the Lambanis are the least concerned with Sanskritisation. Their gods are the ones that were traditionally associated with the community, and they have by and large retained their Lambani cultural identity in language, dress and festivals. They have no role to play either in the *adade* system of exchange relations or in the village festivals, a feature they share with the Oddas and Koramas.[8] The caste leader among them is not only the priest, but was also responsible for the internal organisation of the caste. But he seems to be more loyal to the dominant caste than to the caste to which he belongs.

[7] Old persons among Okkaligas resent this 'laxity' on the part of younger Okkaligas who inter-dine with Lambanis. Women, however, do not accept cooked food from most other castes. I should point out here that, with respect to inter-caste social distance and ranking, it is necessary to note whether women eat food cooked by castes lower or higher than their own caste. Women tend to be more conservative than men in matters of inter-caste dining.

[8] Generally, castes or tribes that were once nomadic, or have had a recent history of migration into the village, were/are excluded from Jajmani relations.

I have attempted a brief account of these three non-Untouchable Scheduled Castes for several reasons. All three castes refer to themselves as 'Harijans', and are entitled to the protection guaranteed under the law applicable to Scheduled Castes in Karnataka. They follow asymmetrical rules of cultural exclusion and inclusion. They are excluded in the sense that they cannot be recipients of the services of priests, barbers, smiths and washermen under the *adade* relations, but they are included in the sense that they have always had access to the village water sources and are allowed into the houses of the upper castes. Like the rest, they take part in the religious activities of the village and are served food along with the others during communal dining, and so on. Further, irrespective of inclusion or exclusion, they too have their caste headman, a person who usually officiates as a priest or as an assistant to a hired upper-caste priest, besides having their own internal divisions based on exogamous norms. In this sense, what may be viewed as 'replication' is not born of 'exclusion'. They are neither excluded in all spheres of cultural and religious life nor, whether included or excluded, do they replicate every institution of the dominant social order.

The Holeyas and Madigas also refer to themselves as Adi Dravida and Adi Karnataka, respectively,[9] and describe themselves as Harijans or 'SCs'. However, they are particular in maintaining a distinct and discrete identity of their own, Holeya or Madiga, in terms of their being right or left hand castes respectively. Holeyas claim to be superior to the Madigas, a claim not conceded by the latter. Madigas were twenty-seven households and 121 persons, and Holeyas were fifteen households and sixty-four persons. During the 1930s, the two castes owned 40 and 51.11 acres respectively (Table 1). Holeyas as a caste had increased their landholdings considerably until 1987, while Madigas had gradually lost out over the same period. Considering the fact that both had alienated most of the land they had received as land grants in the intervening years, the improvement of the Holeyas and the decline of the Madigas in terms of landownership speaks of their relative economic strengths and vulnerability in the village (see Karanth 1992). While most of the prime land (irrigated or irrigable, adjoining or nearer the village site, relatively fertile and so on) was held by the other castes of the village, the land owned by the Holeyas or Madigas was usually former wasteland. I have known several 'landowners' among Holeya and Madiga castes who did not even bother

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[9] In some parts of Karnataka, Holeyas call themselves Adi Karnataka, and Madigas, Adi Dravida. On different dimensions of the names of Untouchable castes, see Charsley 1996.

Table 1
Scheduled Castes and Landownership since 1930s

Caste	1930s*		1978–79				1987				1995			
	HHs	Land Owned (acres)	HHs	Population	Land Owned (acres)	Land Less	HHs	Population	Land Owned (acres)	Land Less	HHs	Population	Land Owned (acres)	Land Less
Holeya	9	40	14	65	49.32	2	15	62	53.73	2	16	70	43.09	4
Madiga	14	51.11	22	92	29.75	13	21	94	29.13	11	27	121	24.75	12
Korama	NK	NK	3	18	6.25	–	4	17	7.25	–	4	23	3.25	–
Odda	NK	NK	7	30	10.00	2	7	29	12.00	2	8	34	7.25	5
Lambani	NK	4	14	42	24.28	4	17	68	24.76	6	16	70	18.23	4
Total	NK	NK	60	247	119.60	21	64	270	126.87	21	71	318	96.57	25

Notes: * Information based on the Index of Land (Revenue Department) for the Village.
NK: Not known; HHs: Households.

to cultivate their land because of difficulties in accessing the land both for themselves and for the cattle. Indeed, a majority of landowners among them were obliged to the Okkaligas. In the first place, it was with the latters' support and sponsorship that they had obtained land grants through different schemes or gained occupancy rights under the Land Reforms Act. Second, they had to depend on landowners, usually from Okkaliga castes, for agricultural implements, plough animals, and credit as well. When institutional credit was made available, it was usually with the help and sponsorship of the Okkaliga landowners, chiefly the leaders among them.

In short, until about the 1970s, it was the patronage of the dominant castes that had compelled the former Untouchable castes to accept their low status. In more recent years, this patronage has been exercised mainly in terms of the distribution of benefits through state welfare schemes. If they are also culturally subordinated to the social order enforced by the Okkaligas, it is because of their dependence on the latter for patronage in the modern and extra-cultural contexts. State welfare schemes and development policies have provided an arena in which the dominant castes can play their role as patrons of the dependent castes in modern contexts, but this does not mean that dissent has not been expressed or dominance gone uncontested either in the past or in the present.

An important reason why the Holeyas and Madigas (and we may also include Lambanis in this case) never exercised autonomy, despite their numbers, is that they had neither a ritual status comparable to the other castes nor economic strength of their own. Mere possession of economic status as landowners did not compensate the Madigas or Holeyas for the lack of ritual status, which in their case was below the 'touchability line'. For the Lambanis, their cultural distinctiveness was an obstacle, especially since others in the village did not regard them favourably, but they did not have to experience Untouchability like the Holeyas and Madigas. Although the Holeyas and Madigas were treated as 'out castes', their way of life was very much akin to that of the others in the village, particularly in cultural and religious terms, whereas the Lambanis were culturally alien to the community.

III
Hegemony, replication and dissent

I shall now turn to describe some cultural characteristics of the Holeyas and Madigas, elsewhere viewed as replication, which I shall argue may

also be seen as strategies of dissent—a first step in their social mobility. Their significance is that there is neither a non-government organisation (NGO) conscientising the ex-Untouchable castes, nor a religious alternative such as Christianity, as is the case in Tamil Nadu (described by Mosse and Deliège). The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), which is quite active in the town of Magadi, is yet to make its presence felt in the villages of the taluk.

Two households among the Madigas and four among the Holeyas have a traditional role to play in village affairs. The former are the hereditary village servants, *thoti*s, who rotate this service among themselves. The *thoti*s' duties in the past involved having to accompany the *patel*, village accountant and other visiting officials from the government. They were expected to run errands for them and make formal announcements within the village. They had to be present in all sittings of the council of elders for arbitrating disputes, to know the boundary markings of agricultural land, and also to take possession of stray cattle. In this sense the *thoti*s' duties were those of village watchman as well as messenger. *Thoti*s also had certain other ritual roles: they buried the dead cattle and played the *thamate*, a musical instrument, during village festivals. Each of the two Madiga households renders this service in alternate years.

In return for their services, the *thoti*s have been given a plot of land (*thoti inam*), and annually receive a quantity of *ragi* and a bundle of straw from all the landowning households of the village. This payment is referred to as *acre ragi* since the quantity of grains given is in relation to the total land owned by the patron. Although in principle the payment in kind is to be made on the last day at the threshing floor, the day of *kadegana*, nearly all the service castes call on their patrons to receive their payment on any day that is convenient to them or their patrons. There are several reasons for this departure from tradition. First, the patrons do not all have *kadegana* on the same day. It would be difficult for the service specialists to keep track of each patron's harvest activities, and in any case the latter may ask the specialists to approach them on another day. Moreover, the specialists are also engaged either in harvesting their own fields, or are hired as wage labourers and are therefore not free to go to their patrons on the designated day. But a most important reason why specialists avoid going to the threshing floor on the last day is that the quality of grains separated from the chaff on the last day is inferior. In this way the village service specialists manage to avoid receiving poor quality grains, which is what the institution of *kadegana* provided for.

Despite the official abolition of the hereditary village offices in 1967, the *thoti*s are still expected to serve the village as they did in the past. In part, this may be explained in terms of *gowdaalike*. They are not happy to be doing so, since the number of households who make the grain payment has been dwindling, but they are also aware that if they gave up the office, there would be others within the caste willing to take it up. (Mosse also recognises this tendency among the Harijans of lower grades in Alampuram who adopt abandoned service roles for the income or security that they provide [1994: 83].) While the households serving as *thoti*s do not experience lower status within the Madiga community but on the contrary seem to derive a sense of importance within the caste by holding the position (see Karanth 1987), the continuation of the service does not indicate that they are in consensus with the cultural system.

Holeyas serve the village as musicians, both for auspicious and inauspicious events. The former included their playing instruments during the village festival or whenever a patron took out a procession of the images of gods of the three temples, and during weddings. The latter included their playing instruments to accompany the procession of a dead body to the burial place. Earlier, they served only the ritually upper castes, such as the Okkaligas, Marathas, Lingayats, Acharis (blacksmiths) and Kumbaras (potters), but not the rest. Nowadays they serve whoever pays them, whether during a wedding or a funeral procession, the exception being Madigas, whom they do not serve. In return for their service to the temples (i.e., the village) they received a measure of grain from the landowning households of all castes other than the five Scheduled Castes. In recent years, i.e., since the 1970s, they have also been retained as village musicians in a few other neighbouring villages, besides being hired in Magadi town and the surrounding villages to play music for weddings. Consequently the team of four to six Holeya musicians is constantly absent from the village, much to the chagrin of their patrons in Rajapura.

The Acharis (blacksmiths) are the only specialists among the service castes who serve the Holeya and Madiga. In fact, there is a caste myth to the effect that the Acharis are kinsmen of the Holeyas. A similar myth establishes a link between the Madigas and Madivalas (the washermen). The washermen, however, do not serve the two castes, either for money or under the *adade* pattern of grain payment. The smith serves both Holeya and Madiga specialists, but does not accept any payment from them. In turn, the two sets of specialists serve the smiths without remuneration. The barber does not cut the hair of persons of the two castes, nor does he play any ritual role for them, though he supplies the headband to the bride and bridegroom, for which he takes cash payment.

A question raised earlier becomes pertinent again: do we consider the Holeyas and Madigas as being included or excluded in the social and cultural order of society in Rajapura? Recall that it was only two and four households among the Holeyas and Madigas respectively who had a role to play in the village festivals, for which the landowning high castes compensated them under the *adade* system. The rest were excluded. These households did not come to occupy their 'hereditary' offices by virtue of being members of any graded division within the caste. Should any of them refuse to continue to serve, others are in principle eligible to be commissioned. In this sense the two former 'Untouchable' castes are no different from other Scheduled Castes in the village, and a few others who are involved in the customary exchange of service relations (smiths, barbers, washermen, etc.). That is, these castes are included in certain contexts and excluded in others. Where excluded, they have not replicated services among themselves in all respects. Madigas, for instance, are not required to render either 'pure' or 'impure' services to the Holeyas, although the former are ascribed a lower status. Among both castes, kinsmen and women perform specific roles during the last rites of a deceased person, or at puberty, but this is also applicable to the higher castes in the village. Contrary to the evidence from elsewhere (e.g., Mosse 1994; Raheja 1988), there is nothing to indicate a low status for such kin owing to their performing such roles or accepting gifts. On the contrary, it is considered to be an honour and a right.

While the Madigas have a headman and a priest, the Holeyas do not have similar positions. The present Madiga headman and priest have not succeeded to the office on a hereditary or lineage principle. The person who was earlier the headman had been away from the village for a few years. Had the office been hereditary, one of his lineal relations ought to have succeeded to the office during his absence. Instead, the present headman, who is a maternal kinsman, had been chosen by the village leaders to succeed. Even after the former headman returned to the village, the incumbent did not hand over the office of headman, though the former headman has resumed his role as priest. The caste headmen of the Madigas and other 'lower' castes also officiate as priests. The priest has often complained to the village headman and *patel* that he should be reinstated as the caste headman. In fact, the Madiga caste headman and the priest have very little to do in their offices, and almost all members take their disputes or matters directly to the village leaders. That is, in the case of a dispute, the caste headman is also invited and consulted, but the decision is usually that of the village elders. In other words, the internal authority

structure among Madigas was being replicated and arbitrated *not* by themselves, but by the Okkaligas. Likewise the priest has a role to play only during the village festival, when the Madigas erect a temporary shrine to sacrifice the buffalo. Indeed, this is the only occasion when the two have any role to play in their caste affairs. On several occasions during the year when they need the services of a priest, they hire the Okkaliga priest, who renders the purificatory or other rituals outside their doorstep. The Okkaliga priest may not have served them in the past and this may have been a recent phenomenon, but one might surmise that, had there been a priest with exclusive claims, he or his successor would have made a claim on such ritual activities, something which does not seem to have happened.

The internal organisation of Holeyas and Madigas is as elaborate as that of the other castes in the village. In the first place, there are sub-castes within the Holeya and Madiga castes, which the members of the respective castes acknowledge. The Holeyas listed seven endogamous sub-castes, all of them Karad Holeyas. But they admitted that in recent years there had been difficulty in maintaining sub-caste endogamy, and many stated that they were not worried about it if the match was otherwise good. All the same, nearly everyone married within his or her own sub-caste. Match-making involves as much detail as among any other castes: checking the past record of both families in terms of sub-caste, grade, compatibility of names, incidence of widow-marriages, etc. This checking is known in the region as verifying the *salavali*. A man could marry his mother's brother's daughter or his father's sister's daughter, the notion of 'a calf to be given in return for a cow' being prominent in marriages until relatively recently.

Both Holeyas and Madigas had several exogamous subdivisions (referred to as *bedagu*) among themselves. Some of the subdivisions among Holeyas were Belli, Kamba, Muchchala, Meenu, Mallu, Baragur, Thamman Kuppe and Rampa. Excepting the Baragur and Thamman Kuppe divisions, which indicate the territorial origin of the group, the remainder indicate objects (e.g., silver, pillar, lid, saw, etc.). Similar subdivisions were also found among the Madigas, who listed four such grades. No particular subdivision within the two castes is designated to hold the office of village musicians (among Holeyas) and village servant (*thoti*s); as noted, the Madiga headman had been replaced by another, from a different subdivision. Likewise, when the former *thoti* had no male child to succeed him, there were many from his subdivision who could have succeeded. Instead, the village leaders permitted succession by his two sons-in-law. In Rateyur in Mysore district, however, the

headman and priest among the Adi Karnatakas (Holeyas, but they prefer to be called AKs or Harijans) were from specific subdivisions. The presiding deity of the priest's *kula* (the term applicable for *bedagu* in Rajapura) was also one of the main gods for the caste as a whole (in addition to Maramma which all the other castes worshipped). There was not a single headman, but a headman for each *kula*, and each of them was consulted by the village elders in conducting the village festival. In Rateyur each caste is assigned a sum that is to be contributed towards the expenses of the village festival, and the Harijans also make their contribution. Indeed, the sum assigned to them traditionally had been higher than that of Parivara Naikas, another caste in the village (see Charsley 1998).

The subdivisions were ranked by the members of the caste. One way by which their relative status is to be ascertained is through the system of honouring each subdivision. Almost all castes in Rajapura have a practice of offering honours to the different caste representatives during weddings. A small ritual stage is erected, referred to as *gadduge* or *hosage*. As the guests pour milk into the joined hands of the bride and bridegroom, caste elders assemble at the *gadduge* and call out the names of castes or different offices. Each caste headman or representative is offered a certain number of betel leaves and nuts. It is the order in which the castes are called out, and the number of betel leaves and nuts counted for each caste, division, etc., which indicate their relative ranks. It is not only headmen of each *kula* within the caste who are so honoured, but also the elders from other castes. However, the first to be called out are the headman of the village, headman of the region (*kattemane yajamana*), and the headman of the caste, in that order. Although none of those present may have represented these offices, one of the guests will usually shout to say the offering has been acknowledged. After this the offerings are made to the different intra-subcaste divisions. The bride's division gets the first offering, followed by that of the groom: both get an equal number of betel leaves and nuts. The rest have their designated numbers and order in which they are called out. To my knowledge there has never been any dispute about the relative status of the subdivisions in Rajapura, but this relative status has no other significance in day-to-day life. In recent years, this ritual has gone practically unnoticed by the guests.

Are the subdivisions and their gradations based on the principles of hierarchy? From the evidence available in Rajapura one could come to such a conclusion. While there is nothing exceptional in the Untouchable castes having internal gradations, the village headman and the *kattemane yajamana* are given precedence over the caste headman. That is, the

power and influence of the dominant social order cuts across the internal hierarchy of a former Untouchable caste, thus undermining the caste's autonomy. Moreover, the seeming replication of institutions within a caste does not mean that the caste and its members subscribe to the low status accorded to them in the village. On the contrary, replication can also be seen as a challenge to the dominant social order and as an effort on the part of the Untouchable castes to pursue that from which they are excluded. To substantiate this claim I shall cite a few examples.

The first example pertains to competing claims for relative status between Holeyas and Madigas. The Holeyas claim to be higher for several reasons. They do not eat beef, and particularly not of the dead cow or buffalo. The Madiga *thoti*s perform ritually impure services for the other castes while the Holeyas do not. The Holeyas claim that the *chaluvadi battalu*,[10] which is in their possession, is a symbol of their higher status, while the Madigas in turn have a myth explaining how they had lost it to the Holeyas. The Madiga headman questioned the Holeyas' claim to higher status: 'If we are said to be lower, then the *chaluvadi battalu* ought to have been with us, for we are the lowest and serve all those above us. We are the *thoti*s. Holeyas are not. Yet they keep the *chaluvadi battalu*. Neither the territorial headman (*kattemane yajamana*) nor the village headman is interested in resolving this.' However, a majority within his caste did not share this old man's concern. Most were simply not bothered, while the younger ones among them were even unaware of all these claims and counter-claims which were stated in such a way that the status claims were not explicitly defined or contested.

A few years ago, however, there had been a demonstration of claims and counter-claims, in which the Madigas had an upper hand. Until 1976, Holeyas and Madigas drew water from separate wells, neither caste being allowed to draw water from the wells used by others in the village. It took an urban educated and employed youth of the Madiga caste to organise a group of young men to fill the well meant for Madigas with garbage so as to compel the caste to look for an alternative source of water. This led to their drawing water from the well meant for Holeyas. The Holeyas in turn complained to the elders of the village, who advised that discrimination among themselves was not in keeping with the law in force.

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[10] A brass ladle connected to a bell, carried by the Holeya to collect the prestations from the members of the community on behalf of the headman of the cultural region (*nadu*, land or territory) within a boundary (*gadi*). The headman is either a Lingayat or an Okkaliga and, therefore, could be any other high caste. The headman is referred to as *kattemane yajamana*.

The Holeyas eventually conceded the right for 'low caste Madigas' to draw water from a well which, until then, they had used exclusively.

A few interesting questions arise out of this episode. A separation that had been maintained in regard to the drinking water well reinforced a ritual separation between the two castes, but by rejecting the separation, one caste (Madigas) not only claimed equality with the other, but demonstrated it by forcibly drawing water from a well which until then had been out of bounds for them. This suggests not a replication of the ritual separation found in the dominant social order, but a rejection of it as applicable to themselves. However, their attempt to forcibly draw water was limited to the well meant exclusively for the Holeyas, and did not challenge their exclusion by castes above them in the dominant social order. The youth who had organised the protest asserted in justification for his actions that 'between the two castes there were no differences'. Asked why his actions did not apply to the discrimination meted out by the higher castes in the village with regard to water, he claimed that he had not wanted to disturb the existing harmony in the village by trying to assert parity with the rest. Elsewhere I have cited his response: 'After all, my people live here and I do not want to antagonise the members of the other castes. But I am hopeful that the Okkaligas will realise that the old order is changing and will stop treating us the way they are doing now' (Karanth 1981: 19). One may note here that this youth's elder brother is one of the *thoti*s in the village who even now performs his duties, long after the abolition of the village hereditary offices.

A further dimension of the episode is the role played by members of the dominant caste. Had they wanted to maintain a separation between the two, they could have resisted the move by the Madigas. Instead, in keeping with their own political identities (they were supporters of the party in power then) and their political interests (Madigas have been their best allies, unlike the Holeyas), they conceded the demand by the Madigas, thus also strategically avoiding the possibility of turning the protest against themselves. As long as their own interests were not being affected by the Madigas' move to draw water from the Holeyas' well, the Okkaligas took a generous view of the situation and sided with the Madigas. The political climate in the state and the country as a whole also favoured the actions of the Madigas.

My second example pertains to a religious practice among the Madigas of Rajapura, which has all the features of replication but which, as I show here, also contains aspects of dissent. During the annual village festival most non-vegetarian castes make sacrificial offerings of a goat or a

chicken to the presiding deity, Hatti Maramma. The Madigas traditionally offered a buffalo, but this is not acceptable to the dominant castes. There is also a custom that the meat is not cooked until the procession of the image passes through the different streets of the village, though it does not in fact enter the colonies where the Holeyas and Madigas live. Moreover, their offerings are consecrated only after all the other castes have finished making offerings, usually only in the early morning of the following day, since the procession is a night-long affair. The Holeyas and Madigas only begin cooking food around the time that the other castes have started feeding their guests. To avoid this inconvenience, the two castes erect a small and temporary shrine within their respective *keri*s, and make their offering to the image of Hatti Maramma by afternoon of the previous day, sacrificing a buffalo in the Madiga colony and offering goats or chickens in the Holeya colony. Buffalo meat is also bought by the Holeyas from the Madigas, although they do not like to admit this. Thus, much before the festivities in the village begin, the Madiya and Holeya women are in a position to begin their cooking.

At first I had interpreted the existence of a separate shrine in the Madiga colony as a case of replication, but the humiliation of the Madigas' wait till the following morning to make their own offerings at the village shrine (which they still do) puts the question in a different light: the make-shift shrine in the *keri* appears as a rejection of the dominant ideology. That is, the Madigas wanted to carry on with their traditional practice of buffalo sacrifice regardless of its supposed opposition to Hindu values according to the definition of the dominant social order. This is not a replication resulting from exclusion from the dominant order or consensus with it, but a reaffirmation of a distinct cultural identity.

The third example relates to the dissent that the ex-Untouchables express in reference to the low and humiliating status ascribed to them. That they are usually unable to express their resentment or redefine their status is due to the fear of antagonising the dominant caste within the village or region on whom they often depend for securing benefits from the state. The example I cite is also the first time that the Madigas organised themselves against segregation.

During 1980, a housing scheme for the weaker sections was being implemented. Several Holeyas, Madigas, Lambanis, Koramas and Oddas were also to benefit from the scheme, as well as small and marginal farmers, widows, landless labourers, ex-bonded labourers, etc., from other castes. The process of identification, by which many ineligible persons

had been identified as beneficiaries, was itself typical of dominant caste politics. The Holeya and Madiga beneficiaries had to encounter at least four sets of problems. First, there were many aspiring beneficiaries, but they were told that the scheme was for *all* poor and weaker sections and not just for the Scheduled Castes. Second, the beneficiaries were mainly known supporters of the ruling faction. Third, the unsuccessful aspirants had been persuaded by the rival faction to make a petition to the officials of the department concerned. Consequently, there had been a delay in approving the list recommended by the ruling faction, who in turn feared that the officer concerned would not approve their list, especially since he was Madiga by caste. The official actually wanted to be posted in Bangalore city, and did not wish to alienate the dominant caste, the more so because the local elected Member of the Legislative Assembly in the ruling party in the state was from the same community. Unaware of this factor, the ruling faction encouraged the landowner in Rajapura, whose land was to be acquired for housing purposes, to appeal to the court against the acquisition of his land. A stay order was granted, and the official in question was directed to examine the case by going on a 'spot inspection'.

During the course of all these developments, the Holeyas and Madigas had come to realise that they would be segregated from the beneficiaries of other castes in the proposed new housing colony. When they learnt of the forthcoming 'spot inspection' by an official belonging to their own caste, a few Madigas decided to give him a separate reception in the village. They presented him with garlands and lemon, the traditional practice for welcoming a visiting official, as he was passing the entrance of the *keri*. The official, unfamiliar with the local caste dynamics, accepted the offerings made to him, but became angry when an enthusiastic on-looker invited him for lunch in the Madiga *keri*. This was because, as is the convention for visiting officials, a lunch had been arranged in the house of the Okkaliga headman of the village. The enthusiastic Madigas had to listen to a brief lecture by the official about inter-caste harmony and the need to forget caste differences. Although they had protested against what they thought was an injustice being committed by the dominant castes, they did not have the courage to confront the bureaucrat. Eventually the spot inspection was held, the writ petition by the landowner was withdrawn, and the house sites were allotted to the beneficiaries according to the original proposal. Those who opposed the ruling faction and questioned the segregation learnt a bitter lesson: that, if they oppose the ideas of segregation as prescribed by the dominant and ruling faction, they are not likely to get what they want.

Though the demand for desegregated housing came as a result of faction rivalry among the Okkaligas, the occasion had given rise to a realisation on the part of the Okkaligas that the ex-Untouchables do not accept their status passively. In my view the persistence of patron–client relationships involving the ex-Untouchable castes is one of the main reasons for their submitting to their humiliating status. An ideal alternative would have been the emergence of a person or group of persons who would not only oppose such humiliation, but also forge links with the outside world of 'development' agencies and institutions. Elsewhere, the activists of Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) and other caste associations have been playing such a role quite successfully, but this is not yet the case in Rajapura. On the contrary, one DSS worker with his base in a neighbouring village is quite well-known as a person of nuisance value among Dalit activists in the region, including those in Rajapura. One night as I was concluding a late session of discussion with a Holeya informant, a messenger from the neighbouring village brought the news of a forthcoming meeting in that village convened by the same DSS activist. Until the arrival of the messenger, my informant had been forthright and insightful in discussing the dominant caste attitudes and practices towards the ex-Untouchable castes of Rajapura, and his embarrassment now was clearly evident. Not only were many in Rajapura unaware of his involve-ment with the DSS leader in question, but there had been a campaign against the leader.[11] It was only after much persuasion that he revealed information about the meeting and his association with the DSS, for he feared that disclosure would antagonise the members of the dominant caste in Rajapura. My informant belonged to a faction opposed to the ruling faction of the village and his political patrons were also from the dominant caste, but, no matter which faction he was in, it was apparent to him that dissent against hegemony would not be approved by either of them.

The three examples cited above show that replication of internal organisation within the caste is not merely a result of exclusion. Second, I have tried to show that what may appear to be replication is not indicative of consensus (as Dumont and Moffatt assume). On the contrary, it is a

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[11] One of the strategies of dominant caste hegemony is to discredit the emerging leaders among the ex-Untouchable castes. A routine means for discrediting an emerging leader is to point to his inefficiency in accomplishing favourable dealings with the development bureaucracy, and to his misuse of his position for personal political gains. The same logic is not applied to the leaders of the upper castes who claim to be the champions of the ex-Untouchable castes. Sub-caste favouritism is also a means of discrediting a person's commitment to the cause of ex-Untouchables.

rejection of dominant values and a re-affirmation of cultural identity. Finally, these examples also go to show that the ex-Untouchables do not passively accept humiliation and the subordinate status culturally ascribed to them. They attempt to redefine their identities, and to protest against humiliation. The scope and relative success or failure of such protests depends largely upon their ability to withstand the power of patronage, or acquire 'patronage which is not patronizing' (Mosse 1994: 87; Scott 1990: 197).

Increasingly, there are many instances in recent years of the rejection of an ascribed low status by the ex-Untouchable castes. For instance, ever since the drinking water hand-pumps were erected in different residential localities, some high-caste women have begun to fetch water from the pump located at the entrance of the Holeya and Madiga colonies. Formerly, the upper-caste women used to resent their vessels coming into contact with those of the Holeya or Madiga women, but now, in an argument following the touching of vessels, the Holeya and Madiga women asked all the upper-caste women to fetch water from hand-pumps elsewhere and not to depend on the ones meant for Holeyas and Madigas. They were told: 'If you want to keep your pots pure, go to the wells meant for your caste.' As a result, the upper-caste women now wait until there are no Holeya or Madiga women present at the hand pump.

As part of the terms of hiring agricultural labourers, the landowners used to serve one or two meals during the day. The ex-Untouchable caste labourers in the past had complained about the quality of food served and the manner in which they were served: often they were given stale food, and had to bring their own plates. Drinking water was poured into their mouths through a leaf funnel lest they pollute the vessel. Nowadays, workers prefer to be paid separately for their breakfast, lunch and tea or coffee.

Most Okkaligas in Rajapura believe that offering milk or milk-based food items to Holeyas and Madigas would result in their cows or buffaloes falling sick. In 1978–81, it was not uncommon to find a Holeya or Madiga squatting at the doorstep of a landowning Okkaliga, while the others in the house sipped tea or coffee. If the householder was considerate, a few betel leaves and nuts would be offered to him by way of compensation. From the Okkaliga standpoint, this would fulfil his responsibility within the constraints of caste hierarchy. Increasingly, however, the ex-Untouchable castes resent not being offered tea or coffee on the grounds of their low-caste status. In more recent years I have noticed fewer Holeyas and Madigas sitting at the doorsteps of Okkaliga landowners, and those who

do, mostly walk away from their posts the moment it is announced that coffee or tea is being served. Their leaving the scene can be understood as a rejection of their being left out while others are being served. Many of them joke about the Okkaliga men who drink liquor in the local shop along with Holeyas and Madigas, while refusing to offer them coffee or tea at home.

Despite such instances of rejection of the notion that they are sources of pollution, there are also many occasions when the ex-Untouchables themselves appear to accept their low status. To this day they have not attempted to enter the temples and tea-shops, to demand the barbers' service or to draw water from the well used by all the other castes. In short, rejection of the values that treat them as low has not been uniform, just as acceptance of these values has not been uniform.

IV
Conclusions

Current interest in the culture and cultural autonomy of the ex-Untouchable castes has tended to conclude that they passively accept the culturally subordinate status ascribed to them. It has also been asserted that they replicate the institutions and values found in the dominant social order from which they are excluded, and thereby express their consensus with it (Moffatt 1979). The foregoing account of the Scheduled Castes of Rajapura points to a different interpretation of the cultural similarities between the ex-Untouchable castes and castes that are not subjected to the same humiliation and subordination. As is the case with others, the ex-Untouchable castes are both 'included' and 'excluded'. Moreover, 'exclusion' does not necessarily mean replication, and replication in turn does not mean consensus. On the contrary, what may appear to be replication is often a re-affirmation of cultural identity and a rejection of the dominant values.

The sociological discourse on 'replication and consensus' has tended to ignore the element of dissent by the ex-Untouchable castes. Evidence from a Karnataka village examined here has extended the discourse from 'replication and consensus' to 'hegemony and dissent'. Such a shift provides an opportunity to recognise the agency of the ex-Untouchable castes who are not merely passive participants in a dominant social order that ascribes them a low and subordinate status. The limited role of dissent and protest in redefining the cultural identity of the ex-Untouchable castes

of Karnataka has been attributed to the persistence of a patron–client network of interdependence. All the same, it is necessary to identify the different forms of dissent and their limitations, for the ex-Untouchable castes in India today are seeking a form of patronage that does not reduce them to cultural dependence. The Dalit movement and Dalit literature are attempting such a cultural redefinition of Dalit identity through rejection of the dominant ideology, as well as through economic and political empowerment. That is a theme in itself, which the discourse on replication and consensus virtually ignores.

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6

Sikhism and the caste question: Dalits and their politics in contemporary Punjab

Surinder S. Jodhka

Caste has invariably been seen in unitary terms, as a pan-Indian reality without any significant variations in its structure or ideology. While it was sanctioned through some Hindu scriptural sources, other Indian religious communities, too, were believed to support the idea of hierarchy and practice caste in everyday life, albeit to a lesser degree. Despite scholarly criticisms of such theories and the many changes that caste has undergone over time, this view of caste has largely prevailed. This happens partly because the idea of caste has become embedded in the idea of India as a nation: caste is taken as proof of India's cultural continuity and a stable past.

Taking a cue from a recent case of conflict between Ad-Dharmis and Jats in a village of Punjab over the question of representation in the management of a religious shrine, the article looks at caste in relation to Sikhism and in the regional context of contemporary Indian Punjab. I have tried to argue that, as in the case of other structures of social relations, caste identities too undergo change, and that they have never functioned as 'pure ideological systems'. For a region-specific understanding of caste, we need to disentangle it from Hinduism and look at caste from an historical perspective. It is within such a framework that we can possibly understand the question of caste today. I conclude by arguing that while caste is nearly dead in contemporary Punjab, as an ideology, it survives and thrives as a source of identity.

In the first week of June 2003 newspapers and television channels in India reported, and prominently highlighted, a case of caste-related conflict from a village called Talhan, located at a distance of around 10 km from the town of Jallandhar in the Doaba sub-region of Indian Punjab. Though caste violence has become quite a common occurrence in contemporary India, it was perhaps for the first time in recent history that the national media reported a case of caste conflict from the state of Punjab. Apart from reporting on the series of events, some of the newspapers and newsmagazines also published commentaries on the subject. Similarly, several television channels showed features and arranged special discussions on the emerging caste situation in the region.

Relations between the landowning Jats and the Ad-Dharmis[1] in the village had been quite strained for some time over the issue of the latter's demand for participation in the management of a local shrine. However, the conflict made news only when a group of dalits organised a protest meeting in Jallandhar against the alleged atrocities being committed by the locally dominant Jats on the members of their community in Talhan. The protestors reportedly went 'out of control' and the police opened fire, killing one person. The killing of a dalit protestor further charged the atmosphere and curfew had to be imposed in the area for a couple of days.

Though the case of Talhan is rather peculiar, it reflects quite sharply on what is happening to 'caste' in rural Punjab. Equally important are the popular responses to the conflict in Talhan, inside Punjab and elsewhere. An interesting dimension of the Talhan incident was that, though the conflict involved two of the caste communities of a village, the contentious issue was that of participation in the management of a religious shrine. Or, in other words, the question of caste was raised here directly in relation to religion. The case of Talhan, therefore, could offer a useful entry point into the question of caste in relation to the Sikh religion.

From a broader anthropological perspective also, Sikhism and Punjab provide interesting peripheral locations for looking critically at the contemporary scholarship on the subject of caste and Indian society in general. Scholars such as Nicholas Dirks (2001) have rightly pointed to the persistence of an orientalist hangover in the writings on caste.

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[1] Currently there are a total of thirty-seven Scheduled Caste communities in Punjab. Ad-Dharmis were originally Chamars, but changed their name in the 1920s after the famous Ad-Dharm movement. The colonial Census of 1931 had listed them as a separate religious community but in post-partition Punjab, they are listed as a Hindu Scheduled Caste in Punjab.

However, despite variations in emphasis, much of the existing literature on the subject continues to look at caste as a pan-Indian reality and conceptualises it, more or less, in unitary terms.

An important attribute of much of the anthropological writing on caste has been its near-complete identification on the one hand with the Hindu religion, and on the other with the 'traditional social structure' of India. As an ideology, caste and Hinduism were inseparable. As a structural reality, caste defined traditional India, with its closed system of social hierarchy. Against such a unitary and static notion of caste, I shall try to argue that, if one looks at the reality of caste from a regional and historical perspective, it is likely to appear very different. In order to do that one needs to begin by separating the idea of 'caste' from Hinduism and looking at it empirically, the manner in which it works on the ground. This would also require that we look at caste not merely as a religious or ideological phenomenon, but also give equal importance to the historically evolved structures of social relations and the political economy of a given region that sustain and reproduce caste in everyday life.

For example, unlike in Hinduism where certain scriptural sources provided ideological legitimacy to the idea of caste hierarchy, it had no place in Sikhism. However, empirically, caste identities continue to be important in contemporary Punjab, and among followers of the Sikh faith. What do we then mean by caste and how should we conceptualise it? It is this question that I hope to answer in the final section of my article.

I
What happened in Talhan?

As mentioned above, the trouble started in Talhan when Ad-Dharmis demanded representation in the management of a village religious shrine constructed in the memory of one Baba Nihal Singh. As the story goes, Baba Nihal Singh was a Sikh from the artisan caste of Ramgarhia who lived in a neighbouring village called Dakoha. He was no saint or fakir while he was alive. He made and fixed wheel-like structures (locally known as *gandh*) for the newly-dug drinking water wells in the area. These wheels are kept at the base of the wells in order to stabilise the water supply. Villagers of the area had deep faith in the skills of Nihal Singh. 'If he put a wheel in the well, it would never dry and its water would always be sweet.'

However, one day while fixing a wheel in a newly-dug well near Talhan, Baba Nihal Singh died. For the common villagers, this was a sacrifice he

made for the village, and he was consequently declared a martyr (*shahid*). Out of respect for Nihal Singh and in order to preserve his memory, they decided to make a commemorative structure at the site of his cremation on village land near Talhan. Close to the *smadh*, a flame too was kept burning. Harnam Singh, who used to be an aide of Nihal Singh, took care of the *smadh* all his life and kept the flame burning. When Harnam Singh died, another *smadh* was built close to the earlier structure. Over the years these *smadh*s began to attract devotees, who also brought offerings, mostly in cash.

These two small structures were slowly converted into a shrine. In due course another structure came up between these two *smadh*s where the Sikh holy book, Guru Granth Sahib, was kept and it began to be read as per Sikh rituals. To mark the death anniversary of Shahid Baba Nihal Singh, his devotees from Talhan and neighbouring villages started organising an annual fair (*mela*) at the shrine.[2]

With the growing prosperity of the region and of Baba's devotees, offerings grew. According to available estimates, the current annual offerings at the shrine were anywhere between Rs 3–5 crore (Rs 30–50 million). As the shrine grew in stature, a committee of 'powerful' individuals from Talhan and neighbouring villages took over its management. They also controlled all the money and decided on how to spend it. Elections to the thirteen-member committee were held every year on the evening of Maghi (a local festival that falls around 14 January). However, not everyone from the village could participate in these elections.

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[2] Apart from the shrine of Baba Nihal Singh, the village also has three regular gurudwaras. One is called the village gurudwara, which was built by the dominant Jats. The second is the gurudwara of Ramgarhias and the third is a Ravidas Mandir, built recently by the Ad-Dharmis. Though in principle gurudwaras are open to all, different caste communities have tended to build their own gurudwaras, generally to assert their separate identities in the caste-divided set-up of rural Punjab (for details see Jodhka 2000, 2002a).

Dalit shrines in *doaba* are generally called Ravidas Mandirs or Ravidas Deras. However, the structure of these shrines is very similar to Sikh gurudwaras. Like the other Sikh gurudwaras, Ad-Dharmis too keep the Guru Granth in the centre of the room and follow regular Sikh rituals of *prakash* and *sukh-assan*. However, they almost always have a picture of Guru Ravidas in the shrine. Some of them also have other pictures, such as of other Sikh gurus or of the dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar.

Talhan village also has a Mazhar of a Sufi Peer, Baba Fateh Shah. Though there is no Muslim family currently living in the village, the Mazhar is well looked after by an aged Ad-Dharmi. An emigrant Jat Sikh from Talhan organises a fair at the Mazhar every year on 5 June when he visits the village. While for regular religious/ritual functions different caste groups have their separate gurudwaras, all villagers participate in the *mela* at the Mazhar, which is more of a cultural festival than a religious affair. Similarly, all caste communities of the village revere the shrine of Shahid Baba Nihal Singh equally.

The committee that managed the shrine and dealt with the finances was largely dominated by landowning Jats. Talhan has a population of around 5,000, out of which only 20 to 25 per cent are Jats, while nearly 65 to 70 per cent are Ad-Dharmis. The rest are from other 'servicing castes' such as Ramgarhias, Lohars and Jheers. Except for Ad-Dharmis there are no other Scheduled Castes in the village. Interestingly, though some other caste communities of villages in the area have been given representation, no Ad-Dharmi from Talhan or neighbouring villages was ever represented in the managing committee of the shrine.

Their social mobility and growing aspirations have changed the Ad-Dharmis from a subordinate caste group to an assertive and independent community. Their influence in local-level politics has also grown. When they asked for representation in the management committee about five years back, the traditionally dominant Jats were in no mood to accommodate them. Not receiving any positive response from the Jats, the Ad-Dharmis decided to approach the court of law in 1999 with a petition challenging the manner in which elections to the managing committee were held. While the court did not give a clear verdict, it directed that a few Ad-Dharmi observers be allowed to be present at the time of the annual elections of the committee.

However, when they went to the shrine to attend the election meeting on 14 January 2003 with the order from the court, the Jats did not turn up. The elections were finally held on the evening of 19 January 2003. However, the Jats refused to concede the demand of Ad-Dharmis for representation in the committee. The Ad-Dharmis claim that the Jats had called the police, who chased them away and beat them up when they insisted on fair representation in the committee. The Jats also issued a letter to the non-Ad-Dharmi residents of the village, directing them to 'socially boycott' the Ad-Dharmis. The Jats stopped going to the shops run by Ad-Dharmis in the village and banned the poorer Ad-Dharmis from collecting fodder from their farms. They had to either bring fodder from the town or had to collect it from neighbouring villages. Even the use of village fields for defecating was disallowed. A picture of Guru Ravidas that hung in the shrine was also torn.

Jat members of the committee felt that the Ad-Dharmis' demand was unfair. The committee had taken care of the shrine and its funds well, they felt. Over the last five years or so, they claimed, a large amount of money was spent from the budget of the shrine on the construction of a hospital and a telephone exchange in the village. Money had also been spent on schools and streets. Even the Ad-Dharmis were given Rs 2.5

lakh for the construction of their gurudwara/Ravidas mandir. As regards representation, the Jat members argued that since the *smadh* was a Sikh shrine, the Ad-Dharmis could not be on its management committee because 'they were anyway not proper Sikhs'.

The Ad-Dharmis on the other hand questioned such arguments. The s*madh* of Baba Nihal Singh was never a proper gurudwara; and if clean-shaven Jats could become members of the committee, why couldn't they? They too worshipped the Guru Granth and conducted their ritual life as other Sikhs did. In order to further their struggle, a Dalit Action Committee (DAC) consisting mostly of the local Ad-Dharmis was formed. They gave a representation to the SC/ST Commission and organised *dharna*s in the town.

The DAC continued its agitation and finally some officers in the district administration brought the two parties together and a compromise was worked out on 3 June 2003. The Jats agreed to include two Ad-Dharmis in the committee, provided they wore turbans. The other terms of the agreement included a public apology by all parties involved, lifting of the social boycott, and restoration of the picture of Guru Ravidas. However, two days after the agreement, members of the two castes again clashed with each other during the annual *mela* at the Mashar of Peer Baba Fateh Shah. It was after this clash that violence erupted in Jallandhar, resulting in the police firing in which one person was killed. After nearly two weeks of tension, the two groups were brought back to the negotiating table by the administration and the same compromise was made effective.

II
Caste and identity politics

The decade of the 1980s was an extremely critical phase in the contemporary history of India. It saw the emergence of new social movements, which questioned the hitherto sacred idea of development, the Nehruvian agenda of modernising India's economy and society. New identity movements, too, appeared on the Indian scene, and acquired a degree of legitimacy (see Jodhka 2001).

Caste re-emerged as an important question in Indian politics during the 1980s, this time, however, from below. The new dalit politics mobilised caste identities in their struggle against caste-based discrimination. Gaining political power was seen as the key towards overcoming all disabilities of dalits. Unlike the old Congress politics, the new political formations like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) mobilised dalits on the

issue of the historical experience of humiliation and deprivation (Chandra 2000). The new dalit leadership made slight of the modernising elite of India and the liberal-Left's insistence on the secularist politics of 'class'.

Their slogans have paid dividends and dalit politics has become a force to reckon with in India today. However, it did not necessarily lead to the empowerment of dalits everywhere (Pai 2002). In fact, in some cases, this shift in dalit consciousness and their refusal to accept humiliating positions in the 'traditional' caste order has led to an increase in cases of atrocities on dalits by the upper caste (Béteille 2000; Shah 2001).

The case of Talhan appeared to fit well in this framework, and that is how a section of the media presented it. A reporter of one of the leading newsmagazines of India, *Frontline*, who had apparently visited Jallandhar town and Talhan summed up his story on Talhan in the following words:

> Years of suppression of Dalits by the Jat community culminates in Punjab's worst caste-related strife, involving Jat and Dalit Sikh residents of Talhan village near Jalandhar.

He further writes:

> Roadside *dhaba*s in Punjab do not have separate tea-cups for Dalits, and Dalits are not massacred when they ask for higher wages: and that, it is now becoming clear, is about as far equality goes in India's most prosperous State.[3]

Similarly, an Ambedkarite journal, advising the dalits of Punjab, wrote in its editorial:

> The Punjabi untouchables must grasp the truth that the Sikhs had over 250 years to get rid of the Hindu caste system, but have miserably failed .... There is no point in pursuing a path, which has already been tested and found to be leading nowhere. The answer still seems clear to me that the Punjabi Untouchables should reassess their position a new and embrace Buddhism like all educated Ambedkarites of India .... There is still time to redress our past errors and to reclaim our separate identity and dignity by discarding Hinduism and *all its branches* by embracing Buddhism (emphasis added).[4]

[3] Praveen Swami in *Frontline* 20, 13: 21 June–4 July 2003.

[4] See www.ambedkar.org, 10 June 2003.

However, reducing Talhan to just another instance of 'caste oppression' would be a mistake. The experience of Talhan for the dalits of Punjab has a much larger meaning. For the Ad-Dharmis of Doaba, Talhan was a test case, an experience of 'assertion'. It was a case of demanding equal rights and a share in the resources, material as well as symbolic, that belong commonly to the village and had so far been under the exclusive control of the locally dominant caste. Their ability to make such a claim was itself a result of a long history of struggle and consolidation, which included making claims over resources available in the Sikh religion.

Though contemporary Indian Punjab and the Sikh religion are not synonymous, the overlap is not insignificant. Political economy and demographics of Punjab have a direct impact on the making or structuring of Sikh religious institutions. Similarly, the impact of the Sikh movement in terms of a restructuring of social relations has been greatest in the Punjab. Thus the broader context of caste and Sikhism should also be seen in the regional context of contemporary Indian Punjab.

III
Caste and Sikhism: The broader context of the region

In its ideological self-image, Sikhism is a religion without caste. Not only were the Sikh gurus 'beyond all doubt, vigorous and practical denouncers of caste' (McLeod 1996: 87), Sikh reformers in the late 19th century also used its anti-caste message to establish Sikhism's distinctiveness from Hinduism. Contemporary Sikh scholars also underline this point very sharply. The following passage provides a good summary of the Sikh claim on caste:

> ... Guru Nanak championed the cause of an egalitarian society as against the hierarchical structure of the Hindu community. He severally denounced the caste oppression .... Identifying himself with the 'lowliest of the lowly', he addressed to the oppressed strata of the society .... To make an actual beginning in this direction he initiated the egalitarian practices of Sangat [religious congregation], Langar [free community kitchen] and Pangat [un-stratified arrangement of sitting] (Gobinder Singh 1986: 49).

This claim is certainly not a superfluous one. The Sikh gurus indeed advocated equality of human beings, at a social plane as well as in relation

to God. For Guru Nanak the aim of salvation was union with God, which transcended the cycle of birth and death. Since the divine presence was everywhere, it was available to everyone. He denounced ritualism, ascetic practices and idol worship. An important aspect of Guru Nanak's philosophy was his emphasis on the values of everyday life, a 'this worldliness'. In other words, against the choice available within classical Hinduism of getting out of the caste system through renunciation (see Dumont 1980: 184–85; Srivastava 1999), Guru Nanak denounced caste while living within the social world. The obvious implication of such a 'path' was that, though the Gurus rejected caste ideologically, their social and personal world could not have been 'caste-free'.

The second guru standardised the Gurumukhi script, which eventually became a vehicle for the Punjabi language and identity. Earlier Guru Nanak had consciously rejected Sanskrit in preference to the indigenous spoken language. When the fifth guru, Guru Arjun, compiled the first canon of the faith, the Adi Granth, he included the writings of some of the contemporary saints from the shudra and 'untouchable' castes (such as Ravidas, a cobbler; Sadhan, a butcher; and Sain, a barber). Bhai Budha, who was appointed the first reader and custodian (*granthi*), was a Jat by caste. Of the 'five beloved' who were the first to be baptised as Khalsas on the day of Baisakhi in 1699 by the tenth guru, four reportedly came from castes belonging to 'middle' or 'lower' categories in the given social hierarchy.

Apart from the influence of the Sikh movement, one must also not forget the fact that until 1947 Punjab was a Muslim majority region. Islamic and Sufi ideas of equality would also have had a significant impact on the overall social structure in the region, including the practice of caste.

When they established their rule in the province, some of the British colonial rulers appeared to have been surprised at the absence of rigid caste hierarchy in the region. Some of them went to the extent of saying that Punjab was a 'notable exception' to the caste system in India (O'Malley in Nayar 1966: 20). Commenting on the status of 'low castes' in the province, a colonial government report, for example, observed in the 1920s:

> It would be misleading to attach too great importance to the existence of caste in the Punjab .... Not only is it the case that the Brahman has no practical pre-eminence among Hindus, but as between 'caste' and

'non-caste' Hindus the distinction is not so strongly marked as to
create the political problem found elsewhere in India.[5]

Social differentiation in Punjab, some of them felt, resembled Europe
more than mainland India. As another observer wrote:

Nowhere else in Hindu India does caste sit so lightly or approach so
nearly to the social classes of Europe.[6]

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the practice of caste in the region
was that it functioned without the presence of what is considered the
most important actor in the system, viz., the Brahmins. Though Brahmins
as a caste community did exist in Punjab and continue to do so even
today, they were ritually important only for the upper-caste Hindus, who
numerically constituted a small proportion of the population of the state.
Even among the Hindus of Punjab, Brahmins did not enjoy a superior
status. Writing on the social life in colonial Punjab, Prakash Tandon, an
upper-caste Khatri Hindu, comments in his celebrated autobiographical
Punjabi century that the Brahmins of Punjab lived a 'frugal life' and it
was rare to find 'an affluent Brahmin' in the region (Tandon 1961: 77).
Most Brahmins in his native village were treated as members of the menial
castes. Like other menials, they too were mostly dependent upon the
food they collected from their *jajman*s. Giving a vivid description of
their social status, he writes:

With us brahmins were an underprivileged class and exercised little
or no influence on the community.

Our brahmins did not as a rule even have the role of teachers, because
until the British opened regular schools, teaching was done by Muslim
mullahs in the mosques or by Sikh granthis ... in the Gurudwaras.
Our brahmins were rarely erudite; in fact many of them were barely
literate, possessing only a perfunctory knowledge of rituals and know-
ing just the necessary mantras by heart (Tandon 1961: 76).

Similarly Saberwal, an anthropologist who studied a small town of Punjab
during the late 1960s, writes:

[5] Great Britain Indian Statutory Commission, *Memorandum Submitted by the Govern-
ment of Punjab (1930)* as in Nayar 1966: 20.

[6] See James Drummond Anderson (1913: 26), quoted in Nayar 1966: 20.

> ... even if the Brahmins were able to carve a ceremonial place at Ranjit Singh's court for themselves, there is no evidence that they acquired much land or that they were able to enforce the social circumstances that they would have required for maintaining high levels of ritual purity (Saberwal 1976: 7).

Joyce Pettigrew, another anthropologist, argued that rural society of Punjab differed radically from Hindu India because of the absence of caste among the Sikhs. She goes to the extent of claiming that instead of rules of purity and pollution, Sikh society placed emphasis upon 'the family unit and [...] the values pertaining to that unit, namely, honour, pride and equality, reputation, shame and insult' (Pettigrew 1975: 4). However, her claim was strongly contested by Hershman, another anthropologist who did his fieldwork in a village near Jallandhar. 'Even in those areas where almost the whole of the population was Sikh, there was most certainly a caste system in operation in the sense that endogamous groups organise their social relationships with one another through the idiom of ritual purity and avoidance behavior', he argued (Hershman 1981: 21). Pettigrew too had mentioned in her study that, while 'Jats, Khatris, Aroras, all ate with one another and there were also an increasing number of cases of intermarriage between them', Jats in the villages 'did not visit the houses of Mashabis, take food from them, eat with them or intermarry with them' (Pettigrew 1975: 44).

Perhaps, most importantly, though caste or Brahmanical ideology was certainly weak in Punjab, social relations in the village community and the political economy of agriculture would have been closely structured around caste. As was the case in some other parts of the subcontinent, different servicing castes were tied to the landowning cultivators within the framework of the jajmani system.

I.P. Singh (1975, 1977), who did his fieldwork in a village near Amritsar during the late 1950s, provides a fairly good idea about the nature of caste relations in a Sikh village at that time. The Sikhs living in the village were divided into two groups, the Sardars (the upper castes) and the Mashabis (the lower-caste scavengers). The first group included the Jats, Kambohs, Tarkhans, Kumhars, Sunars and Nais. Though the agriculturist Jats considered themselves higher than the other groups in this category, Singh found no feeling of caste-based avoidance or prejudice among them. They visited each other's house, inter-dined, and attended marriage functions and celebrated festivals together. In terms of the village settlement, also, no demarcation existed between the houses of these groups.

However, the Mashabis, who constituted nearly half of the village population, were treated differently. They lived on one side of the village. They had a separate well while all the other castes used a common well. In the village feasts, where everyone was invited, the Mashabis sat separately. Since many of them worked as labourers in the fields of the Jat landowners, the latter visited the houses of the Mashabis but they did so as a patronising gesture. The practice of untouchability was minimal during drinking sessions. Mashabis and Sardars drank liquor together but mostly outside their homes, during fairs and occasionally in the fields. When tumblers were scarce, they even drank from the same glass (I.P. Singh 1977: 76).

The practice of untouchability was also less in religious affairs. There was only one gurudwara in the village where everyone was allowed entry. The priest, who himself belonged to a low caste (Cheemba, washerman), served all the castes without any discrimination. He had performed all the marriages in the villages irrespective of any caste distinction. This was quite in contrast to the way the Brahmin priest used to function earlier. Before a *granthi* was appointed in the gurudwara, the Brahmin used to perform rituals even for the Sikhs, but he served only the upper-caste Sikhs.

Reforms and mobilisations against caste

Apart from the historical specificities of the nature of caste relations in Punjab, the region also witnessed many social movements that had a lasting impact on the social structure of Punjabi and Sikh society.

The establishment of British colonial rule also opened Punjab to the activities of Christian missionaries who came with the intention of spreading the message of the Church. The appeal of the Church attracted members of untouchable castes the most. The first conversion took place in 1873 when a man named Ditt from the Chuhra caste was baptised in Sialkot. 'To the surprise of the missionaries, Ditt was followed by hundreds of thousands of others from lower castes, and Punjab Christianity became a de facto movement' (Juergensmeyer 1988: 181). In the given power structure 'conversion would have been a risky act of rebellion' for these 'untouchables' (Webster 1999: 96–97).

According to Juergensmeyer, the Christian missionaries had not really intentionally targeted the low castes for conversion. Apparently it was the untouchables who came out seeking conversion to Christianity. They would have obviously seen a potential for social mobility in conversion.

While missionaries 'saw no sensible or moral reason for keeping the lower castes out, [they] feared that allowing them in would sully the church's reputation' (Juergensmeyer 1988: 184).

Their fears were not unfounded. When a newspaper article in *The Tribune* of 19 October 1892 argued that the rate of conversions would soon turn Punjab into a Christian region, 'a tremor of fear ran through the upper caste Hindu and Sikh elite' (Juergensmeyer 1988: 181). There was a virtual competition among the religious communities, the Christians, the Hindus and the Sikhs, to win the untouchables over to their side. It was around this time that the militant Hindu reformist organisation, the Arya Samaj, made its entry into the Punjab.

The colonial administrative structure had also begun to deploy new categories of social aggregation and classification. They conceived of the populace in terms of caste and religious communities and looked at them accordingly in the process of governance (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). They 'encouraged members of each community to present their case in communitarian terms' (Grewal 1989: 195). As elsewhere, these administrative discourses of British rulers had far-reaching influences on the process of identity formation in the region (Fox 1985). The introduction of the census thus made the 'religious communities' sensitive about numbers. 'Numbers were generally equated with strength, particularly for employment under the government' (Grewal 1994: 131).

While the Muslim population remained stable at around 51 per cent during 1881 to 1911 and the proportions of Sikhs and the Christians went up marginally, the Hindu population declined from about 41 per cent in 1881 to around 36 per cent in 1911 (Jones 1976: 324). The upper-caste Punjabi Hindus, who were already feeling marginalised by the Bengali clerks whom the British had brought with them for administrative work in the region, would have obviously viewed the decline in Hindu population with much concern. The passing of the Land Alienation Act of 1901, which stopped the transfer of agricultural land from the agricultural castes, mostly Sikhs and Muslims, to the non-agricultural castes, mostly Hindus, had also been seen by the Hindu elite as an act of discrimination against them.

The militant reformism of the Arya Samaj appeared to provide an answer to the crisis of the upper-caste Hindu elite of the region. It offered 'a progressive ideology based on traditional values' (Juergensmeyer 1988: 38). Swami Dayanand had launched the Arya Samaj in Bombay in 1875. When he visited Lahore for the first time in 1877, he stayed on in Punjab for nearly eighteen months and set up branches of the Samaj in almost all the big towns of the province (Sharma 1985: 40).

Unlike the other Hindu reform movements, the Arya Samaj not only attacked 'foreign' religions which had been converting locals into their fold, but also severely criticised many of the existing practices of the Hindus, including the practice of untouchability. The Swami advocated going back to the ancient Vedic religion wherein untouchables were presumably a part of the Hindu religion. He attacked Brahmanical hegemony in religious affairs and emphasised the need for spreading modern education among the Hindus. Along with bringing back those who had converted to Christianity, he also advocated bringing the lower castes into the Hindu fold through a process of religious purification, the *Shuddhi*. Since untouchability was presumed to emanate from ritual impurity, it could be removed through a religious ritual to render untouchables touchable, which would automatically raise their status (Pimpley and Sharma 1985).

Thus, despite their criticism of the Brahmanical orthodoxy within Hinduism, the strategy of the Arya Samaj for elevating the status of the untouchables was worked out within the framework of purity and impurity. The very notion of *Shuddhi* involved an affirmation to the idea of ritual purity as being the criterion for status enhancement. Neither did they reject the framework of varna. Though some ex-untouchables from the caste of Odes were solemnised through *Shuddhi*, its long-term impact was limited. However, it helped the Hindu Punjabi elite to consolidate their position in the region and to retain a large section of dalits within the Hindu fold.

Though initially the Arya Samajis attacked the so-called foreign religions, i.e., Islam and Christianity, it did not take them long to turn against Sikhism. Ever since the days of Sikh gurus, many of the low castes in the region had been a part of the Sikh movement. The reports of low-caste Sikhs being administered *Shuddhi* and their re-conversion into Hinduism were viewed with much concern by the Sikh middle-class leadership.

The militant assertion of Hindutva identity by the Arya Samaj had already sparked off a debate on the question of Sikh identity. Sikhs began to assert that theirs was a separate religion and that they should not be clubbed with the Hindus (Oberoi 1994). The practice of untouchability or discrimination against the low castes among the Sikhs was attributed to the continued influence of Hinduism on the community. Thus the struggle against caste and untouchability, which were seen as the core Hindu values, came to be implicated in the movement for a separate Sikh identity.

In other words, the Singh Sabha movement for the liberation of Sikh gurudwaras from the Hindu Mahants launched during 1920 also became a movement for de-hinduisation of the Sikh religion. One of the main demands of the movement was 'unquestioned entrance to Sikh places of worship' for all (Juergensmeyer 1988: 28). Some members of the Sikh Khalsa Diwan tried to create their own 'depressed class movements' to encourage Scheduled Caste support. The movement was not confined to the liberation of historic Sikh gurudwaras.

The impact of the Sikh reform movement went very far. In his study of a village in Amritsar district, I.P. Singh found that the decline of the Brahmins in the village began around the same time, 1922–26. It was after these movements that a low-caste Sikh was appointed as priest in the local gurudwara and he began to give equal treatment to members of all castes in the village (I.P. Singh 1977: 81–82). The insistence of Sikh reformers on distancing the 'community' from the Hindus and the legal recognition of weddings through the Anand Karaj Sikh ritual made the village Brahmin priest redundant. Unlike the Brahmin, the Sikh priest could be from any caste and, as mentioned above, the priest in the village that I.P. Singh studied was actually from a lower caste. He had been trained to be a priest at the Sikh Missionary College, Amritsar.

While the Sikh reformers attacked caste, the Sikh leadership, having become aware of the significance of numbers, did not deny the existence of caste among the Sikhs or that the low castes among the Sikhs faced disabilities due to their birth. The Sikh leadership, in fact, had to lobby a great deal with the national leadership so that certain Sikh castes could also be included along with Hindus in the list of the Scheduled Castes for the provision of special benefits and reservations. They were obviously worried that if reservation benefits were not extended to Sikhs, the low castes among them might declare themselves Hindu. Nayar reports that this 'concession was achieved in return for an agreement by the Sikh leaders that no further political demands would be made in the future on behalf of the Sikh community' (Nayar 1966: 238). However, while all the Hindu untouchable castes were given the special privileges, only four sub-castes of 'untouchable' Sikhs were included in the list. 'The sub-castes excluded from the schedule showed little reluctance in abandoning the Khalsa (Sikh) tradition and declaring themselves Hindus in order to claim benefits' (K. Singh 1966: 304).

For our interest, perhaps the most important social and political movement witnessed in Punjab during the colonial period was the Ad-Dharm movement that initiated the beginning of autonomous dalit politics in

the region. New opportunities opened up by the growing demand for leather goods such as boots and shoes for the British army had brought relative prosperity to some of the enterprising members of the Chamar caste. This mobility was particularly evident in the Doaba sub-region of Punjab, from where some of the Chamars had even gone to the United States of America and England and had been members of left-wing organisations there. The introduction of secular education along with the social mobility that some individual untouchables experienced provided the social ground for such autonomous mobilisations.

The Ad-Dharm movement took off with the arrival of Mangoo Ram on the scene. Mangoo Ram was the son of a rich Chamar, but his family had to bear the stigma of untouchability. He spent much of his early life in the USA where he got involved with the Gadar movement. By 1925, he had come back to Punjab. On his return home, he set up a school for lower-caste children with the help of the Arya Samaj, but very soon he distanced himself from the Samaj and took over the Ad-Dharm movement.

The Ad-Dharm movement saw itself as a new religious movement. Its proponents asserted that the 'untouchables' were a separate *qaum*, a distinct religious community similar to those of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, and that the *qaum* had existed from time immemorial (Juergensmeyer 1988: 45). When the 1931 Census approached, the Ad-Dharmis insisted they be listed as a separate religious community and not be clubbed with the Hindus. In the very first conference of the organisation, they had declared:

> We are not Hindus. We strongly request the government not to list us as such in the census. Our faith is not Hindu but Ad Dharm. We are not a part of Hinduism, and Hindus are not a part of us (quoted in Juergensmeyer 1988: 74).

Despite stiff opposition from the local Hindu leadership, their demand was accepted. A total of 418,789 persons reported themselves as Ad-Dharmis in the 1931 Punjab Census, almost equal to the Christian population of the province. They accounted for about 1.5 per cent of the total population, and around a tenth of the total low-caste population of the Punjab. Nearly 80 per cent of the low castes of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts reported themselves as Ad-Dharmis (ibid.: 77).

In other parts of the Punjab, however, the locally dominant groups were able to thwart the Ad-Dharmi drive rather effectively (Khan in

Saberwal 1972: 144). After the Census, the Ad-Dharm movement was absorbed in Ambedkar's Scheduled Castes Federation that was later transformed into the Republican Party of India. While Ambedkar enjoyed a great deal of influence in Punjab, particularly among the Ad-Dharmis, and made several visits to the province (Ahir 1992), few among them followed his strategy of converting to Buddhism for social mobility (Saberwal 1972: 145).

After independence, the Ad-Dharmis were listed as one of the Scheduled Castes of the Punjab and were clubbed with the Hindus once again. While Ad-Dharm lost much of its momentum as a social movement during the post-independence period, it was able to give a new sense of identity to the Chamars of Doaba. They have since emerged as a proud and influential community.

IV
Caste in contemporary rural Punjab

The new-found sense of pride in Ad-Dharmi identity among a section of the Punjabi dalits, and the influence of Sikhism and various other reform movements in the region, have not been able to erase caste from the social landscape of the region. On the contrary caste continues to be an important marker of social, economic and political life in contemporary Punjab. Caste-based segregation is easily evident in the social life in rural Punjab. Caste boundaries are maintained and reproduced with much keenness even within the dalit castes.

Economic inequalities on caste lines are also clearly visible. For example, though the proportion of Scheduled Caste population in Punjab is the highest among all the states of the Indian union, very few of them own or cultivate agricultural land. The Scheduled Castes constituted 28.3 per cent of the total population of Punjab in 1991, much higher than the all-India average of around 16 per cent. However, only 4.8 per cent of them worked as cultivators in Punjab in 1991. The all-India average of cultivators among them was above 25 per cent and in the neighbouring Himachal Pradesh as many as 67.7 per cent were cultivators. Even in Uttar Pradesh 42.6 per cent of them were cultivators.[7] This is partly because of the British colonial policy of patronising the locally dominant landowning caste of Jats. When the Land Alienation Act in 1901 was

[7] *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy* (special issue on Scheduled Castes edited by André Béteille), XII, 3&4, 2000. Statistical supplement, p. 615.

passed, dalit castes of Punjab were clubbed along with the urban trading communities and were not allowed to register agricultural land in their names.

While caste has not been an idiom of political life in Punjab, unlike some other regions of India, it has always been an important factor in the state, as well as in local-level politics. Until some time back, it was only the dominant landowning caste of Jats who had successfully played caste politics. But now even the dalit communities have begun to assert themselves in the political arena. The happenings in Talhan are clear indicators of this new trend.

What, then has, been the source of this new-found political agency among them? One possible way to answer this question would be look at the nature of social and economic transformation taking place in rural Punjab. Agriculturally, Punjab has been one of the most dynamic regions of India. The adoption of the Green Revolution technology during the 1960s and 1970s set the pace of economic change that led to a complete transformation of agrarian social structure and village life. Though the Green Revolution was conceptually a 'caste-blind' programme of rural development, it did usher in various changes which had far-reaching implications for the prevailing structure of caste relations in the rural set-up. Dalit communities of rural Punjab also used the new spaces opened up by the process of economic development to re-negotiate their relations with the locally dominant castes and rural social structure, eventually leading to a near complete breakdown of the jajmani relations. As I have argued elsewhere, these changes could perhaps be conceptualised through the categories of *dissociation*, *distancing* and *autonomy*.[8]

A large majority of dalits have consciously *dissociated* themselves from their traditional 'polluting' occupations. The Chamars (including Ad-Dharmis and Ramdasis) have almost completely moved away from their traditional occupation of dealing with dead cattle. Some of these occupations are no longer identified with any specific caste group in rural Punjab. For example, the picking up of dead cattle has become a completely commercialised enterprise. The village *panchayat* generally gives the work on contract to an individual contractor, who could even be from another village or a nearby town. Most of those involved in this 'business' are quite well off and are often viewed enviously even by the upper castes. Similarly, some degree of commercialisation has taken place

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[8] See Jodhka 2002a. This paper was based on a study of fifty-one villages selected from different sub-regions of the state. Fieldwork for the study was completed in 2001.

in the case of other dalit or jajmani occupations as well. Barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths, all now have shops. There are many dalits who have opened barber shops. Some dalits have also taken up the job of carpenters, particularly in villages where the traditional carpenters have left for the towns. They all have shops and do not work in the framework of jajmani relations.

The only 'unclean occupations' where a degree of continuity exists is that of scavenging. Though a large majority of those involved with scavenging work are the Balmikis and Mashabis (earlier known as Chuhras), the castes with which it was traditionally identified, only a few families from these castes actually work as scavengers. Even in scavenging, the traditional structure of jajmani relations has almost completely changed. The cleaning of drains and toilets or the sweeping of houses is mostly done on a commercial basis. In most villages a scavenger is employed for an individual street. Each household in the street pays a fixed sum to the scavenger on a monthly basis. In order to avoid any element of familiarity, some of them preferred working in the neighbouring village rather than their own.

There are other areas of village life where the process of dissociation can be similarly observed. While most of the rich farmers of Punjab continue to live in the village, they have all the modern amenities of urban living available in their homes. Their children go to study in the towns and women desire the luxuries of urban living. Many of these households have begun to employ dalit women to help with the domestic chores. At least ten to twelve dalit women in almost every village of Punjab were regularly employed for domestic help. These women do various kinds of domestic work such as sweeping, washing of clothes, and in some cases, even washing the kitchen utensils. As is the case with such employment in towns, dalit women would work in a couple of houses and are typically paid a fixed sum by each household, ranging from Rs 100 to Rs 300 per month, along with some occasional 'gifts'.

Agricultural land in Punjab is almost exclusively owned by the dominant castes, such as Jats and Rajputs. However, a large majority of dalits did work on land as labourers. Some of them also worked on a long-term basis with the landowners. Though the traditional variety of attached labour, such as *sajhi*s and *siri*s have given way to more formalised relations, working on a long-term basis with farmers still leads to relations of dependency and unfreedom. Dalits obviously did not like getting into such arrangements and have been trying to withdraw from employment in agriculture wherever they can. Dalits' attempts to *distance* themselves from the local agrarian economy largely depend on the availability of

alternative sources of employment. In the villages of Doaba, for example, we were frequently told that much of the labour work is done by migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Local dalits rarely wanted to work on land. They only performed seasonal labour and during the remainder of the year preferred going out or bringing work home from neighbouring towns. Some of them, for example, made ropes. These ropes were woven for the urban markets and were sold through a middleman who also supplied them with the required raw materials.

Similarly, they have also been investing in building their autonomous cultural institutions, such as gurudwaras and community centres. Though in principle there are no restrictions on dalits entering the Sikh gurudwaras, caste prejudice at the local level seems to work quite strongly in religious institutions as well. Dalits often felt that they were not really welcomed by the locally dominant castes in the village gurudwaras. Their children would be asked to come for the *langar* after everyone else had finished eating, or they would be asked to sit in separate queues. While the gurudwara management formally invited all the others, dalits were not even informed about special programmes and festivities. Rarely were they allowed to participate in the cooking and serving of the *langar* in local gurudwaras.[9]

There were some other significant changes in caste relations in rural Punjab. One of them was the declining significance of segregated settlements. With the growing population and a continual expansion of residential areas, the old settlement structure of the village has, to some extent, been diluted. As the newly-prosperous upper castes make newer and bigger houses on the peripheries of the village, dalit settlements do not remain as isolated as they were before. In fact, all categories of villagers have constructed new houses on the peripheries. There were also some interesting cases where upwardly-mobile dalits had purchased houses in upper-caste localities from those who had left the village for towns or had emigrated to the West. Interestingly, there was little resistance from the neighbouring upper-caste residents to dalits buying houses in their localities.

Much has changed with regard to the access to drinking water as well. Wells are no longer the primary source of drinking water anywhere in rural Punjab. While in some villages taps have been installed under government-funded programmes, at others, hand-pumps have replaced

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[9] It may be mentioned here that the practice of untouchability in Hindu temples in Punjab villages is much greater even today (see Jodhka 2002b).

wells. Though the sources of drinking water as such were separate for dalits and the upper castes, there was much less restriction on the access of dalits to the taps and hand-pumps used or owned by upper castes. However, it may be useful to add here that though dalits could and did access water from the upper-caste sources quite regularly, the frequency of upper castes taking water from the sources used by dalits was much less, though not completely absent.

Caste continued to be a significant factor in education, albeit in a new secular form. By and large, the practice of untouchability was not visible in village schools. However, more than untouchability, perhaps, the problem was with the quality of education being imparted in the government-run village schools. The number of teachers employed was normally fewer than required. Even those employed did not take their work very seriously. Rarely did rural schools have sufficient infrastructure in terms of the rooms, laboratories and furniture required for the proper functioning of a school. As a consequence, the more ambitious and well-to-do parents had started sending their children to urban schools. One could also notice a mushrooming of private schools, mostly at the nursery and primary level of teaching in some of the villages. The main attraction of these schools was that they claimed to carry out teaching in 'English medium'. However, they charged fees, while the government schools were virtually free. Only the landed upper caste and better-off families could afford to send their children to these schools.

This withdrawal of upper castes from government-run schools has had a further negative impact on the quality of education in these schools. In some of the villages, the government schools have begun to be called dalit or 'harijan' schools. Since the influential upper castes do not send their children to the government schools, there is little interest among them to demand an improvement in standards of teaching in local schools.

V
Caste and Sikhism

As is evident from the brief account given at the beginning of this article, the conflict in Talhan was not a major case of caste violence, and largely remained a local affair. It acquired prominence only when outside actors, who understandably saw in it the possibilities of expanding their own spheres of influence, got involved. However, the Talhan incident managed to revive the question of 'caste in Sikh religion'.

While on the one hand it was a case of assertion of dalit identity, on the other it was also a case of making claims to a wider identity in the language of 'rights'. The manner in which questions of 'participation' and 'share' were raised and articulated by local dalits tends to clearly reflect this complexity of the Talhan case. An important and unstated aspect of Talhan was that, despite the obvious suggestions, it did not lead to any kind of polarisation in state politics. While the Bahujan Samaj Party's gains were quite limited, the Akalis did not make any statements on the 'caste dimensions' of the conflict either.[10] They criticised the state government for having failed to preserve the hard-earned peace and stability in the region. Even with regard to the s*madh* of Baba Nihal Singh, though they initially argued that it had never been a proper gurudwara, they did not persist with their position.

The Ad-Dharmis wanted the restoration of the picture of Guru Ravidas on a wall of the shrine, which was reportedly removed by the Jats during the conflict. They also contested the Jats' move to convert the shrine into a 'proper' gurudwara with help of the militant Sikh outfit, Damdami Taksal. However, they never attacked the Sikh religion. On the contrary, their position was that they (the Ad-Dharmis of Talhan), too, had the right to be treated as Sikhs, at par with the Jats. The problem, according to them, was with the Jats, 'who had appropriated Sikhism for the benefits of their caste alone'. Two elderly dalits of the village took me to their own shrine and showed with pride that they too had the Sikh flag (*Nishan Sahib*) installed in their gurudwara. When the local Jats insisted that Ad-Dharmis could join the managing committee if they were willing to become 'proper Sikhs', dalits did not reject the proposal outright, and eventually conceded to the conditions put up by the Jats. Of the two members who were accepted in the managing committee to represent the Ad-Dharmis, one eventually agreed to become baptised as an Amritdhari Sikh.

The point I am trying to make here is a rather simple one, which is that the manner in which the question of caste and Sikhism has been raised in much of the academic literature has an inherent flaw because it tends to club the social and economic realities of contemporary Punjab with Sikh ideology. This tendency was strongly reflected in most of the

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[10] Though the BSP claims to represent both the dalits and the 'backward' castes, its social base in Punjab has mostly been among dalits, particularly of Chamar background. The Akali Dal, on the other hand, is known for its base in the peasantry and its leadership in 'caste' terms is largely Jat.

popular responses to the Talhan episode. Journalists/activists from other parts of India saw the conflict in Talhan as just another case of Brahmanical caste oppression on vulnerable dalits.

This happens partly because of the manner in which caste has been conceptualised in anthropological writings on India. The 'mainstream' anthropological/sociological discourse on caste usually conceives it as a unified system that worked in more or less similar ways everywhere in India; it has invariably tended to emphasise the underlying cultural/ideological consensus across castes on its governing normative order (Dumont 1980; Moffatt 1979). However, as scholars have repeatedly pointed out, Dumont constructed his theory of caste on the basis of some Hindu scriptural sources and did not care to look at the lived reality of caste (Gupta 1991; Mencher 1975). This 'book-view' is essentially a Brahmin-centric view of caste (Berreman 1991; Béteille 1977). More recently Dirks has pointed to the continuities between Dumont's writings on caste and the earlier orientalist and colonial constructs of Indian society (Dirks 2001). Similarly, some other scholars like Quigley (1993) and Raheja (1988) offer alternative ways of conceptualising caste. However, the underlying assumption of it being a pan-Indian reality is rarely questioned.

Notwithstanding the many criticisms of Dumont's writings on caste and extensive historical and empirical evidence that contradicts such claims, 'yet, when it comes to theorising about the caste system it is the book-view that tends to dominate' (Gupta 2000: 3). Why does that happen? My opinion is that the idea of caste has been very deeply embedded in the modern Indian self-image. This is partly because, to a large extent, the Indian self-image is itself a mirror reflection of the orientalist and colonial images of India. As I have shown elsewhere, though Nehru, Gandhi and Ambedkar disagreed quite fundamentally on the value of the so-called Indian tradition and the place it should have in independent India, all the three leaders of the Indian freedom struggle accepted colonial and orientalist notions of Indian civilisation. This is best reflected in the way these nationalist leaders dealt with the idea of the Indian village. The village was useful because it was a means through which they could visualise a united India. It could be used as a common denominator of the 'nation'. Irrespective of the differences of region, language or culture, villages were the same everywhere! (Jodhka 2002b).

Something similar is true about caste. Caste has been seen to represent the continuity and unity of Indian culture and its social structure. Interestingly, it is not only the nationalist/Hindu ideologue, or sometimes the professional anthropologist, who makes such claims; even the contemporary

dalit movement in India is mostly informed by a similar Brahmin-centric notion of caste.

As I have shown above, colonial writers did not see Punjab as being similar to 'Hindu India'. Caste, according to most of them, was not the governing idea of social life in Punjab. Perhaps one of the reasons why historians of modern Punjab and the Sikh religion rarely talked about caste could be the absence of colonial accounts of caste in the region. Even when they (the historians) write on caste in the region, they invariably refer to it as a descriptive (as against systemic) category. Perhaps the most talked about aspect of caste in literature on Sikhism is with regards to the caste origin of the ten gurus, the changing caste composition of the Sikh followers, and the impact that the coming of Jats into the Sikh fold has had for the faith.

While some sociologists and social anthropologists have studied the social organisation of rural life in Punjab or caste identities and their politics in urban Punjab, rarely did they try proposing any formulations on caste that could have had wider implications for the theorisation of caste itself. An absence of regionalist and historical perspectives on the subject reinforced the Brahmin-centric notion of caste.[11] Thus in the absence of any alternative theorisation of caste and empirical studies on the subject from Punjab, whenever they come across an instance like that of Talhan, outside commentators tend to invoke the popular Brahmanical notion of caste. Scholars working on contemporary Punjab have also tended to ignore the factor of caste, even when much of the political analysis on Punjab is done through categories of caste and community.

More recently, some efforts have been made in this direction. Puri has recently claimed that though the classical Brahmanical notion of caste hierarchy did not work in Punjab, Sikhism had a parallel structure of hierarchy (Puri 2003). Caste hierarchy in Sikhism, according to this view, is different because in rural Punjab the supreme caste is that of the Jats. The point about rural and urban hierarchies in Punjab/Sikhism being different has also been made by several other scholars (see Dhami 1995; McLeod 1996).

However, there are several problems with such arguments. In all these writings the empirical reality of contemporary Punjab is seen as being

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[11] Though anthropologists working on the 'Indian village' during the 1950s and 1960s criticised many of the colonial notions of village life in India, they did not question the ahistorical and essentialised constructs of rurality that were central to the colonial discourses on the Indian village (see Jodhka 1998).

synonymous with Sikh religious ideology. Further, such an approach gives no space to the obvious fact that nowhere do the operative beliefs and social practices conform to the normative and ideological prescriptions of a religious ideology (McMullen in Jakobsh 2003:8). Even the fact that Sikh gurus came from a particular caste or that they married within their own kinship network does not in any way suggest that they propagated caste hierarchy. On the other hand, the popular self-image of Sikhism tends to make claims about the absence of caste in Sikhism purely on the basis of scriptural ideology.

An alternative understanding of caste should begin with the recognition of the fact that, as in the case of other structures of social relations, caste identities too undergo change and that they have never functioned as 'pure ideological systems'. In order to do that one should separate the empirical realities of a region and the scriptural identity of religious communities. Not only should we separate contemporary Indian Punjab from Sikh ideology, but we would also need to disentangle the practice of caste from Hinduism. In other words, a historical perspective on the subject would perhaps make the question of 'caste and Sikhism' superfluous.

It is within such a framework that we can possibly understand the question of caste today. While ideologically it is dead, or nearly so, caste survives and thrives as a source of identity. The processes of dissociation, distancing and autonomy described above clearly show that the dalits of Punjab are breaking out of the systemic aspects of caste. They are trying to get out of the patronage structures of jajmani relations. The old association of caste with occupation has nearly gone. They have also been trying to distance themselves from employment in agriculture. In order to preserve the dignity of their individual selves and of their kinship communities, dalits of Punjab have been investing in their own autonomous structures of social and cultural life. However, once freed from old structures, they also make claims over the common resources of the village and begin to demand equal rights vis-à-vis other caste communities. It is in this framework that we can perhaps make sense of the Talhan case. Caste today, the way it works on the ground in contemporary Punjab, is not about hierarchy but about power and identity.

Before I end my article I would like to take you back to Talhan. I visited the village around three weeks after the conflicting parties had settled the dispute and two dalit men had been incorporated into the managing committee. When I asked one of the newly-appointed Ad-Dharmi members of the committee about his possible role, he sounded

very cynical. 'What can the two of us do in a committee that has as many as ten Jat members?' Though he had already attended two meetings with the Jats, he did not feel that their being on the committee was going to radically alter the local power structure. When it comes to power, the question is not that of caste alone. The Jats in Talhan and elsewhere in rural Punjab are not going to easily give up their 'old' position. However, their domination and 'sardari' will no longer go unquestioned.

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7

Inventing caste history:
Dalit mobilisation and nationalist past

Badri Narayan

In this article I have tried to show how dalit communities are inventing their caste histories in the present context as stories of self-respect. These self-respect centred histories are continuously being reshaped in today's socio-cultural and political context. Many sources, including archaeological, linguistic and ethnomusical sources, are cited to substantiate their authenticity. These histories are not merely presented as narratives; commemorations, celebrations and festivities are also organised around them so that they are ingrained in the memory of the dalits. Local heroes are also created in this process to symbolise the glory of the community. Uda Devi is one such heroic person, who has emerged as a symbol of mobilisation of the dalit communities, especially the Pasis, in their struggle for contemporary socio-political empowerment. The mobilisational potentialities of such caste histories and heroes are the reason why different political parties have made them an integral element of their modern democratic, electoral and mobilisational discourses. The study focuses on the invention of caste heroes and histories of the Pasi community of Uttar Pradesh, and the political mobilisation centred around them.

Who am I
Don't scratch old wounds
Who am I
Not what you think I am
I have grown up playing in the dust of my alleyways
I have learnt to fight for myself at an age when others
dream dreams

> *I am that winsome bud which blooms on my*
> *forefathers' graves*
> *And must smilingly endure every punishment merely*
> *because it exists.*
> Ishrat Aafreen

Nobody knows how true the truth about Uda Devi is. Contemporary sources do not disclose much, nor do the academic histories of her period. But the dalits, more specifically the Pasis, remember her more through written than oral sources. Now they have also started celebrating festivals in her memory at different places. Statues of her have been installed at various places in Uttar Pradesh. A fair is organised every year near the statue of Uda Devi installed in Sikandar Bagh, Lucknow. Political organisations have also appeared in her name. Yet nobody can say with certainty whether the accounts of Uda Devi are a part of their actual or their 'discursive' past. Has she (or her story) become part and parcel of the everyday present of the dalits, or is she a mere political gimmick? Is she an instrument of the dalits' attempts to capture power through the constructed story of their nationalist past? The dalits may have multiple reasons for using her, and it appears that they are doing so. But for me her significance lies in the telling, writing and celebration of her story. While the story may be simply an attempt to create a myth or a legendary reconstruction of the past governed by the needs of communities that may be imagined or real, national or otherwise, it is created as an historical narrative to suit their desires and expectations. In this case the expectations appear to be inter-locked with the emerging aspirations for self-respect among the dalit castes. This article focuses on the process of invention of history by the dalits, with special emphasis on the invention of the myth of Uda Devi by the Pasi caste in the Avadh region of Uttar Pradesh to provide self-respect to the caste. As a symbol of mobilisation of the Pasi and other dalit castes, this myth is being utilised by different political forces in their electoral discourses. I have tried to highlight how the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party), in particular, is moulding this myth for the purpose of mobilising the dalits, especially the Pasi caste in Uttar Pradesh.

The story of Uda Devi is narrated in the Lucknow region of central Uttar Pradesh, which is still demographically dominated by the Pasis, a prominent and widespread community throughout North India. An important Dalit caste in Uttar Pradesh, the Pasi is notified as a Scheduled Caste, *vide* the statutory order of 1956, throughout the states of Bihar, Haryana, Orissa, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh

and the Union Territories of Delhi and Chandigarh, as well as some parts of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and as far as south Mysore. The Pasis are traditionally associated with a number of occupations of miscellaneous types, in addition to toddy tapping. They serve as watchmen, tend pigs, and do manual labour in the fields (*Census of India* 1931: 366). Some Pasis in certain areas are also reputed to be engaged in crime, and the Pasi community was notified as a criminal tribe in Uttar Pradesh and erstwhile Vindhya Pradesh, now merged with Madhya Pradesh (Ayyangar 1951: 33).

I
Telling and retelling

Rakesh Chaudhury, a 22-year-old Pasi youth living in the Dalmau village near Rae Bareli, narrated the history of the Pasi caste (*Pasi Gaurav gatha*) to me during my fieldwork in August 1998. He told me that the Pasi caste originated from the sweat of the great *rishi* Parasurama. He added that, in the mediaeval period, a number of ruling dynasties of central Uttar Pradesh were from the Pasi caste, and many Pasis of today are the descendants of the mediaeval ruling dynasty of Rajbhars, who have been mentioned in colonial narratives as Rajpasis and Rajbansis. During the War of Independence (1857) the Pasis played a significant role, and many of their men attained martyrdom. Rakesh also narrated the story of Martyr V*irangana* (Chivalrous Lady) Uda Devi, an associate of Begum Hazrat Mahal, who was shot dead by British soldiers (1857) while fighting for Lucknow. According to his narrative, Pasis have a martial tradition, perhaps because their caste is descended from Parasurama. In his narrative of the Pasi caste history, Chaudhury attached great importance to the history of the Pasis as a ruling community in Uttar Pradesh in the mediaeval period, and to their great sacrifice in the Indian freedom movement.

Typically, the *Gaurav Gatha*s, the stories that assert the glory of the caste, identify legendary figures who, the narrators imagine, have played pivotal roles in building their caste identity. The facts of the past are interspersed with myth and fantasy to create a new perception of a past that is glorious, pure and exclusive. This in turn is accorded historical status and imagined to have existed from time immemorial (Seneviratne 1997: 5). This kind of history, which seeks authenticity from written sources and from the self-interpretation of so-called archaeological remains, is sustained by commemorations such as feasts, fasts, celebrations and the creation of new symbols like flags and emblems based on these

invented and reinterpreted historical narratives. In support of these created and invented histories, the traditions and customs are also interpreted to serve contemporary political interests (Gupta 1997: 124).

II
The politics of telling

The *Gaurav Gatha*s narrated by the Pasis are flexible and amenable to change in different times and contexts. The pasts of the Pasis are socially constructed, continuously defining new friends and enemies according to their subjective perceptions of difference. Like the other newly-aware dalit communities, the Pasis are not merely passive spectators of the changing socio-political scenario, but are deeply influenced by the newly-emerging dalit consciousness. This has inspired them to invent their own traditional myths, associations and memories in consonance with their new political aspirations. The recovery and dissemination of a lost chapter of the past has played a significant role in carving out their new socio-political identity (cf. Gupta 1997 : 123).

To prove the authenticity of their claims, the Pasis frequently refer to colonial ethnographic sources, gazetteers, etc., that were produced under the project of colonial documentation. Once recorded and presented in colonial government publications, however, these stories became frozen as 'historical fact', circulating in contemporary oral traditions and endorsed by the dalits themselves. A very important figure in the colonial documentation project, William Crooke (1896: 138–52), has stated that throughout the area of Oudh, the Pasis claim that they were lords of the country and that their kings reigned at Sandila, Dhaurahara, Mitauli and Ramkot in the districts of Kheri, Hardoi and Unnao. Ramkot, where the town of Bangarman in Unnao stands now, is said to have been one of their chief strongholds. Crooke has further mentioned that the last of the Pasi lords of Ramkot, Raja Santhar, withdrew his allegiance to Kanauj and refused to pay tax. On this, Raja Jaychand gave his Ganjar country to the Banaphar heroes, Alha and Udal, who attacked and destroyed Ramkot, leaving it the shapeless mass of ruins in which we find it now. But Crooke (ibid.) has ridiculed the claim of the Pasis that they originally came from Gujarat and that Tilak Chand, from whom the Pasis claim descent, was actually a Bhar king who called his family Rajbanshi or 'those of royal lineage'.

On the basis of this claim, Russel (1916: 380–85), another colonial ethnographer, proposed that the Pasis were a Dravidian tribe who held a

part of Oudh before it was conquered by the Rajputs. As the designation of Pasi is an occupational term derived from Sanskrit, it would seem that the tribe must formerly have had some other name, or that they were an occupational offshoot of the Rajbhars or Bhars. In favour of this sugges- tion, it may be noted that the Bhars also have strong traditions of their former dominance in Oudh. Thus, Sir C. Elliot (ibid.), states in his 'Chronicles of Unnao' that, after the close of the heroic age when Ajodhya was held by the Surajbanshi Rajputs under the great king Rama, Ajodhya was destroyed and the Surajbanshis utterly banished. The country was ruled over by aborigines called Cheros in the far east, Bhars in the centre and Raj Pasis in the west. These colonial ethnographers did not advance any archaeological proof in support of their claims, but relied on folk traditions.

The colonial period caste histories reflected the competing aspirations of these communities (Dirks 1997: 121), providing an opportunity to the backward and lower classes to lay claim to a higher status in society. The caste histories of many lower castes were written during the colonial period not by scholars of their own caste, but by Arya Samaji activists and scholars who tried to give the middle and lower castes an identity and create a space for them within the Brahminical social system. Many books were published enumerating the qualities of persons belonging to the Brahmin or Kshatriya castes. While the books that were composed by Sanatanis tried to restrict the entry of backward classes into the hal- lowed ranks of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, those written by Arya Samajis gave space to the lower and backward classes to claim Brahmin or Kshatriya status. Thus upper-caste characteristics were appropriated into the histories of the backward castes.

A number of caste histories, for instance, the *Kshatriya varg kosh* (translated in Hindi by Pandit Hardayal Sharma of Meerut in 1899), the periodical *Pandit* brought out from Kashi in 1898, and the *Nishad Vanshavali* written by Shri Devi Prasad published in 1907 to chronicle the Pauranic history of the Nishad caste, were published during the colo- nial period. Similarly, the *Kalvar sanhita*, in which the Kalvars were projected as Kshatriyas, was published in 1912. In the same series, also in 1912, Arya Samaji Mathura Prasad Sharma's *Maha Lodhi vivechana* was published from Nagpur. In 1914, Dileep Singh Yadav of Etawah composed *Ahir itihas ki jhalak,* while another book on the Ahir caste, *Ahir raj kul*, written by Bal Dev Chaudhry Updeshak, was published from Aligarh and Allahabad in 1924. In 1917, Shri Bhola Nath wrote *Vaidom vanshi Darziyon ki vanshavali*, published in Badayun. This book

linked the Vamkul Vanshi Darzis with the Yaduvansh Kshatriyas. In 1918, the famous Arya Samaji Shri Satya Vrat Sharma Dwivedi of Sikanderpur near Farrukhabad published the *Telivarna prakash* from Allahabad, proving the Teli caste to be Vaishyas. Similarly, in 1921, Shri Ganga Prasad Gupta published a book from Banares in which he attempted to prove castes like Koiri, Kachhi, Murad and Kushwaha to be Kshatriyas. Another book, *Kurmi Kshatriya itihas*, published from Banares in 1927, was written by Arya Samaji Shri Abhayanand Saraswati, who claimed the important agricultural caste, Kurmi, to be Kshatriya, while the book *Mali jati Nirnay*, published in 1935, established the genealogy of the Basailiya Pali caste. The *Lodhi Rajput itihas*, written in 1936, claimed agricultural communities like the Lodhi as Rajputs, while in 1939, the All India Bhartiya Koli Rajput Mahasabha published *Kol Rajput jaati ka sankshipt parichay*, the foreword of which was written by the famous Arya Samaji Shri Nand Kumar Shastri. Similarly, in 1940, Shri Baijnath Prasad Adhyapak wrote a short history called *Rajbhar jati ka itihas,* centring around the Rajbhar caste of Uttar Pradesh, in which he tried to establish that the Rajbhar was a ruling caste linked with the ancient Bhar tribe.

Such caste histories were vital inputs into the discourse of the caste associations that were formed during the colonial period. The caste associations, which were voluntary organisations composed of members from a single caste, could demand candidacies or concessions in return for support by the caste. Also, through the associations, the urban, politically literate elite were linked with the less literate villagers belonging to the same caste. The caste histories were transmitted to the common people of the caste through these associations.

Caste associations linking members of a caste within a region first emerged in the 19th century when education became more accessible and easier means of communication and transportation like trains, roads, printing presses and postal services were established. Often, the associations were funded by western-educated men who published newspapers and held conferences to discuss caste-based discrimination, the reform of customs, and the establishment of benefits such as scholarships and hostels (dormitories) for students of their caste.

As Ronald Inden (1986: 401–6) has argued, caste was the major pillar of Indology through which European-trained writers 'essentialised' Indian peoples. The dissemination of these imagined essences not only denied Indians agency, but also justified European intervention in India. The Census has enjoyed a special place within this general line of thought,

for it has been held as one of the most important colonial institutions through which these new forms of caste were articulated (Peabody 2001: 821). Ever since Bernard Cohn's famous essay on the colonial census, social historians have appreciated how the British collection of numerical data on caste in India was not simply referential but was, in fact, generative (Cohn 1987: 224–54). The caste-based colonial censuses of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Cohn argued, did not objectively describe some already/always extant reality that was independent of and external to the gaze of the colonial state. Instead, the censuses actively created many of the social forms they purported to describe. It is interesting to see how specific bureaucratic routines associated with the actual administration of the census during the latter half of the 19th century set in motion various discursive practices that resulted in caste identities becoming standardised, their numbers simplified, the boundaries between them solidified, and the hierarchical relationships amongst them codified (Pant 1987: 145–62). Richard Saumarez Smith (1985: 153–76) has nicely explored how the census changed from an instrument of tax to an instrument of knowledge.

III
Nationalist narratives and dalit imagination

As is evident from their printed literature, the claims regarding the dalit role in the national movement linked to the story of the War of Independence, assumed significance during the 1960s. Such booklets may well have been published before 1960, but it was only after 1960 that one finds booklets narrating stories like that of Virangana Jhalkari Bai, authored by Bhawani Shankar Visharad (1964). The story of Virangana Uda Devi, who was believed to have played an important role in the 1857 War of Independence as an associate of Begum Hazrat Mahal, has been narrated by the Pasis since 1980. Pasi respondents first documented the story of Begum Hazrat Mahal in print in the 1971 Census records. Though the name of Uda Devi was not mentioned, the respondents mentioned that, in the war of 1857, a Pasi Palton (a platoon of Pasis) rescued Begum Hazrat Mahal from imprisonment by the British (*Census of India* 1971: 2). It was only later that the story of Uda Devi came to be incorporated into the narrative. After 1990, the story found organisational support for its transmission and celebration with the formation of the Virangana Uda Devi Smarak Sansthan.

Such nationalist narratives were used by the dalits to prove their important role in the nation-making process, and to establish themselves as respectable citizens. The newly-formed Indian states started the process of nation-building by launching various development projects and using various types of media and communication channels for transmitting their messages. Participation in this process by the various marginalised communities was expressed in their attempts to create their own space in the history and narratives of nation-making. The combined effect of the developmental activities of the state and the mobilisation process carried out through the democratic political process was a rapid widening and deepening of the institutional and ideological reach of the state into the lives of virtually all sections of the people of India (Chatterjee 1998: 9). This intervention of the state in society was needed in order to bring about a societal change. While this process provided space for lower castes to come into contact with the state, people who did not fully share the identity of citizenship found themselves marginalised or even excluded from public political negotiations, even when these directly involved matters in which they had a stake. As a result they evolved other strategies—strategies that are often deemed contrary to democratic principles—to get their point across to the liberal state-apparatus (Nag 2002: 52). On the one hand the lower castes were inspired to associate themselves with the developmental state in various ways, such as imagining their association with the nation through histories and narratives, and engaging themselves with politics to get an appropriate share of state benefits. On the other hand they were disillusioned by the independent Indian State, which had failed to satisfy their needs and expectations. Both trends were reflected in the dalit narratives of that period: on the one hand, glorification of their sacrifices for the nation, and on the other, a sense of disillusionment culminating in the political assertion of their unfulfilled aspirations through strategic pressures and demands.

As Homi K. Bhabha (1990) says, nations are themselves narrations in which specific identifiers are employed to create an exclusive and homogeneous conception of the national tradition. Such signifiers of homogeneity always fail to represent the diversity of the actual national community for which they purport to speak and, in practice, usually represent and consolidate the interests of the dominant power groups within any national formation. The myth of a national tradition is employed not only to legitimise a general idea of a social group (a people), but also to construct a modern idea of a nation state in which all the instruments of state power

(e.g., military and police agencies, judiciaries, religious hierarchies, educational systems and political assemblies or organisations) are subsumed and legitimised as natural expressions of a unified national history and culture. Dalit castes have been eager to be part of this process of nation-making in order to acquire their share in the policies, planning and development projects of the nation. Second, by linking themselves with the narrative of the freedom movement, the dalits sought to win acceptance from the wider society by creating and legitimising a space for themselves within the nationalist narratives.

IV
The making of Uda Devi

The story of Uda Devi and the revolt of 1857 is narrated as follows:

There was a peepal tree, heavy and thick, at the centre of the inner part of Sikander Bagh of Lucknow. Under it were kept many earthen vessels filled with cold water. When the bloodshed in the battle stopped, many soldiers came there to quench their thirst and enjoy the cool shade. Under this tree, a number of British soldiers belonging to the 53rd and 59th regiment of the British army were found lying dead. But Dawson (Captain of the British army troops) noted at one place that, from the wounds on the dead bodies of the soldiers, it was evident that they had been shot from above. Captain Dawson soon came out of the shade of the tree and called Wallace to confirm whether there was someone on the tree. He said that the European soldiers did not die by bullets from the opposite direction, but by bullets fired from the top of the tree. Wallace had with him his loaded gun. Cautiously moving backwards, he started searching for the person on the tree. Immediately, he called to Captain Dawson that he had seen a person and, lifting his gun, he said that he would fulfill his promise before God to kill that person. Thereafter, he fired at the target and the body of a person fell to the ground. This person was wearing a red coloured jacket and a tight trouser of rose colour. When the person fell on the ground and the jacket was removed, it was discovered that it was not a man but a woman. The woman had two old-fashioned pistols. Of these, one pistol was full of cartridges and other was exhausted. In her pocket she had some illicitly manufactured live cartridges. When Wallace saw that the dead body was not of a man but of a woman, he

started weeping. Then he said, 'Had I known that she was a woman I would have died a thousand times but never harmed her.' This lady was none other than Uda Devi.[1]

Pasis of the region believe that in the struggle for freedom, Begum Hazrat Mahal had organised an army of women after her husband was arrested. The commander of this army was Uda Devi, who belonged to Ujrion village near Lucknow. Her name at her in-law's place was Jagrani and her husband's name was Makka Pasi. He had been a soldier in the army of Hazrat Mahal who had laid down his life while fighting the British at Chinhat, a battle in which Begum Hazrat Mahal had herself participated (Dinker 1985: 35). Uda Devi was accompanying Begum Hazrat Mahal. Hazrat Mahal looked after her wounded soldiers and covered the bodies of the martyrs with shrouds. At the sight of a particular dead body, Uda Devi suddenly shuddered and wept bitterly. The corpse was that of Makka Pasi, her husband. It was then that Uda Devi vowed to avenge the killing of her husband. This resulted in the tree-top killing of thirty-six British soldiers on 16 November and Uda Devi's subsequent martyrdom (ibid.).

The East India Company had made General Campbell the Commander of their forces, and sent him to Avadh. He was the same Campbell who, on his way to Lucknow from Kanpur, was thrice defeated by Pasis of Amethi-Banthara. On the fourth attempt, Campbell was successful in proceeding forward, and he converted the fort of Maharaja Bijlee Pasi into a military cantonment. On 10 November 1857, General Campbell had reached Dilkusha from the fort of Bijlee Pasi on the way to meet General Outram and Henry Havelock at Motimahal in Lucknow. However, fearful of the brave Indians, and especially Dankashah, he changed his route to reach Sikanderbag. It was then that his forces encountered Uda Devi, who was leading the army of women.[2]

[1] This story is narrated by the Pasis who believe that this incident took place on 16 November 1857 (Chaudhury 1997; Narayan and Mishra, forthcoming). Oral narratives recorded from Rakesh Choudhry on 9 June 1998 also contain similar narratives.

[2] This story came into circulation when a botanist, Professor K.N. Kaul (quoted in Saroj 1997), while studying the history of Lucknow, discovered that a woman was killed by thirty-two British soldiers in Begum Hazrat Mahal Bagh during the 1857 Indian freedom movement. Professor Kaul recounts narrative by a British historian Pobers Mitchel, as follows:

In Sikander Bagh of Lucknow, a woman wearing a *gulenaari ghaghra* and *dhani dupatta* was sitting on a pipal tree and was continuously shooting and killing British solidiers. An Englishman who saw that many British soldiers had been shot with

After 1990, the Government made an attempt to commemorate the 1857 history of Lucknow and a Committee named Swatantrata Sangram Smarak Samiti was formed with the Mayor of Lucknow, Dr Dauji Gupt, as its President. Under the supervision of this Smarak Samiti, the statue of an unknown *Virangana* of 1857 was unveiled in Sikanderabagh. Around 1995, officials from the Pasi caste, political leaders and other renowned personalities formed a committee named Virangana Uda Devi Smarak Samiti. Ms Sushila Saroj, former Minister of the UP state government, was made the Chairman, with the secretaryship assumed by Mr Ram Lakhan of the Stamp and Registrar Office of the UP government. A Gazetted Officer in the UP government, Sri Jagjivan Prasad, became the Joint Secretary. Once again the statue was unveiled by Ram Vilas Paswan. But this time there was a change. The statue, which was previously anonymous, now had the name Uda Devi Pasi written on it. Subsequently, Kalyan Singh (then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh) unveiled this statue for the third time with its new identification as Uda Devi. 16 November every year is now observed as Uda Devi Martyrdom Day, a conference of people of the Pasi caste is convened, a souvenir published, and Pasi *Ekta* (Unity) Rallies are organised in the memory of Virangana Uda Devi.

The stories about her that are in circulation along with the statue have made the myth of Uda Devi widely popular. Various poems are also composed on the same lines, describing her historic contribution to the Indian Freedom Movement. One such poem is as follows:

> *Desh ki khatir Udha Devi ladi thi ladai*
> *Saikaron Angrezon ko udha din girai*
> *Seenen pe goli khayee, nahi haar manee*
> *Rahe doodh ka doodh, paanee ka panee*
>
> (Uda Devi fought for the country
> Uda Devi killed hundreds of Britishers
> Faced the bullets but accepted not the defeat
> What could not happen was injustice
> This is the pure milk, unadulterated) (Rawat 1997: 39).

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bullets from a suspected hideout in the branches of the tree, shot at the branch. A woman fell down. General Campbell witnessed the scene and thus came to know of the brave Indian woman who had killed so many British soldiers. Sir Campbell bowed in honour to such a brave lady and said: 'I do not feel such regret for the killing of any British soldiers as I feel for killing this brave lady. She is so virtuous and brave. Sacrifice and patriotism are her genuine virtues.'

V
Story telling and community

Pasis offer two different interpretations of the term Pasi as recorded by scholars and ethnographers like Crooke. According to one version, the term Pasi is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit *pashika*, meaning 'one who uses a noose' (like that used by Pasis for climbing the palm tree for toddy tapping. In Hindi, *pass* or *pasa* also means 'a noose'). According to the other version, which was found during field investigations to be more popular among the Pasis, their name derives from the Hindi word *pasina* meaning 'sweat'. There are different traditions in different areas in support of the latter version, the central theme of which is that the Pasis were born of the sweat of Parasurama, the Sixth Avatar of Vishnu (*Census of India* 1971: 4). The fact that the Pasis now lay emphasis on the latter version illustrates their use of mythology to claim a glorious Kshatriya origin, an instrument of their social mobility and a strategy to escape the social stigma of their low, occupation-based caste position. Mythology and invented histories are entwined to provide a higher social position to their identity.

During field investigations for the present study, a few Pasi members of the Pasi elite in Lucknow who were associated with a social reform organisation, the Pasi Jagriti Mandal, interpreted the term Pasi to mean a soldier. According to them the name Pasi is composed of two Hindi words, *pa* meaning 'grip' and *asi* meaning 'a sword', implying thereby one who possesses a sword in his hand (i.e., a soldier). They claimed that the Pasis are a martial community who in earlier times had joined the militias and armies of the native princes.[3]

The Pasis in rural areas have now gone over to the agricultural sector, either as cultivators or as agricultural labourers. With the abolition of the Zamindari system in Uttar Pradesh in 1952, many Pasi agricultural labourers have also acquired ownership rights over the lands which they had been cultivating for some time. A considerable number of Pasis have also migrated to cities such as Kanpur, Gorakhpur, Varanasi, Mirzapur and Meerut. In urban areas, other than household industry, some non-traditional sectors such as manufacturing have attracted fairly large numbers of Pasis, i.e., 23–24 per cent (*Census of India* 1971: 39). The

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[3] Oral narratives collected from the members of Pasi Jagriti Mandal at Mohanlal Ganj (5 August 2001).

growth of literacy and the desire for upward mobility are increasing. The Pasis also enjoy reservation in State Civil Services and other administrative jobs. Among these elite groups, the political leaders, social workers, etc., appear at the forefront, playing an important role in the shaping of a new identity for the community. These Pasis shun their earlier image as pig-rearers which, it is said, has contributed to their being accorded a low social status, and seek to shrug off their reputation for criminal activities. They would like their community to be restored to its past position of respect in society as landlords and rulers.

VI
Inventing history

A major project of the invention of history is thus underway within the Pasi caste of Uttar Pradesh, initiated, discussed, orally transmitted and recorded mostly by the educated and semi-educated sections of the community (the activists and socio-political elite of the caste, now extending to the middle and lower ranks). Told and retold as both oral and written narratives, these invented histories have been published in popular booklets written mostly by intellectuals, activists and leaders of the community, who are involved in the political mobilisation of dalits and downtrodden communities. Most of these histories are once again percolating down from the written to a secondary form of orality (Ong 1982: 31–37). The writers of these booklets claim that these histories are derived from their survey and documentation of the old mounds near Pasi settlements, the remains of the old forts of local kings, the collective memories of the old people around these mounds and fortresses, and oral proverbs, stories and folk songs of the Pasi caste.

Some of the caste histories narrated by the Pasis appear to derive from those of the Rajbhar caste composed during the colonial period, but many episodes, interpretations and inventions are the new by-products of the recent identity consciousness of the Pasi as a dalit caste in northern India. They emphasise that the people of the Pasi community at one time ruled over a large area of Avadh and that centuries of Pasi history still lie buried at various places. Like other dalit communities, the Pasis, too, have a strong sense of being neglected in the history-writing of the nation, dominated as it has been by elitism—colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist (see Guha 1982: 3, 4).

R.K. Chaudhury (1997: 3), an eminent Pasi leader and minister in the Mayawati-ruled UP government, writes:

> Historians have not written books on the Pasi Empire. Scholars never identified the history of this chivalrous community for their research. The government departments, established for the purpose of protecting cultural heritage, have also never attempted to collect information about the Pasi Empire. Not a single book is available in libraries in which details about the Pasi Empire are mentioned.

Some educated Pasis remark that while the British authors have mentioned Pasi rulers in different Gazetteers and other books, Indian writers have almost completely eliminated those chapters relating to the Pasi community.[4]

This sense of historical marginalisation became sharper during the rise of Bahujan (dalit) politics in Uttar Pradesh, when history appeared as an important constituent in their identity formation. Mayawati, a dalit leader and ex-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, writes:

> Among the Pasi rulers, the names of Maharaja Bijlee Pasi, Maharaja Satan Pasi, and Maharaja Lakhan Pasi, Maharaja Chheta Pasi and Maharaja Daldeo deserve to be mentioned in golden letters. But unfortunately, the history of these chivalrous and majestic kings has received only negligible treatment in a few books (Mayawati 1997: 1).

Similarly, Avadhesh Prasad, another leader of the Pasi community and an ex-minister in the Samajwadi Party government led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, states that without history and literature, communities cannot succeed in joining the mainstream of society, nor can they find a respectable place in it. Since literature opens the way for the future, a community without literature closes the door for its future generations. Without literature, the sources of vision and contemplation are absent (Prasad 1997: 4).

The use of myth and history as important markers of dalit identity formation is not a new phenomenon. It is a continuous process that had become visible as early as 1939, when the Pasis started to form their own caste associations (*Census of India* 1971: 4). With the rise of political consciousness among the UP dalits since 1990, research on Sanskritic

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[4] Interview with Ram Lakhan Pasi and Jagjivan Pasi in Lucknow on 5 August 2001.

Brahminical myths and the invention of heroes and histories have acquired greater momentum, along with the Bahujan Samajwadi Party's expansion of its mass base in the state.

It is interesting that, despite their different political affiliations, the lectures, writings and stories of intellectuals and leaders were remarkably similar, highlighting the false 'secular' academic history-writing that had marginalised the Pasis in the national history, and emphasising the many sacrifices made by the Pasis to defend Hindus and the Hindu religion against Muslim invaders and communalists. Thus, Sushila Saroj, an MLA in the BJP government and a minister in the Kalyan Singh-led BJP cabinet, referred to Uda Devi as a 'Hindu *Virangana*'. Reinterpreting the traditional Pasi profession of pig-rearing, she said that Muslim intruders used to steal the honour of Hindu wives and daughters. In order to protect them, the Pasis started rearing pigs, which the Muslims abominate. Similarly, the Pasis settled on the village outskirts to prevent the entry of Muslim intruders (Saroj 1997: 7). Another BJP activist, Ram Lakhan Pasi (1997: 10) construed the intrusion of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi in central Uttar Pradesh as a Pasi-Muslim conflict, describing how the *vir* (chivalrous) Pasi ruler Suhal Deo defeated and killed him.

On the other hand, Pasi leaders active with BSP and the Samajwadi Party blamed the forward castes of the society for their social, economic and intellectual marginalisation. In their interpretation, they claimed that the Pasis were the original rulers of central Uttar Pradesh, who had lost their kingdom to the Thakurs. In modern times, too, their position was snatched away by upper-caste conspiracies (Mayawati 1995: 22). The eminent Pasi leader, R.K. Chaudhury, writes of the role of history in the social mobilisation of the community, that

> the thought occurred to me that a book should be written by me on the glorious history of the Pasi community so that the morale of this community is raised to new heights, and so that it may recover from the injuries to its self-respect and some solution may emerge (Chaudhury 1997: 16).

In response to Pasi identity assertion, the Department of Posts, under the Cabinet Minister Shri Ram Vilas Paswan (a Janata Dal representative in the NDA government who was also a dalit leader associated with the Pasi caste leader), on 16 November 2000 issued a commemorative stamp

on Maharaja Bijlee Pasi, based on the Pasi caste histories and folk traditions.[5] In describing the stamp, it was said that,

> The Gupta empire (4th to 6th century AD) as well as the empire of Harsh (7th century) had brought the entire northern India under a strong, centralised rule for a long period. However, the region saw a bitter struggle for domination between three powers, the Rashtrakutas, the Pratiharas and the Palas in the subsequent centuries. Maharaja Bijli Pasi, who is credited with the founding of Bijnor, now a small town near Lucknow, was an enlightened ruler who appears to have consolidated his position and established his reign over a large tract of land in this region. He was a contemporary of Prithviraj Chauhan and an able leader of the 'Pasis', a fiercely independent people indigenous to the locality. He constructed 12 forts, which is an indication of the prosperity of his kingdom as well as of the power he wielded. Through this issue celebrating Maharaja Bijli Pasi, the Department of Posts invites attention to the reign of this legendary monarch, and tales of bravery.[6]

The Pasis begin the history of the Pasi Empire with the great Emperor Puru, whom they claim had posed a great challenge to Alexander in 327 BC. Raja Bhatt Paramanand of Pataliputra is also claimed to have been of the Pasi caste. Similarly, the kings Porus and Ambhi, the great emperors of Takshashila, are claimed as Pasis. The Pasis also believe that, about 800 years ago, Lucknow and the adjacent areas were strongholds of the Pasi kings. The Amosneeganj market in Mohana Paragana of Malihabad tehsil in the Banoga village, established by Nawab Asifudduala, was originally a Pasi village. Amethi, too, was earlier under the rule of Pasi kings, while Bijnor Pargana was the village of Bijlee Pasi. Bijnor fort is also said to have been constructed by Bhar-Pasis. Thakori Pargana of Lucknow district was under the control of Bhar Pasis, who constructed the fort named Kaakorgarh there. From here the kings of the Baiswara kingdom

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[5] See the stamp folio of Maharaja Bijlee Pasi issued on 16 November 2000.

[6] They believe that in the mediaeval period there were Shudra kingdoms in various parts of the country, but that Rajput and Muslim invaders destroyed these. They claim that the kingdoms that were Pasi-ruled were much bigger and more powerful than others of this Shudra Empire. This is in contrast to some other dalit castes such as the Chamars who, rather than claiming themselves rulers, tell the story of the unjust processes, factors and historical injustices that made them untouchable (Briggs 1920: 16).

pushed the Bhars out and established their own rule. Similarly, beneath the mound of Kallee, west of Bijnor, are the remains of a fort of King Bijlee Pasi (Chaudhury 1997: 15). The state of Raja Kans, a Pasi king who was defeated by Sayyed Salar Masud, nephew of Mohammed Ghazni, was in Kasmandi Pargana of tehsil Malihabad. Subsequently, Sayyed Salar Masud was himself defeated and killed by Raja Suhal Deo of Bahraich, who stopped the wave of Muslim expansion in Uttar Pradesh (ibid.).

In the Pasi narrative, Kathwara in the Mahona Pargana of Malihabad tehsil is said to have been the kingdom of one Dayyad Ansanbhuj in the Dwapar age; it was later ruled over by the Bhar kings. Similarly, Pasis ruled on the southwest side of Kharavan Pargana in the Malihabad district. The Jhojha Muslims of Maal Pargana in Malihabad tehsil, established by Malia Pasi, were considered to be originally Bhar Pasis. It is said that Pasis of this area circulated their own currency, whose coins have been found in many excavations. Many high mounds on Aantgarhee, Dilawar Nagar, Maal and Siswara in Malihabad area are believed to have been Pasi forts.

From 1300 AD onwards this Pargana was subjected to 300 years of Rajput rule. Madiyaon, an ancient site north of Lucknow, is said to have been ruled by the Bhar Pasis who were defeated and displaced by Malik Adam, a military soldier of Sayyed Salar Masud. Another place called Hulaskheda in the southeast of Mohan Lal Ganj on the banks of the Karela Lake has the remains of an old fort that was also built by Bhar Pasis. Sisendi of Mohanlalganj was captured from the Bhar Pasis by a thakur named Gautam Rajput. According to the gazetteer, a village on the east of the Ujriyaon village was previously ruled by the Bhar Pasis. Similarly a part of Utravan village is known by the name of a fort built by a Pasi king (Verma 1997: 32–34).

The Pasi community of Uttar Pradesh appears eager to emphasise their role during various phases of the Freedom movement. The great hero of the 1921–22 Peasant Struggle in Uttar Pradesh, which was begun by the tenants in Hardoi district towards the end of 1921, was Madari Pasi, a resident of Pratapgarh (Verma 1997). They also relate stories of legendary heroes of the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–33), for instance, of Kandhai Pasi of Dorama, Bhoora Pasi, Barawan Salon of Rae Bareli, Sahboli Pasi of Dumri and Jhagata of Gorakhpur, and of the heroic role played by Sattan Pasi and Basant Pasi in the Quit India Movement of 1942. To recover their history, the Pasis use a range of sources, from the

oral history of their caste, community memories, idioms, folk sayings[7] and literary compositions, to the *Lucknow District Gazetteer* prepared during the colonial period, and the writings of colonial ethnographers like William Crooke. They also refer to a Souvenir issued by the UP government, Department of Information, and even the novels *Nachyo bahot Gopal* and *Gadar ke phool*, written by the famous novelist Amritlal Nagar, well known for recovering the history of Lucknow and its adjoining areas.

VII
History and history making

As noted above, the invention of Pasi history had four characteristics:

- (*i*) projecting the martial characteristics of the Pasi community;
- (*ii*) projecting the Pasi caste as builders of the Shudra empire;
- (*iii*) emphasising the role of the Pasi caste in creating the socio-economic and cultural infrastructure of Uttar Pradesh society; and most importantly,
- (*iv*) creating *gaurav gatha*s (stories which provide them the sense of self-respect).

Historically, there was a popular tradition of soldiering in the north of the country, also known as *Purab Des* or Eastern Hindustan, that is, the linguistic region of the Bhojpuri dialect of Bihar and the Avadhi dialect of eastern and central UP. In mediaeval and colonial times soldiering was a source of employment for people of many castes, including many lower castes of eastern India. This profession conferred a martial identity on them. In the 14th century, a martial community called Sanidi (a group coming from Africa) and the Baheliyas, with whom the Pasis, according

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[7] R.K. Chaudhury, a Pasi historian, writes: 'It was during this study that I realised the importance of folk sayings as significant and powerful chains in history.' People of Pasi caste use the following folk saying to narrate the history of King Saatan Pasi:

For three months and thirteen days
Swords were in continuous action
In the battle at Ganjar.

(Recorded from Ram Sharan, Pasmangata, a bard and genealogist of the Pasi caste, who recites folk ballads in the villages around Rae Bareli.)

to Crooke, 'were possibly allied', were appointed to be joint governors of the fort of Chunar on the Ganges over Banares. They were given the title of Hazari and a jagir of twenty-seven villages was conferred on them. During the 17th century, they were conspicuous as foot soldiers fighting under Mughal commanders. Mirza Nathan mentions them as serving in Bengal in 1612. In 1671 the army of Chhatrasaal, a local king of central UP, consisted of Rajputs, Barbers, Dhimars, Chhipis (dyers), Gonds, Muslims, Banias and Ahirs.[8]

Pasi was merely an occupational identity including a number of distinct groups whose only obvious connection was the occupation of extracting the juice of the date palm. In 19th-century Avadh, the Pasis were village watchmen, though inveterate thieves and robbers when not employed as such. The Pasis were regarded as experts in archery, being especially for-midable at night. Many landholders used to hire Pasis to fight for them. They cost little as they lived off their plunder. Apart from this, there were also independent gangs. Sleeman describes the genesis of such a Pasi group under Brahman leadership. Some Pasis became Rajputs by giving their daughters to Panwars and other Rajput families when they had acquired wealth and landed property by robbery and murder. In one version of the legend of Alha and Udal, perhaps the best-known epic of Hindustan, a Pasi figured prominently, suggesting that the heroic character of the Pasis was generally acknowledged in the rural peasant folk culture of North Indian society. Commanders of these warrior groups sometimes also tried to acquire a territorial power base of their own as local rulers or feudal lords.

The Pasis also claim that the martial nature of their caste is reflected in the Pasi Raag. This Raag expresses the *tandav* (arrogant) body language of the *tandav nritya* (dance of Lord Shiva). Earlier associated with intoxication, the Pasi Raag is now seen by some to be a natural response to oppression. A Pasi writer, R.D. Nirmohi, claims:

> It is a false notion that wine is necessary for bringing out the militant nature of the Pasis. The truth is that whenever there is an attempt to crush the existence and identity of a community beyond the limit of tolerance, the arrogance and fighting tendencies of the community surface naturally. This then leads them to revolt against such attempts (Nirmohi 1997: 16).

[8] Only in the 19th century, when there was increasing economic pressure, did the gentry close shop and reserve recruitment for their own kith and kin (Kolff 1990: 190–91).

The Pasis use a musical instrument called *dahanki*, similar to the *damru* (a percussion instrument). When the *dahanki* finds the support of a singer and dancer, it automatically starts to beat like the *damru* in the *tandav nritya*. The following song based on the Pasi Raag of the Pasi community highlights the militancy of the Pasis:

> *darhi- toot-gai dae dae dhwansa*
> *maar danadan hoonka hoonkar dekar*
> *charhikai va dhi kae ... mukka dai dai*

> (Like the bull strikes with its horns
> You also strike with a war cry
> Go forward and hit with your fists) (Nirmohi 1997: 16).

This particular war song refers to the story of the *tandav nritya* of Lord Shiva. The Pasis say that when Lord Shiva was humiliated by his father-in-law in the presence of all the courtiers, he quietly left for Mount Kailash. In spite of her husband's humiliation, however, Sati attended the *yajna* held by her father. This made Lord Shiva very angry. He ordered his soldiers (Parshadgun, who were the brave Pasi warriors), to go and wreak havoc in the court. After carrying out the order, the soldiers returned to Mount Kailash. Since then the *dahanki* is used as a mark of respect to Lord Shiva, to bring out the warring nature of the Pasis (Nirmohi 1997: 16).

VIII
Etymology, archaeology and history making

While the history of the Pasi caste is largely based on a reinterpretation of linguistic evidence and literary and oral narratives, the Pasis also attempt to develop various archaeologically-oriented narratives. For this they do not rely on government archaeological survey reports, but draw instead on popular narrative traditions. Some of the Pasi forts and fortresses are of course mentioned in government archaeological survey reports, but mostly without archaeological proof of the Pasi connection. For instance, the fort of Bijlee Pasi is identified by the state archaeological department, UP government, but it would be difficult to find official archaeological support for establishing the historicity of Raja Daldeo who, it is claimed by the Pasi caste, was a great Pasi emperor of the region.

To justify their invented histories, the Pasis offer to interpret the prefixes and suffixes of the place names from the Pasi-dominated regions of

central Uttar Pradesh. This strategy provides ample space for their invention of history. Paul Whalley, a retired British Civil Servant who conducted research on the meaning of the place names of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, rightly suggests that the obscurity of many place names encourages ambiguity or multiple interpretations (Whalley 1928: 1), such that one can only hazard a guess as to their origins (ibid.: 91)

Place names are mostly determined by the religion or occupation of the inhabitants, by local topographical features and names of locally important persons. For instance, Bijnor, one of the district towns of central Uttar Pradesh, is etymologically decoded by Whalley as being derived from Vishnu Puram, a temple named after Vishnu (Whalley 1928: 4). On the other hand, Pasis explain the place name 'Bijnor' as having originated from Bijanagarh (a fort of Bijlee Pasi named after his mother Bijana Devi). Similarly, the Pasis identify the place name Dalmau as an area or border place (the term *mau* means the border) of the Pasi king Raja Daldeo.

IX
Power of the past

Like other such myths, the myth of Uda Devi functions to raise socio-political consciousness among the dalits in general and the Pasis in particular. It cannot be said to be a pure and simple 'invention of history', for such stories are alive and effective instruments of mobilisation. Observing the widespread effect of the myth of Uda Devi on the Pasis, the Joint Secretary of the Virangana Uda Devi Smarak Samiti, Sri Jagjivan Prasad, writes:

Whether a child or an old man, a farmer or a worker, a subordinate, an officer or a businessman from the Pasi caste, each member of the Pasi caste is eager to regain his/her lost pride as if a volcano of emotions has erupted. Even the *Kazis*, *Mullahs*, *Pandits*, politicians and leaders are talking about the pride of the Pasis. Now all of them are recalling the forgotten history of the Pasi caste. One is publishing their history and another distributing it. Some other is launching a cassette or making a film, and someone else is composing an *Alha* or *Geet* [folksong] or a *Birha*, or writing or directing a play. Some Pasi is installing statues of Pasi kings or Pasi V*irangana*s, while some other person is involved in beautification or governmentalisation of the Forts of Pasi kings (Prasad 1997: 18, 19).

On 13 March 1997, the Virangana Uda Devi Smarak Sansthan, an organisation involved in mobilising the Pasi community on socio-political issues, organised two big rallies in Hasanpur and Khetni near Hardoi (Prasad 1997: 20). On 7 February 1997, a huge Pasi conference was organised by the Virangana Uda Devi Smarak Sansthan in Haidar Garh, presided over by the BSP leader R.K. Chaudhury. At this conference, *dhoti*s (white sarees) were distributed among the widows, and the students who achieved exceptional results in their high-school examinations were awarded prizes. On the Uda Devi Memorial Day, 15 June 1997, a big Pasi Sammelan was organised in Bhiti. On 28 September 1997, in Arjun Ganj, Lucknow, people of the Pasi caste celebrated Uda Devi Gaurav Diwas. It was at this conference that a Pasi caste flag, rose-coloured with the symbol of swords and spears, was hoisted for the first time.

Not only the elites of the Pasi caste, but various political parties, for instance the BSP, Samajwadi Party, Lok Janshakti and BJP are using the myth of Uda Devi to mobilise dalits, and especially Pasis, in their favour. In 1997, on the occasion of Virangana Uda Devi Smriti Diwas, a big rally was held in Mohan Lal Ganj under the leadership of the Samajwadi president and ex-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Sri Mulayam Singh Yadav. Similarly, under the leadership of BSP leader Mayawati, R.K. Chaudhury and Lok Janshakti president Ram Vilas Paswan, many dalit and Pasi rallies were organised in various parts of the Avadh region of Uttar Pradesh (Prasad 1997).

Soon after his expulsion from the BSP due to political differences with Mayawati, the well-known Pasi leader R.K. Chaudhury formed a new regional political party named Lok Parivartan Party. He also formed the Uda Devi Force (UDF), an organisation of dalit women, which was expected to launch a struggle against everyday atrocities on dalit women. He deputed members of the UDF at various polling booths in the Mohanlal constituency during the UP Assembly election held in 2001, and used them to mobilise women's votes for his party. The UDF activists were supposed to wear a special uniform (*Amar Ujala*, 23 December 2001). Chaudhury also wrote a history of the Pasi caste, *Pasi samrajya*, in which he presented a very appealing history of Uda Devi. He is clearly planning to use this myth to mobilise dalits, especially those of the Pasi caste, in his favour.

Apart from R.K. Chaudhury, Ram Vilas Paswan (Lok Janshakti), Mayawati (BSP), Mulayam Singh Yadav (SP) and even the BJP, through leaders belonging to the Pasi caste, have variously sought to imbue this

myth with a politically correct meaning. The BJP leader Ram Pal Rajvanshi, then state minister in the Kalyan Singh-headed BJP government, projected Uda Devi as a symbol of the chivalry of Hindu women. On the contrary, Mayawati and R.K. Chaudhury present her story as a celebration of the glory of the Pasi (dalit) caste. R.K. Chaudhury even tries to strengthen his argument in favour of securing reservations for dalits through this myth. He says that 'forward' castes claim that, although they fight on the border, the dalits get all the scholarships and jobs through reservation. On the contrary, according to him when a dalit lays down his life for the nation, he is mentioned only in passing, instead of being granted the title of 'martyr'. The history of the dalits, he says, provides strong evidence for the martyrdom of dalits, Martyr Uda Devi being a shining example. In the new context, R.K. Chaudhury recently wrote a booklet on Uda Devi entitled *Balidan*, which interprets the myth of Uda Devi in terms of safeguarding the reservation policies (Chaudhury 2003: 3).

Similarly, Mulayam Singh, President of the SP, states that Uda Devi has enhanced the glory of the Backward and Depressed classes. He emphasised the fact that she was born in one of the lower ranks of society, and he tries to use her story in favour of his own politics, which is to create linkages between backward classes and dalits for his electoral benefit.

Another interesting example of the political use of this myth was observed on 16 November 2002, in Balapur village near Allahabad, where a Fair and Rally was organised on the Martyrdom Day of Uda Devi. On this occasion, the Chairman of the Allahabad Nagar Nigam, Dr K.P. Srivastava, a leader of the SP, though not officially invited, delivered a lecture in which he expounded the myth to depict Uda Devi as a model of Indian womanhood who had sacrificed herself for the nation. Underplaying her image as a purely dalit heroine, his interpretation of the myth included all backward sections (*Amar Ujala*, 17 November 2002). The BSP, on the other hand, mostly emphasised the dalit association of this story. Thus, both Mayawati and Mulayam Singh in their election speeches mention the name and narrative of Uda Devi, especially in the Pasi-dominated regions of Uttar Pradesh. The success of the myth of Uda Devi in transforming symbolic power into political influence is yet to be tested, and may depend on which party uses it more efficiently with the help of newspaper coverage, writings, booklets, festivals and other modern communications.

X
Electoral market and the use of history

The term 'electoral market' is used here not to denote the economic functions linked to electoral politics, but to reflect the vigorous marketing of caste mobilisation strategies in favour of the various political forces which are active in democratic electoral politics. After the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, many lower castes and dalit groups have become politically more assertive. They have become aware that power lies in their caste vote-bank, as well as in the mobilisation of a combined Bahujan-dalit identity. This has led them to acquire a double identity—both as members of a specific caste reiterating their caste pride, and as an important dalit-Bahujan community that had made sacrifices for the nation.

This double identity of the dalit caste required a new history different from, and sometimes subversive to, the sanskritic model of caste history writing that had emerged during the colonial period. They needed to create caste histories that could provide self-respect to the caste, like the *gaurav gatha*s, which glorified dalit socio-cultural locations. These *gaurav gatha*s mostly shifted away from Brahminical symbols, although there are still traces of the sanskritisation process. Progress towards the glorification of dalit status is quite visible in these contemporary history writings.

Nonetheless, some of the residual sanskritising features of the caste histories have paved the way for political forces like the BJP, who are then using the lower-caste origin myths associated with Rishis and Sants belonging to the Great Traditions to enter into the dalit space. These parties are reinterpreting dalit myths, histories and symbols in their own politically correct versions, projecting the dalits as defenders of the Hindu dharma and 'nationalists' (*rashtravadi*). Narrowing the meaning of 'Hindu' and 'nationalist', their nation is not a nation with equal space for all religions and cultures, but a 'Hindu nation' originating in the Vedas. They propose that Bharat Mata represents an ancient concept of devotional patriotism (cf. Brosius 1998: 17). In a recent speech delivered by Ashok Singhal, a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) (aligned to the BJP), the Indian nation is defined as the land of Rama, who was a Hindu. Singhal added that those Indians who do not believe in Rama are anti-nationalists since Rama is the history of the nation, and the 'pseudo-secularists' who claim that he was only an epical character are also anti-nationalists (*Jansatta*, 1 February 2003). The BJP politicians also try to

interpret most of the dalit myths, histories and symbols so as to bring them into the BJP fold.[9] This is evident in the case of the invented histories of the Pasis. Their commemoration of the Pasis as a martial race provides space for such political forces to reconstruct their histories as great warriors and gatemen of Hindu temples during the period of Islamic rule of India.[10]

For the Chamars, however, this is not the case. The latter do not glorify their martial status in society but emphasise the work culture of their caste and their history of Brahminical oppression. Politically speaking, the forces involved in the contemporary mobilisation of the dalits need a grand, unificatory, meta-history of a particular caste, which may be projected as an historically important dalit community that had made many sacrifices for the nation. While the Pasis' attempts to project themselves as a dalit caste seem to be successful, it is not an easy task to develop a unified dalit history representing the identities of more than 6,000 heterogeneous and sometimes rival dalit castes. While the Pasis glorify their role as a martial caste, as *gorait* (gatemen), chowkidars, dafadars and tax collectors in northern Indian peasant society, the Chamars on the other hand assert that the Pasi gatemen, chowkidars and tax collectors had oppressed the dalit castes on behalf of the colonial overlords. Under the new political regime, the Pasis seem to be eager to minimise these contradictions. As Ram Lakhan Pasi has written:

> It is true that in eastern and central U.P., for many years the honour, dignity and possessions of the Chamars have been safeguarded by the Pasis. And the Chamars managed to survive only because of the existence of the Pasi community in nearly 25 districts of U.P. Even today the government coffers, courts, kutcheries and prisons are safe only because they are being guarded by the brave, martial Pasis. More than two-thirds of the prisons of U.P. have Pasi watchmen (Pasi 1997: 11).

Thus, political mobilisation requires a unificatory history which can provide the Pasis an honourable place in society and also unite heterogeneous dalit castes and the various subdivisions of the Pasi caste itself. The new ethno-histories can provide various kinds of symbolic power, as well as

[9] Vinay Katiyar, President of the UP state unit of the BJP has launched a campaign to propagate the BJP's version of cultural nationalism by projecting Dr Ambedkar as anti-Muslim (*Amar Ujala*, 31 January 2003).

[10] See RSS pamphlets distributed among the Dusadhs and the Pasi caste in the Gaya district of Bihar during Samajik Samrasta Abhiyan, 1995.

lead towards a homogeneous Bahujan-dalit mobilisation in contemporary North Indian politics. Thus the ethno-history writing projects among dalit groups of North India aim to promote self-respect as the foundation of their identity construction, ultimately helping them to acquire a share in state power through electoral mobilisational politics.

XI
Conclusion

The dalit search for identity is the outcome of a quest for existential re-cognition, influenced by the political, social and economic changes and discourses around them. The caste histories written around 1920 suggest that the dalits had accepted the vertical hierarchical caste order, but in the histories written after 1960, a different stream of historical argument-ation and reasoning has become visible. They now try to locate the heroes of their own castes in various social upheavals that flowed from the events of 1857. This tendency has become more obvious since 1980, when the changing socio-political scenario made them even more aggressive and assertive about their caste identity. While some castes like the Pasis locate their glorious past in the mediaeval period, others tell a story of historical deprivation. That is, there are certain streams in dalit history writings that are common, but there are also others that are different, depending on the caste or sub-caste orientation. Such interpretations are meant not only for political gains, but also for creating confidence for community reform.

In these g*aurav gatha*s, or self-respect centred caste histories, there is a strong tendency to carve out legendary figures who, the narrators im-agine, have helped in building their caste identity. The facts of the past are merged with myth and fantasy and create a new perception of a past that is glorious, pure and exclusive. These caste histories are both part of the wider dalit history, and are also a history of the glory of the dalit caste concerned. Various sources are cited to authenticate the caste histories and glorify their heroes. These sources include colonial gazetteers and colonial ethnographical studies, local archaeological remains linking these claims with mounds and the rubble of various forts, and re-interpretation of the names of cities and local places. Folklores, proverbs, idioms, ethno-musical oral traditions and literature are other sources. The caste histories are not only circulated through narratives, both in the written and oral mediums, but are also the fulcrum around which festivities and com-memorations are held. Statues and memorials of the local heroes are

erected and fairs and mahotsavs are organised around their legends by literate and non-literate dalits, and community and political leaders in various parts of Uttar Pradesh.

The heroes that were created in the process of rewriting history have also helped to mobilise the community concerned. This mobilisational potential is the reason why various political parties have cornered local heroes such as Uda Devi and reshaped them according to their own political agendas. Thus the caste histories appear as the space where various political forces can find a niche to mobilise the concerned communities. The social equations in the electoral market are apparent in the framing and re-telling of the stories by the different political parties. Through these caste histories, political parties channelise the dalit sense of identity in their own favour while at the same time swaying them against their political rivals. The use of the myth of Uda Devi, who is a part of the Pasi *gaurav gatha*, can be cited as an example of how various parties like the BSP, BJP, Lok Janshakti and Samajwadi Party are interpreting it in their own way to bring dalit communities, especially the Pasis, into their own fold.

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8

'The Bedias are Rajputs': Caste consciousness of a marginal community

Anuja Agrawal

This article attempts to further the argument that caste hierarchies are subject to creative manipulation by those who inhabit the supposedly fixed slots. I provide detailed ethnographic data on the Bedias of North India, a 'denotified' community which lives off the prostitution of its own women. The engagement in this occupation renders the Bedias very 'low' in general opinion. But the data regarding the beliefs and practices of the Bedias shows that the community redefines the non-marital relations of the women with men belonging to higher-ranking castes through recourse to upper-caste norms of patriliny and hypergamy in order to claim upper-caste origin and affiliation. In doing so the community rejects the social position which the broader society accords it.

There is much debate concerning the hierarchical character of the Indian caste system, which needs to be matched by empirical studies demonstrating how particular social groups live and conceive their positions within such a structure. This is particularly true of the caste groups which are supposed to occupy the lower ranks within this presumed social order. In attributing an overarching significance to ritual hierarchy, the

sociology/anthropology inspired by Louis Dumont's vision of the caste system (Dumont 1970), at best, sees such groups as replicating the caste structure among themselves (Moffatt 1979). More recent scholarship, however, suggests that such groups are more likely than not to have their own versions of the caste hierarchy as well as of their place in it.[1] In this article, I will present some evidence from my fieldwork among the Bedia community in order to provide an empirical basis to substantiate this argument. I seek to show that the Bedias selectively and creatively use elements of upper-caste kinship ideologies and practices in order to put forward an alternative vision of their economic practices and social position, both of which are extremely marginal. In doing so, however, Bedias do not replicate the upper-caste structures, although they often do reinforce their ideologies. What is, however, at stake is a respectable social identity rather than the dominant ideologies themselves.

I
The Bedias and their marginality

The numerically insignificant Bedia community of North India is thinly dispersed in three of the, until recently, largest states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.[2] As a 'denotified' community, Bedias find themselves officially designated as a Scheduled Caste. The term 'denotified' community refers to groups which had the dubious distinction of being notified as 'criminal tribes' during the later half of British rule in India.[3] After independence this categorisation was formally abandoned, thus rendering these communities 'denotified'.

It is not primarily their status as Scheduled Castes that makes the Bedias 'lowly' in social opinion although, as would become clearer in the course of this article, they themselves believe as much. The extreme social marginality of the Bedias also does not arise merely from their being an 'ex-criminal tribe', a stigmatising designation from which 'ex-' is often conveniently dropped in various public discourses. Members of most denotified communities are believed to engage in a host of criminal and anti-social activities. But while such an association with crime was

[1] See for instance Berreman 1970; Charsley and Karanth 1998; Deliège 1999; Gupta 1992, 2000; Parish 1997; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994; Zelliot 1992.

[2] In other parts of India, similar communities are known by different names. Conversely, some communities named 'Bedia' are not comparable to those bearing this name in northern parts of the country. See Ekka 1982, for instance.

[3] The Criminal Tribes Act was first enacted in 1871. See Nigam 1990a, 1990b; Radhakrishna 2001.

instrumental in the Bedias' notification as a criminal tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, it is the large-scale dependence of the community upon the prostitution of their own women which has earned them dubious distinction.[4]

It is not impossible to find archival evidence of Bedias' engagement in prostitution from as early as the first half of the 19th century (see Sleeman 1849, for instance), but it is somewhat more difficult to establish that this has been their exclusive or even primary means of survival. While space precludes my elaboration on this, in my view prostitution among the Bedias is a product of the upheavals that the community had been through in the last century and a half. At best, the members of such communities may be treated as erstwhile occupational specialists, whose wandering lifestyle was the function of the scarce need of their peculiar services.[5] The rare and occasional requirements of their services made it difficult for any sedentary population to support them exclusively. At the same time, changes in communication and transportation made their services largely redundant, propelling them into all kinds of anti-social activities. Whatever be the truth about the largely unknown facts regarding the Bedias' previous mode of existence, the available evidence suggests

[4] Contrary to what is often assumed, engagement in prostitution was not sufficient reason for a community to be notified under the CTA. To the contrary, many even postured as deriving income from this source in order to escape this draconian Act. The Bedias' engagement in prostitution has, however, assumed an institutionalised character, an important aspect of which is that only unmarried Bedia women engage in prostitution, supporting their natal families. These women generally do not marry at all and Bedia men are not permitted to form either marital or non-marital liaisons with them. The women who marry Bedia men do not engage in prostitution and are expected to observe the chaste monogamous lifestyle of a 'household woman' (*grihasthi ki*). This is one of the most important features of the Bedia social structure.

[5] The Bedias of Nagla claim to have been 'Bhat', or genealogists of the ruling castes in the past. In the colonial archives there are references to Sansis, from whom Bedias are said to have descended, claiming to be Bhats. In one of the earliest of these records going back to 1848, W.H. Sleeman quotes an account of the 'Sanseeas' prepared by Captain G. Ramsay, Assistant Resident at Nagpur: 'In the Sansee tribe, it was customary to chronicle the names of the Jats, and of their ancestors, and of their children, and when they used to beg from the Jat families, it was their custom to recite their praises. The Jats, on this account, styled the Sanseeas as their bards, or "Jat ka Bhat"' (Sleeman 1849: 253). Charles Hervey, another notable Officer of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, also gives a similar account of the 'Sansyas' and also adds that the members of this 'tribe' took to 'robbery, by fraud or open violence, as the occasion most required' once the means of livelihood as a Bhat became scarce (Report No. 1160A, dated 30 November 1869, Foreign Department Press).

William Crooke (1896) gives the following account of this legend which he also notes has several forms: '... when the Agnikula or fire born races were created, the Chauhan

that, owing to the loss/absence of stable means of livelihood and persistent hounding by the state, they have undergone great turmoil in the recent past, forcing them into new economic niches, of which prostitution is one. This cautions us against concurring with the popular impression that prostitution is a 'traditional' occupation of the community.[6] The treatment of many communities as 'hereditary criminals', as was explicitly done by the Criminal Tribes Act, is also problematic for the same reason.

Notwithstanding the historical shallowness of such a public image, the dependence upon prostitution renders the Bedias the lowliest of the low in the general opinion. Most local people in the regions Bedias inhabit shun any overt relations with members of the community. Many opine that Bedias should not be allowed to reside in the vicinity of 'respectable' people. There has been at least one organised and violent attempt to dislocate the Bedia residents of the hamlet in which I have done fieldwork. A Manihar woman who sells bangles to Bedia women in this hamlet compared them unfavourably with the Jatavs, one of the lowest-ranking social groups in the region: '*Kam se kam vo* (Jatav) *apni behan beti ki izzat to bacha kar rakhte hai*' (At least they [the Jatavs] maintain the dignity of their sisters and daughters).

Despite their extreme marginality, the Bedias are not quite like the 'untouchable' communities which constitute the bulk of the Scheduled Castes. While the untouchables have been occupationally integral not only to the caste system but to the rural class system as well,[7] the Bedias,

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Rajputs created the Sansiyas *to act as their bards and sing their praises*' (Crooke 1896: 277–78, emphasis added). A fragment in Sleeman's accounts also indicates that the Bhat identity could have been an 'ostensible' one used by members of these groups known to engage in many criminal and unlawful activities. One approver, who admitted that the Sanseeas, as also the 'Berias', were engaged in dacoities, thus stated: 'If any one asks us on the roads, who we are, we call out "Jaton ka Bhat" or "Kusbee Bhat" or "Kumhaar Bhat" and that we gain our livelihood by trading in cattle, goats, and donkeys ...' (Sleeman 1849: 261).

[6] The form of prostitution in which Bedia women engage appears to have undergone a transition from a phase in which relationships akin to concubinage with the feudal/ rural elite were predominant alongside women's engagement in singing and dancing, to one in which providing sexual services to numerous anonymous men for immediate remuneration have assumed primacy. In a limited number of cases such an engagement may be accompanied by singing and dancing in its modern variants of 'disco' dance or adaptations from popular cinema. The latter is the case when women operate from bars, hotels and even brothels.

[7] Deliège describes untouchables as 'socially excluded but economically indispensable' (1997: 104). See Mencher 1974 for a discussion of how the presence of untouchable communities is closely related to the needs of agricultural labour in the rural economy.

as well as a host of other denotified communities, do not have a long history of co-existence with the sedentary caste-based society but led a nomadic/semi-nomadic existence till relatively recent times.[8] Some of the denotified communities continue to do so even at present, although this is largely not the case with the Bedias. This is perhaps one of the reasons why many of these groups, including the Bedias, are often referred to as 'tribal'.

But while the community does not seem to have a clear place within the caste system, the notion of 'tribe' does not fit well either and appears to be a remnant of their being treated as a *criminal tribe*. I have also never come across the use of the indigenous term for tribes, *adivasi*, for the Bedias. In the Indian context the notion of 'tribe' continues to be more a political than a sociological one (see Béteille 1991). It is well known that many 'tribal' groups have been absorbed within the caste system at various levels, most usually at the bottom of the social ladder, and becoming a part of the caste-based division of labour is generally believed to facilitate such integration. However, this does not resonate with the present situation of the Bedias, and it is somewhat difficult to see prostitution as an integral part of the caste-based division of labour.[9]

It is thus not possible to be sociologically definitive as to whether the Bedias are more appropriately treated as a caste or as a tribe, and certainly there is nothing much to be gained by trying to understand their present social position in terms of a ritual hierarchy. Nevertheless, an attempt to understand Bedias' position with respect to the caste system is not entirely out of place, as this is where the Bedias place themselves. The indigenous term for caste, *jati*, is very much part of the Bedia vocabulary. Even though they quite often refer to themselves as a *biradari* (community),[10] they never dispute being referred to as a *jati*, and indeed describe themselves

[8] This was one of the primary reasons for their being brought under the net of the Criminal Tribes Act.

[9] It may be mentioned here that in his classic description of the Jajmani system, Wiser includes *tawaif*s as one of the twenty-four castes identified in the village Karimpur. They are, however, defined as Mohammadan dancing girls (Wiser 1936).

[10] In many contexts the Bedias tend to see themselves as an exclusive and independent group. The term *biradari* as opposed to *jati* appears to refer to this more exclusive social grouping. In referring to themselves as a *biradari*, the Bedias also treat themselves as part of a larger amorphous set of communities whom they designate as 'Bhatu'. However, this term is used as an emic category with effective social ties forming the basis of defining group limits. Moreover, this group is not necessarily occupationally homogeneous. For instance, the Nats and Kanjars are treated as 'Bhatu' by many Bedias. This is a term used in opposition to the term 'Kaja' which designates anyone other than Bhatu, including the clients of Bedia women.

as such unambiguously. Nevertheless, the position of such a *jati* within the traditional Hindu order is far from fixed. This is largely due to their being peripheral to the caste-based division of labour. It is arguable that groups which are not integrated within the prevalent division of labour are more open to differential status evaluations. The Bedias therefore have a special place in the study of groups which thrive at the margins of the caste system. We would very much like to know how the Bedias conceive their own position, contra that which others are willing to grant them.

II
Bedias' self-perception: 'We are Rajputs'

In the light of the above discussion, it is notable that Bedias claim to be descendants of Rajputs, the erstwhile rulers of northern India. Nowadays, these claims generally do not take a mythical form, but there is considerable archival data documenting the claims of mythical ancestry made to the colonial authorities. In the most prevalent variant of these, the Bedias and their kindred communities, most notably the Sansis, trace their origin to the legendary ancestor, Sans Mull, who is invariably claimed to be a Rajput of Rajputana, to a Hindu Raja, to the illegitimate son of a banished princess, to the Chauhan Rajputs, and so on.[11] Similarly, in contemporary times, Ramsanehi[12] traces Bedias' origin to the Rajputs exiled during the expansion of the Mughal empire (see n.d. [1998?a]).[13] A writ petition on behalf of several denotified communities filed in 1975 in the High Court of Punjab argued that they had wrongly been included in the category of Scheduled Castes as they were in fact Rajput, not untouchable.[14] Rangey Raghav's fictional depiction of the Nats also reveals the significance of a 'Thakur' identity in the lives of this extremely marginal community, which has many affinities with the Bedias (see Raghav 1980). Thus the Bedias of Nagla, the name I have given the Bharatpur hamlet in which I did my fieldwork, often claim descent from Prithvi Raj Chauhan or Amar

[11] See, for instance, Crooke 1896: 277–78; *Proceedings*, Home, Thagi and Dakaiti, 1883, D-1, 16; *Printed notes on criminal tribes in Central Provinces*, Home, Thagi and Dakaiti, D-1, No. 14, 1880: 103–4; Rose 1919, vol. iii: 364.

[12] Ramsanehi is a senior member of the Bedia community who has devoted himself to the reform of the Bedia community. He runs the Abhyudaya Ashram for Bedia children in Morena. See Agrawal 2002 for a brief biographical account of Ramsanehi.

[13] See Agrawal 2002 for a detailed discussion of how the Bedias construe their past in many different and contradictory ways.

[14] See Writ Petition No. 132 of 1975.

Singh Rathore, famed rulers of the erstwhile Rajputana. In this respect the Bedias are scarcely unique, for there are a very large number of low-caste groups in north India that claim Rajput or Kshatriya descent (Srinivas 1966: 9–10). However, these claims take on a specific form among the Bedias who couch their claims of upper-caste ancestry within the frame of the engagement of their women in non-marital relations with men of other/upper castes. The following discussion seeks to illustrate this peculiarity of the Bedia claims.

In one of my earliest conversations with the members of the Bedia community, Bhola Baba, one of the oldest members of the community in Nagla, claimed: '*Hum Rathore ke ansh hai*' (We are part/remains of *Rathore*s). On being asked how they became Bedias, Baba explained: '*Hamare Baba ne koi Bedni ghar mein de di thee*' (Our great ancestor had kept a Bedia woman in his house), thereby implying that the community members define themselves as the descendants of a Rajput man who kept a Bedia woman as a concubine. Ram Singh, cousin of Bhola Baba, claimed '*Hum hai lali Rajput. Hum Prithvi Raj Chauhan ki aulad hai*' (We are Rajputs, dear girl. We are the offspring of Prithvi Raj Chauhan). The explanation followed: '*Ab mein koi tucchi muchhi baat to karoo nahin. Ab hamare paas aate Prithvi Raj ke to vake aulad hoti ke nahin? To ye baat hain. To hum Prithvi Raj Chauhan ke hi likhe hue hain*' (I do not talk loosely. If the sons of Prithvi Raj Chauhan came to us, would they not have had children? Obviously, they would have. Then that's the point. We have been authored by Prithvi Raj Chauhan). Compared to the statement of Bhola Baba, this claim to Rajput ancestry is relatively feeble, and couched more in the idiom of the present organisation of the trade: now the Rajputs come to the Bedias and 'author' progeny, rather than being great ancestors who kept some lowly women in their households. Yet the tenor of the claims is obvious: 'Father determines the membership of a group. Upper-caste men of royal ancestry have fathered us. Therefore, we belong to these upper-caste groups.'[15] Ram Singh's elder brother, Raja Singh, makes the claim even more clearly, linking it to the existing organisation of the sex trade:

[15] Such claims have interesting implications with regard to the issue of descent within the Bedia community. Despite the presence of a large number of members who cannot be seen as patrilineal descendants since they have been born out of the non-marital alliances of Bedia women, the community continues to define itself in strongly patrilineal terms. Limitations of space do not allow me to discuss this issue at length in this article, but see Agrawal 2002.

Dekho beta hamara dhanda hai. Ab hamari chhorin ke paas grahak aate hain. Ab unke bacche thahar gaye. To ye kaun ke hue? Amar Singh Rathore ke? To bas unhi ki aulad hai. Thakuron ki aulad hai. (Look child, we engage in the sex trade. Men visit our daughters. They conceive and have children. Now who are these children? Obviously they are the children of these men. They are the children of Amar Singh Rathore, of Thakurs. This is how we are Thakurs.)[16]

A.M. Shah, writing in the context of Gujarat, suggests that the category 'Rajput' was used flexibly there for purposes of making claims of caste affiliation because the idea of power was its essential feature. Anyone who had power could claim to be Rajput (Shah and Desai 1988: 16). In the Bedia case we find that it is not power which forms the basis of these claims, but rather the beliefs, as also facts, regarding being born out of relations with Rajput men. This, then, is a variation on the otherwise wide-spread claims regarding Rajput status made by innumerable groups across the social spectrum.

III
Children of Bedia daughters/sisters:
From kinship to caste affiliation

The Bedias' generalised claim of upper-caste affiliation is reinforced by their insistence on the 'patrilineal' descent of children of Bedia women engaged in prostitution. Some examples will illustrate this tendency. Among the Bedias with whom I have done my fieldwork, it is only with the second generation of Bedia women, i.e., the daughters of the settlers of Nagla, that the community's engagement in prostitution is evident. One of the four daughters in Bedia families with which Nagla came into existence had no children. The remaining three daughters had one (surviving) son each, although one of them sometimes claims to have two. Kamla, the daughter of one of the Bedia men who settled Nagla, had a long-standing alliance with a Jat Man in a nearby *tehsil*.[17] Her son is claimed to be a Jat, although he has continued to live in Nagla even

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[16] The Bedia case is somewhat different, though comparable, to the devadasis among whom, as Srinivasan argues, 'the caste status of the "father" provided a kind of axis along which the different members of the group were graded' (1988: 189). I did not find Bedias using these claims to institute any explicit internal gradations.

[17] The Jats are the dominant caste and erstwhile rulers of the region in which Nagla is situated.

after his mother's death. The sons of the two daughters of the other brother are said to be Thakurs, though their mothers remained members of their father's household. The elder sister Shyama, now dead, had a relation with a 'Tomar' Thakur. Her son, who also died a few years ago, and her grandsons, are said to be of the *got* of 'Tomar' Thakur. One son of the younger sister, Sitara, is said to be a 'Pawar' Thakur; the other is claimed to be a Pandit.[18]

Similar claims regarding affiliations continue in the next generation. Kamla's brother's daughter, Munia, also had a long-term relation with a local Jat man and, therefore, her children, like the son of her father's sister, are also claimed as Jat. But it is merely a coincidence that both she as well as her father's sister Kamla, had relations with Jats and therefore claim their children to be of Jat descent. Rameshwari claims her children to be Pandit, as she had a relation with a Brahmin man, while her father's sisters, Sitara and Shyama, had children who are claimed as Thakurs (Pawar and Tomar) or Pandit. Rameshwari's daughter, Sharmila, claims that she is a Pandit, but her daughter is a Gujar. Champa, another Bedia woman in the third generation since the settlement of Nagla, has had a long-term relation with a Gujar man. Her children are claimed to be Gujars.[19] Her father's sister, Shanno, had had a long-term relation with a Pandit but had no child of her own. On the other hand, Champa's cousin Laccho claims to have had a long-term relation with a Bania man, producing children of Bania descent.

I came across similar claims of parentage and caste affiliation among the Bedias of Morena. The older women I met there insisted upon the Jain, Thakur or Brahmin parentage of their children. Champa Behan, an activist of Vinoba Bhave's persuasion who has been living in a Bedia village for the last fifteen years, confirmed the prevalence of a similar state of affairs among the Bedias of the Sagar district in Madhya Pradesh.

One implication of this manner of claiming caste affiliation is that a Bedia woman's child of supposed Thakur or Baman descent no longer belongs to the caste/*got*[20] of her/his mother. S/he is a Thakur/Baman

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[18] Tomar and Pawar are well-known Rajput divisions. I have retained the terms that the Bedias use to describe members of the upper castes: Pandit or Baman for Brahmin and Thakur for Rajput. These are common north Indian appellations for the members of these castes.

[19] The engagement in prostitution of daughters in this family was even offered as proof that members of 'other castes' also engage in prostitution.

[20] The Bedias and kindred communities are divided into an indeterminate number of exogamous groups, of which Chhari and Karkhor are the most prominent. The internal segmentary structure of the caste is, however, hardly elaborate.

now, although s/he has no place within the social morphology of the Thakur and Baman castes. S/he has to carve out a space within the Bedia social world. A male child *may* thus give rise to a new *got* within the Bedia community. Bhola Baba summarised this consequence of paternal caste affiliation of children of Bedia women as follows:

> *Ab jaise Chauhan ne randi kar rakhhi hai ya Tomaron ne kar rakhi hai to unhi ka got ban jayega. Aise hi jat badalti chali jati hai.* (If Chauhans or Tomars keep a concubine, their children will belong to their *got*. This is how caste keeps changing.)

Baba attributed similar origins to the various *got*s in the community. But what is more interesting is that the Bedias of Nagla themselves trace the origin of their *got* Kesia, to which all the offspring of Bedia men are said to belong, to such a source. Raja Singh narrated the following story about the origin of Kesias:

> A sister of one of our elders used to live with a Thakur many generations ago. A son was born to her. All the old men of the community gathered to discuss what the *got* of the new-born child should be. Keeping a *got* was essential for the marriage of the child (*Iska got dharo jis se iski bhi natedari ho jaye*). No Thakur would have given him a daughter. That was the time that the *Kesula* tree was in bloom. They decided to keep Kesia as the *got* of the new-born. Our origin lies there. We have originated from the Thakurs.

The Nagla Bedias, therefore, often append Chauhan or Rathore against their *got* to underline their descent from the Rajputs: 'we are Kesia Chauhan', or, 'Kesias are Rathores', they say. The flexibility with which they use these Rajput names only confirms the ideological nature of these claims.

The Bedias' manner of claiming caste affiliations should *ideally* have led to a proliferation of *got*s, as every male offspring of an unmarried Bedia woman is a potential point of origin of a new *got*. But this is hardly the case. It would be too much for the community to recognise each of these new *got*s although, when it comes to defining who a particular individual is, they are emphatic in designating that so-and-so is a Thakur, Jat or Baman, as the case may be. In the long run, therefore, only a few of these *got*s survive. The only instance in which this is likely to happen in Nagla is that of a Bedia woman's son who has been married to a

woman who belongs to the *got* of Nagla Bedias, i.e., Kesia. In this instance, it is imperative to insist upon the difference in the *got* of the husband and wife since the Bedias swear by *got* exogamy.[21] Indeed, this is one of the tangible purposes served by the patrilineal affiliation of children of Bedia women: the expansion of the marital field of Bedia men to include the mother's patrilineal kin. But this is not very usual as hardly any Bedia women are married and, most often, the children do revert to claiming the *got* affiliations of their mother or mother's brother.

From the above discussion it should be obvious that, by insisting on the patrilineal character of descent, the Bedia community gives force to its claims of upper-caste origins. In claiming upper-caste parentage for the children of the Bedia women, the community is also attempting to validate its broader claim of an upper-caste ancestry in general. In other words, they claim upper-caste parentage for the children of Bedia women in an immediate and specific sense alongside claims of being Rajputs on the whole. Thus Sharmila said to me, 'I am a Pandit but otherwise we are Thakurs.' Thus the Bedias as a community, each of their *got*s, as well as each individual born to the women of the community is said to have high-caste ancestry. It is, therefore, understandable that no hierarchy is insti-tuted between those who are claimed to be 'not Bedia' in an immediate sense and those whose claims of being other than Bedia have only a legendary and mythical basis. Moreover, incorporation into the mother's group *in practice* is also not seen as a refutation of upper-caste ancestry in general. In Sahlins' words, one could say, 'truth in a descent system is a specification of structure, not of birth, and "true" ancestry may assume the status of a sociological lie' (1965: 106).

IV
The 'basis' of patrilineal caste affiliations

What I have said so far might seem to imply that, in individual cases, some 'real' stable relation always underlies claims of high-caste parent-age. While this is not necessarily so, it is obvious that such contentions draw heavily upon claims regarding the long-term relations formed by Bedia women. The women generally refer to their first client as their 'husband' (*mera aadmi*). This man may be designated as the father of the children of the woman, although the women's relationships are neither necessarily, nor often, restricted to one man. Generally Bedia women

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[21] See Agrawal (2002: Chapter 10) for a detailed discussion of this case.

consider one of their more regular customers, with whom they have close ties for the moment, as their 'husband'. This man then becomes the putative father of their children, at least for the period that the relationship lasts.

As more and more Bedia women move towards commercialised forms of prostitution, the issue of the paternity of their children becomes a sticky one. If the relations of the Bedia women are more often with anonymous men and also increasingly fleeting in character, the claims to high-caste paternity of their children might seem less credible than in the past, when the relations were supposedly marked by greater stability. Yet it is striking that the Bedias are not ready to give up the ideology of patriliny in defining the caste affiliations of the children of Bedia women. Perhaps the difference between the past and present should also not be overemphasised, for there is no evidence that older women who make unambiguous claims about the paternity of their children have a greater basis for doing so than the women at present. That is, it is not obvious that the former did not have relations with more than one man, while even now women continue to aspire for stable relationships.

Furthermore, if relations have become more commercial and anonymous now, there are also new factors that can be used by the Bedia women and the community to lend validity to the assertions they make about the knowledge of the paternity of their children. Increasingly, there is pressure on Bedia women to force their clients to use condoms, not as a reproductive contraceptive but as a precaution against HIV/AIDS. Women routinely assert that they do not entertain any clients who refuse to use condoms. But for Bedia women condom usage with the husband, or with any man whom they treat as a husband, is unimaginable (*Pati ke saath nirodh kaise istemaal kar sakte hain*). Women engaged in prostitution similarly do not see why they should use condoms with men with whom they have regular relations. By giving a more privileged access to their bodies to some men, Bedia women may have some basis to their claims of knowledge of the paternity of their children (*Maa ko to pata hota hain*).

But this does not work as an iron rule, and there are many women who do not have any stable client although they continue to have children. In cases where there is no claim about the existence of regular male patrons, frequent pregnancies and childbirth controvert the women's claims of regular condom usage with anonymous clients. Although in some instances pregnancy may be explained as contraceptive failure or the mischief of the customer ('some customers are so mischievous that they tear the condoms with their nails', I was told), more often it is accepted

as a consequence of the desire to have children. Women who have no stable clients, therefore, accept that when they want to have children, they stop using condoms (*Jab baccha chahiye hota hai to nahin karti istemaal*). Social workers also report that, in their desire to have a good-looking child, the women may not use condoms when a good-looking client visits them.

To come back to the issue of parentage, despite all the claims made in this respect, establishing the paternity of a particular child is not a pressing concern *within* the community. There are no rituals through which such claims are institutionalised or formalised.[22] In most instances, therefore, the paternity of the child may even be left as an open issue and can be decided if the question arises or favourable circumstances exist. It may, for example, be settled as and when the woman forms a stable relation with a client. In one case a Bedia woman had borne a child. Subsequently, she formed a stable relation with a Jat man who was thereafter claimed to be the father of her daughter. Considerable flexibility is therefore exercised in the attribution of paternity of a child. Sharmila claims that the Gujar man who is the father of her first child is now dead. She has a second child now. While today she cannot claim that both children belong to her Gujar 'husband', nothing would stop her from making this claim or an entirely different claim on a later date. Even within the community, therefore, such claims have a certain 'constructedness' about them. They assume the garb of truth with the passage of time by taking on an appearance that they could not have had under more immediate circumstances. More immediately, the presence of a stable patron may, however, give them such an appearance. It is thus instructive that when pushed beyond a point, the community members simply say '*ab koi kai se paida hai to koi kai se*' (One is born of one, another from another). Often they admit

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[22] This is unlike the Kerala Nayar case where a man of appropriate caste status had to formally accept the parentage of a child for it to be accepted within the community (Gough 1959). Ramsanehi has written that among upper-class prostitutes, the first pregnancy was marked by a celebration akin to a marriage in which the husband's place was taken by money. This ceremony was called 'Missi'. Among the Bedias of Nagla, I found no evidence of any such ceremony and community members denied any ritualisation of childbirth. Even the ceremony described by Ramsanehi does not entail a social recognition of paternity (Ramsanehi n.d.[1998?b]). The protagonist of Acharya Chatursen's Hindi novel *Goli* (Slave woman), ostensibly based on the real life of the royalty of erstwhile Rajputana, is a much favoured concubine of the Raja. She is married to a man from her background when she is about to bear a child to the Raja. She never has any sexual relations with her 'husband' to whom her children are said to belong (see Chatursen 1997). This again does not resonate with the Bedia case.

that the knowledge of their children's paternity is not available to them. '*Ab kiskis ki nishani rakhe*' (How can we keep proof of all those who visit us), they assert. But in these moments of weakness, we get a glimpse into the constructed character of their more usual claims. This constructed character also reveals that their assertions of patrilineal caste affiliations have strong ideological overtones, explaining why even the changed nature of women's relationships with men has not made any notable difference in their tenor.

In making such claims, standing almost at the bottom of the social ladder, Bedias seem to draw upon a caste ideology which favours hypergamous (*anuloma*) relations as opposed to hypogamous (*pratiloma*) relations which are strictly disapproved (Tambiah 1973).[23] I refer here to the hypergamous character of the relations Bedia women have with their clients and patrons. True, these relations may be only imprecisely described as akin to marriage, and therefore the application of the notion of hypergamy may appear to be far-fetched,[24] but the concept of hypergamy conveys much of the spirit of these relations.

As in the past, even now the Bedia women seek alliances with men of upper castes and are quite candid about their disapproval of relations with lower-caste men. Goda, an elderly dancing woman from Morena, after finding out that I belong to an upper caste, said to me:

> All this is your blood. It does not belong to any lowly community (*neech kaum*) like Chamar or Chuhra. Thakur, Baman, Bania—it is the blood of only these three, and no fourth group is included.

That caste remains a significant consideration even among the young was evident to me when a Bedia girl who wanted to get married rather than engage in prostitution[25] told me how she was unable to accept the marriage proposal of an eligible local young man. 'He is a Jatav (i.e., a Chamar), and we are Thakurs', she said.

As a matter of fact, the men who visit Bedia women may not be members of upper-castes, and certainly Bedia women have relations with men of all castes. While they are barely in a position to determine the

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[23] Béteille (1991) argues that hypergamous unions are also not considered entirely commonplace although they are at least acknowledged, as opposed to hypogamy, which is clearly condemned (pp. 20–21).

[24] Tambiah has defended such a usage (1973: 219).

[25] A Bedia woman may either get married or engage in prostitution. The community norms forbid women from marrying once they begin engaging in prostitution, and vice versa.

caste of every client, they never draw any attention to this fact and tend to treat the men who visit them as belonging to the upper castes. Note how easily, in the statement quoted above, Raja Singh slipped between talking on the one hand about the *grahak* (customers) of the daughters of the community, who are anything but royal, and about Amar Singh Rathore, who is a royal legend in the erstwhile Rajputana, on the other. The reference to Thakurs mediated the two extremes. The analogies drawn between a modern day *grahak*/customer, a feudal Thakur and a royal Amar Singh Rathore are indeed highly exaggerated. But then, in ideological matters, one is not concerned with actual facts. It is enough that many upper-caste men are clients of Bedia women, and that royalty was always known for such indulgences. Howsoever remote, obscure and imaginary it may be, this brush with royalty does give a solid ideological weapon to the Bedias.

V
The social worth of the Bedia claims

While making all these claims, Bedias are not unaware that the upper castes and the larger society do not care for such assertions about their social status. Goda, whom I have just mentioned, admitted: 'no one will call us Thakurani, we will always be called *randi*s'. The 'real' descendants of Rajputs, Brahmins, Banias and Jats simply laugh off these assertions made by the Bedias. They obviously have good reasons for not taking these claims seriously. If the non-marital relations of Bedia women with non-Bedia men are seen as a basis for the former to claim upper-caste origins and affiliation, the reverse appears to be the case for the *biradari* of the high-caste men who are the basis of these claims. That is, while such relations with Bedia women may boost the masculine pride of non-Bedia men among their peer group,[26] they do suffer a loss in social standing within their *biradari*. Far from accepting any affinity with the Bedias with whom their men relate, the men's families may choose to ignore these relations, fearing social disgrace. In one instance, when an elderly Jat woman found out that her brother's son visits Nagla, she informed the brother's wife. The latter, however, refused to believe her and saw this as an attempt to tarnish her family's reputation. The woman's son also

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[26] That the peer group is an active participant in such forays of men is obvious from the fact that visits to brothels and places like Nagla are often made in pairs, and even groups of young men.

felt that it was his mother's foolishness to have shared the information about her nephew's activities with the latter's mother. In the interests of amicable family relations such things should not be talked about, he argued. We can see how this studied blindness functions in the interest of both: the *biradari*'s reputation, as well as male privilege. To a limited extent, men are also repositories of family honour, but evidently their excesses are best ignored.

In extreme circumstances, when there are no doubts about particular men's relations with Bedia women, the wider society distances itself from these men by treating them as akin to the Bedias themselves.[27] I found that all men who were notorious locally for forming long-term relations with Bedia women in Bharatpur were treated as Bedias. About Shanno's long-term client, it was claimed by the village Patwari, '*hai to vo Pandit magar Shanno ke saat rah kar vo Bedia ban gaya*' (He is a Pandit but he has become a Bedia by living with Shanno). Similarly for the Gujar patron of a Bedia woman, it was claimed, '*ye koi Gujar thodi hi hai, ye to ab Bedia hai, Bedia*' (He is hardly a Gujar now. He is a Bedia).[28] The community at times takes drastic steps against these men. Champa Behan, whom I have mentioned above, narrated an instance in which a Rajput man who had married a Bedni was socially outcast by his *biradari*. His own community members filed around 150 civil and criminal cases in order to harass him. In another case I was told that a Jat man used to frequenting the Bedia women was facing difficulty in finding

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[27] Some Bedia women deny that, apart from the jealousy of the wives, their relations with non-Bedia men cause much discord in their patrons' families. Many claim that they have had cordial relations with their 'mother-in-law' and other members of their patron's family. On the contrary, others claim that they have withdrawn from such relations in order to escape the unsavoury situations that can arise if their patron's *biradari* chooses to interfere in the relationship.

[28] I found examples of this even within the colonial records where, in lists of Bedia families, men of other castes who formed relations with Bedia women are treated as having become Bedia by virtue of these relations. Thus it is on record that 'Kundan, the leader [of a Sansiya camp] was a Thakur [and] ... he fell in love with a Beriah woman ... and became a member of the tribe' (see *Proceedings*, Police, Thagi and Dakaiti, 1883, D-1, No. 16). This could of course be an integration at the residential level alone. But the following statements from an earlier record pertaining to 'Bowreeahs' resonates very closely with our case: '... Ooda was originally a Goojur, but having married a woman of Bowreeah caste, himself turned a Bowreeah'; 'Sukhdeo's wife began to live with Mohra Rajput, who in consequence became Bowreeah also'; and finally, 'The father of Jhunkoo was a Rajpoot, and his mother was of Bowreeah caste, hence Jhunkoo is known as a Bowreeeah' (see *Proceedings*, Home, Judicial, May 1873, Nos 270–72).

a match for his daughter.[29] If the upper castes are so resistant to acknowledging the relations of their men with Bedia women, they are even less likely to accept the Bedias' claims regarding their upper-caste ancestry.

Dube has noted, 'if the physical appearance of a low caste boy and the quality of his intelligence and capacity for leadership, etc., attract attention as being incongruent with his caste status, people try to explain it by alluding to the history of his mother's illicit sexual relations with some powerful high caste man' (1986: 29). This, however, happens only in the rarest of circumstances, where the upper castes are forced to come to terms with the invalidity of their prejudices,[30] or when it suits them. Among the Bedias, the opposite is true. While the members of upper castes are forced to dilute the patrilineal ideology to avoid strengthening the Bedias' status claims, the Bedias themselves draw all possible strength from the ideology of patriliny in claiming upper-caste descent, in turn becoming strongly patrilineal like the upper castes.

It is also important, in this context, to see how the community recuperates members whom it may in others circumstances designate as belonging to other castes. While the engagement of a Bedia woman's daughter in prostitution consolidates her membership within the community, for her brother, it is his marriage within the ambit of communities whom the Bedias consider as members of their *biradari* that performs the same function.[31] It is revealing, then, that the Bedias see this co-option not only as arising out of the *de facto* membership of these children within the community, but also as a consequence of their compulsion to marry within the community (in the case of most Bedia men and a few Bedia women

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[29] In a comparative analysis of race and caste, Béteille refers to an American case that illuminates the same point. When, in a moment of extreme crisis, a white man referred to the children of his black mistress as 'my children', he was permanently ostracised by his community. Cited from Davis et al. (1941: 31) in Béteille (1991: 26).

[30] Most strikingly, some of the predominantly high-caste Hindu organisations have made such insinuations with regard to Ambedkar, a most illustrious lawyer, scholar and leader of the untouchables. Jokes with similar suggestions abound among high-caste men about the physical strength or beauty of the men and women of untouchable castes.

[31] Since *most* Bedia women engage in prostitution and are not allowed to marry Bedia men at any stage, we need to know who the wives of Bedia men are. In this regard it is important to point out that, for several purposes including marriage, Bedias treat themselves as part of a broader social entity, 'Bhatu', which includes groups not necessarily occupationally comparable to Bedias (see note 10). Thus the majority of Bedia men in Nagla were married to women from the Nat and Kanjar communities who, while defined as Bhatu, did not depend upon the prostitution of their unmarried women as a primary source of income. The Nats did not restrict women married to Nat men from engaging in singing and dancing as a means of livelihood. Women married to Bedia

who are married) or to carry on with the profession of prostitution (in the case of most Bedia women).

Given the logic of caste affiliations, it is indeed unlikely that children born to Bedia women of non-Bedia fathers would be able to find a match within the community of their fathers. I was told of a case in which a Jat man formed a long-term relation with a Bedia woman who lived with him. The children of the woman remained with him till such time as the question of their marriage arose. No one was willing to accept his daughter in marriage, and eventually the daughter had to be married within the mother's community. If there is such resistance to accepting a daughter, there is likely to be even more in giving a daughter in marriage to a son born out of such a relation.[32] Such marriages would be contrary not only to the norm of endogamy but also to the rule of hypergamy. While one can treat the wife-giver as an inferior and by corollary take a wife or a daughter-in-law from some one who is an inferior, it is barely desirable to have an inferior wife-taker. Were such a marriage ever to take place, it would confirm a rise in the social status of the Bedias, but definitely jeopardise the social standing of those with whom such an alliance has been formed.

The Bedias candidly admit that 'if a Jat has kept a *randi*, and he has a son by this woman, other Jats will not give him their daughter. At least the real Jats would not do so'. Similarly, it is admitted that children born of Bedia women's relations with men belonging to the caste of Gujars or Rajputs would not be able to find a match from these communities. Thus the children from Bedia women's unions with higher-caste men are seen as without any option but to marry within their mother's community. '*Bediyo mein byahega to Bedia hi banega*' (One who marries among the Bedias becomes a Bedia). The community members suggest that when there are no marital ties with the father's community, the mother marries her children within her community and this leads to the incorporation of the children within the community. Yet, this does not deter the Bedias from making their claims. '*Aise hi badal jati hai jaat. Ansh Jaton ka hai*

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men are not permitted to do so. In a small number of instances Bedia men are also married to Bedia women from other hamlets. This is not to say that the marriage of Bedia men is not a 'problem' for the community. All marriages involve payment of bride-price which has been rapidly rising, and men without resources (i.e., sisters who earn) remain unmarried. See Agrawal 2002 for a detailed exposition of this issue.

[32] If we remember that within the Bedia community it is usually only men who marry, it will be clear why the possibility of actual marital ties with upper castes are virtually ruled out. Any such marriage would be hypogamous by definition.

magar Bedia ban gaye' (This is how caste changes. A Jat becomes a Bedia). Here the change in caste being referred to is not from Bedia to Jat, but of Jat to Bedia.

VI
Attempts at institutionalising the claims

Despite these odds, the Bedias stick to their claims of a more than imaginary high-caste ancestry, though there are few domains in which they can either stake a claim about the high-caste paternity of their children, or draw any concrete mileage from such claims. One could imagine that, for a community whose stigmatised existence keeps it very much on the margins of society, only a researcher could provide the ideal audience lending an ear to these claims! Though I would not deny that my respondents, perhaps provoked by my questions, might have been prone to give me an exaggerated account of their claims, they nevertheless put forward their views with remarkable consistency, cutting across the age and sex divide. I believe that even if the Bedias are unable to stake claims of the high-caste parentage of particular individuals born within the community in any wider social forum, they do make numerous micro-level attempts at consolidating and institutionalising these claims whenever they get a chance. I examine below a few instances of such attempts.

While in their everyday life the Bedias are unlikely to be asked to spell out issues of paternity and caste affiliation explicitly, dealing with social/public institutions does pose dilemmas that have to be resolved by precisely resorting to such affiliations. Thus, in many public dealings one is routinely expected to provide the father's name. Rather than questioning the assumptions underlying such a requirement, the Bedias have found this to be a means of institutionalising their claims. In part, their response must also be understood as an outcome of the fear of stigma that a fatherless child faces in the larger society. In such situations, they therefore regularly resort to providing an answer that may be entirely fictitious or perhaps, more precisely, based on their belief about their paternity and caste.[33] Needless to say, this more often than not implies an upper-caste parentage. Champa Behan found this to be an entrenched practice among the Bedias of Sagar district. Many community members

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[33] Ramsanehi also confirmed this. In search of a socially acceptable identity, the Bedia children of his Ashram in Morena often publicly use his name as their father's name when they go out of the Ashram.

had upper-caste names such as Tewari, Verma and Sharma in the Patwari's records, and some had entered themselves as members of the Rajput caste. This is the case in a village that is entirely inhabited by the Bedias. Even in the land records of some other villages, I was told that the heirs had the fathers' names recorded in the 'son-of' column even when they had actually inherited the land from their mothers.

In Morena too, where I found the sons of Bedia women sometimes using Bedia *got* names such as Karkhor or Chhari,[34] I was told that when they were in schools or colleges these children used the names of their 'fathers': Jain, Sharma, etc. It was only when the children had reverted to their mothers' locality in which there was no prospect of passing off as belonging to any other community, that they reconciled to the use of their mothers' *got* name.[35] Bedia men and youth agreed that those Bedias who do not live in identified Bedia localities pass themselves off as members of upper castes, most often as Thakurs or Rajputs. Often, they may adopt innocuous names such as Kumar, Kushal, Singh, etc., which are sufficiently ambiguous in their reference to caste affiliations and in no case indicate low-caste or Bedia origins. At times, the rest of the society also appears to accept these claims. I was told that Rajan Garg (Garg being a surname used by those belonging to the Baniya or Vaishya caste), who was a resident of Gwalior, was actually the son of a Bedia woman but had been given the name of his father as the mother had moved out of the sex trade.

Though many community members continue to use Bedia *got* names like Chhari and Karkhor in the public domain, I came across only one example of someone using Bedia as a surname. Pooran Singh Bedia is Minister of State, Department of Scheduled Caste Welfare and School Education in the Madhya Pradesh state government. Paradoxically, I was told by some of my respondents that he was actually *not* a Bedia because his father was a Raghuvanshi, a Rajput. But he had *become* a Bedia in order to serve his political ends. Without claiming Bedia caste status, he could not have contested from a reserved constituency. In line with their understanding of patriliny as determining caste affiliation, Bedias do not consider Pooran Singh Bedia to be a Bedia in the strict sense of the term. The latter, on the other hand, explains his inability to do much

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[34] These are the two most prominent *got*s among the Bedias; see note 20.

[35] Thus, even in instances where the children revert to their mother's *got*, this is perceived as an inferior option, rather than the way things 'should be'.

for his caste brethren because 'they hide their caste' (*vo apni jaat chhupa kar rahte hain*).[36]

There may be some merit in Ramsanehi's opinion[37] that the Bedias have begun to privilege claims of patrilineal descent only with the increase in their interaction with the wider society. It does seem that, when confronted by public institutions, the Bedias' first impulse is to present themselves in the most socially acceptable manner, implying both the privileging of an upper-caste identity as well as paternity. But the dilemma which modern state institutions pose for all lower-caste communities is well known. Thus, on the one hand, the possibility of social stigma instigates Bedias to deny their identity, but the state on the other hand demands that they reveal it in order to partake of the small favours that have been set aside for them. While the inclination of community members is to pass off as belonging to an upper caste, eligibility for state benefits requires an acceptance of their lower-caste origins. For many Bedias this, in addition, often requires accepting the absence of a father as well. Champa Behan reported that she had to persuade the Sagar Bedias to start adopting their mother's name in order to become eligible for state scholarships.[38]

But the Bedias do not confine their attempts to legitimise upper-caste ancestry to the institutions of the modern state. Interestingly, they also, like any upper caste, have their own Brahmin genealogist. When there is a death in the community, the Bedias visit their *Panda* who lives on one of the holy g*hat*s of the Ganges. Some of my informants insisted that all their claims about high-caste paternity were enshrined in the genealogical records maintained by the *Panda*s. This certainly intrigued me and I therefore paid a visit to their *Panda*. I also met the *Panda* of the Bedias of some other regions, and made some interesting findings in their records. Contrary to the Bedia claims, I did not find the attributed paternity of

[36] I was told this by Champa Behan, a follower of Vinoba Bhave, who has spent almost twenty years in a Bedia village in Madhya Pradesh.

[37] Personal conversation.

[38] The imperative of legitimate paternity is not so much a caste issue but one peculiar to women in sex work or any single mother. In 1988, *Patita Uddhar Sabha* (Delhi), an organisation that claims to champion the rights of women in prostitution, filed a PIL in the Supreme Court pleading that it should not be mandatory for the children of these women to provide the father's name while admitting their children to school. The Supreme Court of India accepted the appeal and accordingly issued notices to the central government and the state administration (see Sangwan 1989). I am not sure about the popularity of this judgement among women in prostitution. If it singles them out for this privilege, in effect it results in their identification/stigmatisation.

the children of the Bedia women enshrined in the records to the extent claimed by my respondents. But I did find that in several cases, though not always, women who are engaged in prostitution were recorded as married to men of upper castes. Among the records of Bedias of other regions, there were clearer instances in which the women were shown as married to men of higher castes, and subsequently their children were also shown as belonging to these castes.[39] When I asked the *Panda*s about the caste/*got* affiliation of the Bedia children, I found that they were somewhat confused. Being aware of the nature of activities in which the Bedias engage, they told me that the mother's *got* is adopted as the father's *got* is indeterminate. But interestingly, they also said that:

> There are no *got*s. *Got*s are made up. The wheat that is sown determines the variety and not the earth in which it is sown. Wheat has different varieties. The fields have no variety.

This use of the seed and earth analogy referring to the male and female roles in procreation is a remarkable confirmation of the theory of patriliny that Bedias also insist upon, and which is characteristic of much of Indian society (Dube 1986). Though the Bedias did not use the seed and earth analogy, they did continuously use the notion of *ansh* or particles[40] in defining their patrilineal allegiances. But in the genealogical records there is no distinction made between the children of the brothers and the sisters, and frankly the *Panda*s saw no contradiction here.

However, I did find that more recently, the Bedias of Nagla have been insisting upon entering their caste as 'Bhatu Thakur' rather than Bedia. Bhatu is a term that a very large segment of the community, including the Bedias, uses as a self-designation. The *Panda* explained that, while they considered the designation of Thakur to be inappropriate, they did not wish to displease their *jajman*s, i.e., the Bedias. Moreover, they felt that their own descendants might be unable to identify their *jajman*s if they did not record the claims as they were made. They thus faithfully recorded what they were told by their *jajman*s.[41] I also came across

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[39] The difference in these regions may be partly explained on the basis of the greater insulation and marginality of the Bedias of Nagla as compared to those in Morena. The latter are not only better off and less visibly engaged in prostitution, but also more vocal and in greater interaction with the rest of society.

[40] They did not elaborate this notion, implying that it is self-explanatory.

[41] Srinivas (1966) has pointed out that 'one of the most important functions of genealogist and bardic castes was to legitimise mobility from the ranks of the lower

references to 'Karkhor Chauhan', 'Thakur Chauhan Karkhor' and even 'Bedia Chauhan' in the records of other areas. It appears that the Bedias are more up-front about claiming a high-caste ancestry for their *group as a whole* in the traditional domain, and utilise means of insisting upon *individual* members' high-caste patriliny available through the bureaucratic institutions of the modern state. This perhaps reveals something about the kind of possibilities of social mobility these two domains offer to a community like the Bedias.

VII
Concluding remarks

One can gauge the seriousness with which the Bedias pursue an upper-caste identity from the numerous small-scale and individual attempts they make to legitimise their claims in several domains. The above discussion of the peculiar manner in which the members of the Bedia community construe affiliation and identification with castes traditionally regarded as having a superior status is thus instructive in more ways than one. We find that the Bedia claims of Rajput ancestry are not mere figments of mythical imagination, but rather are concretely located within the present-day practices of the community. This may well be a peculiar characteristic of the way in which the Bedias' practices *allow* them to construe descent to suit their claims. But it is notable how this community makes social use of its economic practice which, for all practical purposes, renders them amongst the most degraded in social opinion. Rather than surrendering to this opinion, the Bedias underscore particular aspects of their practice to validate their claim and belief that their 'origin' is far from humble. Instead of treating the non-conjugal sexual relations of their women as lamentable, they construe these relations as proof of their upper-caste origins. While in much of this article I have been concerned with demonstrating this facet of the Bedias' self-image, it is significant to note here that they treat any evidence of non-marital sexuality among women of the upper castes with much loathing and show no inclination

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castes to the Kshatriya by providing suitable genealogical linkage and myth' (p. 10). In an important study of the genealogist castes, Shah and Shroff (1959) note that the Vahivancha Barots, one such caste in Gujarat, was primarily patronised by those who wanted to pass off as Rajputs. As noted above, the Bedias themselves claim to have been Bhat, or genealogists, in the past. In this regard it is important to note that the Vahivancha Barot also modelled themselves after the Rajputs, their chief patrons (ibid.).

towards any laudatory view of such instances. This is in striking contrast to their rendering of such practices of their own women who engage in prostitution, which has been discussed in this article. Even more interestingly, the Bedias go on to compare the wives of Bedia men, who are expected to live a life of chastity and monogamy, with the 'good' women of the dominant groups. By presenting an alternate interpretation of their practices, the Bedias challenge their social image as a degraded community, unacceptable and at the margins of 'respectable' upper-caste society. But what is really at stake is not the alternate view, but rather the purpose for which it is adopted.

It is relevant that Bedias make extensive uses of norms of hypergamy and patrilineal descent, cherished by the upper echelons of the caste order, but ill-suited to the reality of the Bedia social structure. The norm of hypergamy structures their avowed preference for upper-caste patrons even when their relations with these men are generally non-conjugal. Patriliny is unambiguously favoured in deciding the caste affiliation of the children of Bedia women, in spite of the fact that the Bedia children are bound to retain membership of their mother's family/caste. In fact, the so-called upper castes are constrained to give up these values when confronted with Bedia claims. This, however, does not always seem necessary as it can easily be pointed out that the Bedia women are neither *married* to upper-caste men, nor are their children actual *members* of their 'father's' caste/family. Notwithstanding the dismissive attitude of those with whom the Bedias seek to identify, we cannot ignore the significance of the uses the Bedia community makes of these cherished norms towards fashioning *a more respectable social identity*. Here again, what is at stake is not the upper-caste values themselves, but rather the uses to which the Bedias can put them.

When what is at stake is a respectable social identity, differences which are loathed may be underplayed and even superficial similarities overemphasised. Thus, in addition to being a telling example of different manifestations of 'caste consciousness', the Bedia case is also a vivid reminder of the fact that reinterpretation, rather than a denial of dominant values, may be the consequence of an alternative lifestyle. But it is not really the dominant values themselves which are at stake. Rather it is the social identifications which certain values permit in particular contexts that makes them, so to say, valuable.

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About the Editor and Contributors

The Editor

Dipankar Gupta is a Professor at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems in Jawaharlal Nehru University. He has also taught at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Prof. Gupta's recent publications include *Culture, Space and Nation-State* (2000) and *Interrogating Caste* (2000). He has held several overseas appointments and fellowships. He was the Lever-hulme Visiting Professor at the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics, in 2003, and Visiting Professor, Asia Chair, at the Institut D'Etudes Politiques De Paris.

The Contributors

Anuja Agrawal has been teaching at the Department of Sociology, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, since 1994. As a Commonwealth Scholar for the years 2000–01, she was a visiting research scholar at the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science. In 2002 she was awarded the Ph.D. degree for her work on the Bedias, a 'denotified' community of north India. Her research publications and interests have focused upon issues of gender identity, marginality and ideologies. She is currently editing a volume on women, work and migration in Asia.

Prem Chowdhry is Professorial fellow of the University Grants Commission at the Centre of Contemporary Studies, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti, New Delhi. She is the author of *Punjab politics: The role of Sir Chhotu Ram* (1984); *The veiled women: Shifting gender equations in rural Haryana, 1880–1990* (1994); and *Colonial India and the making of Empire cinema: Image, ideology and identity* (2000). Other publications include research articles on politics, society, culture and

gender both in colonial and contemporary India. Dr Chowdhry is currently engaged in exploring the highly contentious issue of elopements and runaway marriages in rural north India, with special attention to Haryana.

John E. Cort is Professor of Asian and Comparative Religions at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, USA. He has conducted extensive field-work on the Jains of western India, and published widely on this subject. In addition to several dozen articles, he is the author of *Jains in the world: Religious values and ideology in India* (2001), and editor of *Open Boundaries: Jain communities and cultures in India* (1998), and Kendall W. Folkert, *Scripture and tradition: Collected essays on the Jains* (1993).

Surinder S. Jodhka teaches sociology at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He had earlier taught at the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, and Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has published extensively on the subjects of agrarian change in contemporary India, and social identities. His edited book, *Community and identities: Contemporary discourses on culture and politics*, was published in 2001.

G.K. Karanth is Professor and Head of the Sociology Unit at the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore. He obtained his doctoral degree from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, under the guidance of Professor T.K. Oommen, and taught sociology in Mangalore University from 1981 to 1989. He is the author of *Rural youth* (1981); *Change and continuity in agrarian relations* (1995); *Surviving droughts* (1995); *Challenging Untouchability* (1998, co-edited with Simon Charsley); *Rejuvenating tanks* (2002, with K.V. Raju and others); and has also contributed to several professional journals and edited volumes. Currently he is working on rural livelihoods and sustainable natural resource management; use of information technology for health care delivery systems; social security needs of unorganised workers; and on child labour. He is currently the Managing Editor of the bi-annual *Journal of Social and Economic Development*.

Lucia Michelutti is an ESRC Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology and the Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics. Her research interests include caste, politics and religion in north India. More recently she has started an ethnographic comparative

project on popular democracy and charismatic leaders in India and Venezuela.

Badri Narayan is a Faculty Member, Centre for Culture, Power and Change, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, India. A Social Historian and Cultural Anthropologist, he has been Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (Shimla), Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris) and International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands. He has authored many books and articles in English and Hindi on popular culture, memory, migration, social and anthropological history, and dalit and subaltern issues of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and has also conducted national and international projects. He is a Hindi poet of national repute.

Gaurang R. Sahay is Reader at the Unit for Rural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He has a Ph.D. in Sociology from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, based on intensive fieldwork (1991–93) on rural social transformation in four villages in Buxar district, Bihar. He has published *Village studies in India: A case of Bihar* (2001), and a number of research papers on caste and the agrarian economy in rural Bihar and on agrarian mobilisation in western Uttar Pradesh, the latter interest dating from 1993 when he joined the post of Lecturer in the Janta Vedic (PG) College, Baraut (Meerut). He is currently researching on caste and politics in rural Bihar, as well as on caste inequalities in the villages of western Uttar Pradesh.

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