The Persistence of Caste Power: The Panchayats of North India

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Abstract

The institution of *panchayat*—a village or caste council or tribunal—has had an uneven trajectory in the anthropology of South Asia. Once seen as revealing much about caste, and its varied forms of power and subjugation, in India's villages, the panchayat is today largely relegated to the dustbin of history. Specifically, the panchayat is believed to have roots in the old Hindu caste order whose foundations, many argue, have nearly disintegrated in the face of modernizing forces such as the expansion of the postcolonial state and its legal system, the spread of representative democracy, the political rise of lower castes, and, more recently, the expansion of private capital in the countryside. In its place, scholars have argued, has emerged a modern form of caste, characterized less by land-based hierarchies and more by geographically expansive horizontal solidarities, or caste networks, through which caste groups compete for power and resources. While this analytical framing captures important aspects of contemporary workings of caste, it also reproduces a crude opposition between 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of caste. Against this backdrop, political events that reveal the continued social and political significance of the panchayat in the countryside are perceived through the tradition-modernity dichotomy, with panchayats framed as disappearing vestiges of a pre-democratic and hierarchical caste order.

Based on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork in rural Haryana, India, this dissertation interrogates existing understandings of caste by studying how khap panchayats of exogamous patrilineal Jat clans, the centuries-old multi-village repositories of caste power, have recalibrated and adapted to modern society. I first examine the emergence of khap panchayats as a precolonial species of power, specifically, as a multi-village framework through which a diverse set of values, practices, actors, and institutions associated with localized forms of caste authority were stitched together. These included establishing control over ancestral land and its produce, the labour of subjugated castes, the reproductive and productive labour of women, and the adjudication of disputes that threatened local caste hierarchies and political order. The ethnographic part of the dissertation studies how the authority of khap panchayats has declined in the postcolonial period, and how its leaders struggle to reproduce it across several interconnected spheres in mutually reinforcing ways. Broadly, these spheres include regulating marriage and sexuality, controlling village government, and organizing rural mobilizations to stake a claim to state resources, for instance, by demanding reservations (quota-based affirmative action).

Résumé

L'institution du *panchayat*, soit un conseil ou un tribunal de village ou de caste, a connu une trajectoire inégale en anthropologie de l'Asie du Sud. Autrefois considéré comme révélateur de la caste et de ses diverses formes de pouvoir et d'assujettissement dans les villages indiens, le panchayat est aujourd'hui largement relégué aux marges de l'histoire. Plus précisément, le panchayat serait issu d'un ancien système de castes hindou dont les fondements, selon de nombreux observateurs, auraient presque été anéantis par des processus de modernisation tels que l'expansion de l'État postcolonial et de son système juridique, la diffusion de la démocratie représentative, l'ascension politique des basses castes et, plus récemment, l'expansion du capital privé dans les campagnes. Selon les chercheurs, une forme moderne de caste aurait émergé à la place, caractérisée moins par des hiérarchies basées sur le territoire que par des solidarités horizontales ou des réseaux de caste géographiquement plus étendus, à travers lesquels les groupes de caste rivalisent pour le pouvoir et les ressources. Si ce cadre analytique permet de saisir des aspects importants du fonctionnement contemporain de la caste, il reproduit également une opposition caricaturale entre les formes 'traditionnelles' et 'modernes' de la caste. Dans ce contexte, les événements politiques qui révèlent l'importance sociale et politique persistante du panchayat dans les campagnes sont perçus à travers la dichotomie tradition-modernité, qui dépeint les panchayats comme des vestiges d'un système de caste pré-démocratique et hiérarchique.

Basée sur vingt mois de terrain ethnographique dans des régions rurales de l'Haryana, en Inde, cette thèse interroge les conceptualisations existantes de la caste en étudiant comment les khap panchayats des clans exogames patrilinéaires Jat – les institutions multi-villages séculaires détentrices du pouvoir lié de la caste – se sont recalibrés et adaptés à la société moderne. J'examine tout d'abord l'émergence des khap panchayats en tant qu'espèce précoloniale de pouvoir, plus précisément en tant que cadre multi-villageois à travers lequel un ensemble varié de valeurs, de pratiques, d'acteurs et d'institutions associés à des formes localisées d'autorité de caste ont été assemblés. Il s'agissait notamment de contrôler les terres ancestrales et leurs produits, le travail des castes assujetties, le travail reproductif et productif des femmes, et l'arbitrage des litiges qui menaçaient la hiérarchie des castes locales et l'ordre politique. La partie ethnographique de la thèse analyse la manière dont l'autorité des khap panchayats a décliné au cours de la période postcoloniale et comment ses dirigeants s'efforcent de la reproduire dans plusieurs sphères interconnectées qui se renforcent mutuellement. De manière générale, ces sphères comprennent la régulation du mariage et de la sexualité, le contrôle du gouvernement municipal et l'organisation de mobilisations rurales pour revendiquer les ressources de l'État.

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List of Abbreviations

ABJASS: Akhil Bharatiya Jat Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti (All-India Jat Committee for the Reservations Struggle)

BJP: Bharatiya Janta Party

BKU: Bhartiya Kisan Union

INC: Indian National Congress

PRI: Panchayati Raj Institutions

The final words of thanks are reserved for my family, without whose unwavering support this dissertation would not have seen the light of day. Vikas, my brother, Anupam, my sister-in-law, and Kamlesh, my mother, have been supportive and affectionate, especially in moments when my enthusiasm was flagging. I give credit to Ved Parkash Rathee, my father, for first inspiring my interest in the rural world of northern India through a vast storehouse of personal stories based on his childhood and youth, which recounted in vivid details the pre-Green Revolution villages of Haryana. Specifically, his stories delved into material struggles of peasant and non-peasant families in the village, the significance of close-knit kinship and caste networks, and more broadly, various features of land-based dominance and subjugation.

Introduction

This anthropological study examines the making of the Jats as arguably the most dominant peasant caste in the present-day state of Haryana, India. The story of Jat power I explore covers the past two centuries—it starts in the late precolonial period, traverses through the British era, and then ends in the postcolonial present. Though my dissertation focuses on the territory encompassed in the contemporary state of Haryana, the logics of Jat power I examine also apply to other Jat-dominated regions of northern India, especially Delhi, Punjab, and western Uttar Pradesh, which have historically shared the same land tenurial system, namely, the Mahalwari.

I

The Problem

That the Jats, a caste group internally segmented into numerous patrilineal clans (*got*), are arguably the most dominant landowning caste in Haryana and its neighbouring regions is a widely accepted sociological "fact" among students of South Asia.[1] In fact, a small body of literature has already paid attention to key attributes of Jat dominance. This includes works by historians like Chowdhry (1984) and Datta (1999), by anthropologists and sociologists like Lewis (1958), Miller (1975), Pradhan (1966), Gupta (1997), Sahai (2015), and Jeffery (2010), and by political scientists and economists like Jaffrelot (2002), Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan (2020), and Deshpande & Ramachandran (2017). Mindful of this, my project from the start was not about gathering more ethnographic evidence to arrive at an already well-established conclusion, namely, that the Jats are a powerful caste group. Instead, my interests lay in learning about the politico-juridical institution of Jat *panchayat*, or what is more popularly known as the *khap panchayat*, a centuries-old multi-village organizational framework of clan councils among the

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[1] The Jats have historically settled in the vast agrarian belt of northern and north-western India, which extends from Punjab and Rajasthan to the western part of Uttar Pradesh (UP). In addition to the Jats, other landowning caste groups like the Rajputs, Ahirs, Gujars, and Meos have wielded similar forms of caste power in this region but over much smaller territories.

Jats.[2] Specifically, I wanted to understand both historical and contemporary aspects of the relationship between Jat power and the khap panchayat. Following this line of inquiry has led me to critically reflect on various anthropological conceptualization of caste power and dominance as they have been deployed by different scholars. I contend that certain key manifestations of Jat power—especially those formed through centuries-old linkages between caste, kinship, gender, and landownership—have been rather peripheral to earlier accounts. In this dissertation, therefore, I study these historically constituted logics of Jat power by paying attention to both the past and present of the khap panchayat, especially with regard to its relationship with colonial and postcolonial statecraft and law.

In contemporary northern India, the Jats have retained several features of their precolonial clan organization. Broadly, each Jat clan has an ancestral territory called *khap*, which is internally disaggregated into multi-village clusters of varying size (Bayly 1999:37; Gupta 1997:41-44; Madsen 1991:353-354). The villages in which a Jat clan has settled have historically organized themselves into a clan council called the khap panchayat. Every Jat clan has a headman (*chaudhari*), who leads its khap panchayat along with a small nucleus of elders called *panch*. Apart from the Jats, other dominant landowning castes like the Rajputs, Ahirs, Meos, Gujars, have had similarly structured political and territorial organization represented by their respective caste and clan councils called the panchayat. For example, in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, Cohn (1959:81) noted how the locally dominant Rajputs of Dhobi Tappa—a tract of land comprising about one hundred villages—had a formal clan-based panchayat that was organized along their twelve lineage segments. Likewise, Aggarwal (1971:18-31) studied the traditional multi-village political organization among the Meos of the Mewat region in southern Haryana. He observed how individual Meo villages were internally clustered into a multi-

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[2] On the ground, the khap panchayat among the Jats exist in form of inter- and intra-village networks. Mostly, the Jats use the term 'panchayat' for its intra-village avatar, and 'khap panchayat' while speaking of its inter-village networks. To avoid confusion, throughout this dissertation, I use the term khap panchayat to refer to both its intra- and inter-village forms.

village unit called *thama*, which was, in turn, part of a much broader unit of *pal*, i.e., ancestral territory of a clan. Historically, these multi-village units have been organized into various gradients of lineage and clan panchayat (Aggarwal 1971; Moore 1998).

In this dissertation, I study the khap panchayat of the Jats as historical repositories or frameworks through which a diverse range of values, practices, actors, and institutions associated with caste, kinship, landownership, and power were stitched together. In precolonial and colonial periods, Jat clans, who settled villages over their clan territories, participated in local and regional state systems, controlled the land, its produce, the reproductive and productive labour of women, as well as the agrarian and artisanal labour of subjugated castes, and lastly, adjudicated disputes that threatened local caste hierarchies and political order of the village or the region. In post-Independence period, however, the power and authority exercised by these centuries-old multi-village frameworks suffered from much decline, primarily because of an increased penetration of the postcolonial state, its modern legal system, and its apparatuses of governmentality in the countryside, and more recently, by the expansion of private neoliberal economy. My dissertation examines how the khap panchayat has recalibrated and adapted to various sites of its postcolonial decline.

The topic of the khap panchayat has figured only minimally in writings on the Jats and their dominant position in agrarian northern India. Anthropological studies have long identified political (access to state power and its resources), economic (landownership), ideological (notions of caste superiority), and educational (level of formal education and employment) moorings of Jat power as existing somewhere else, for instance, in the realm of rural political economy (Gupta 1997; Jeffery & Lerche 2000; Jeffrey 2010, Lewis 1958; Sahai 2015). This has resulted in a general overlooking of the khap panchayat in anthropological accounts of Jat power. I argue this has much to do with the enduring

legacy of 'the dominant caste,' a concept first articulated by M.N. Srinivas and later adopted by innumerable anthropologists and sociologists of South Asia.

Originally, the dominant caste, along with other concepts developed by Srinivas like 'village solidarity,' were inspired by British structural-functionalism. They later gained popularity among anthropologists of South Asia via 'village studies,' a genre of ethnographic analysis that flourished from the 1950s to 1970s. For Srinivas (1955:8), a "caste may be said to be 'dominant' when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low." Broadly, Srinivas described the status of the dominant caste in terms of economic dominance supplied by landownership and the group's ability to access state power and its resources.[3] However, he seldom studied how logics of caste power and dominance were historically produced in the first place (Witsoe 2018). Not surprisingly, his contemporaries like Cohn (1965, 1987), Dube (1968), and Oommen (1970) criticized this dominant caste argument on several counts, most prominently its alleged ahistoricism.[4] Yet, as Mendelsohn (1993:806) noted, up until the 1990s, Srinivas' conception of the dominant caste "proved remarkably resilient and represent[ed] something of an orthodoxy."

In post-Independence village studies, the khap panchayat, and other similar kinship- and territory-based units of caste, were sidelined for two broad reasons. First, the concept of the dominant caste was mostly deployed within the territorial context of a single village, the defining feature of the framework of village studies, so ethnographers confined their fieldwork to one village. As a result, anthropologists studying Jat villages have merely alluded to the multi-village networks of the khap

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[3] To this definition, Srinivas (1959) later added other attributes of dominance, such as, access to modern education and government jobs.
[4] Cohn (1987) criticized village studies for its ahistorical foundations. He had earlier noted that Srinivas's concept was inapplicable in situations where a single locus of authority in form of the dominant caste could not be identified as power was shared between two or more castes in the village (Cohn 1965). Alternatively, as Dube (1968) and Mayer (1960) had pointed out, power may not be vested with the entire caste but only among a select few.

panchayat but have seldom placed it at the centre of their ethnographic inquiries.[5] For example, in his study of Rampura, a Jat village on the outskirts of Delhi, Lewis (1958:29-30) noted in passing that the village was also nested in a "multi-village…organizational structure," which was locally known as *beesgama*—a collection of twenty villages that was, in turn, disaggregated into smaller village-clusters held by the Dabas Jat clan. Likewise, while studying Badipur, a Jat village in Jhajjar, Haryana, Miller (1975:24) observed that the village belonged to a multi-village khap panchayat that was led by the Chahar clan but also included a few Ahir and Gujar villages. His analysis of the khap panchayat, however, did not extend beyond this mere observation.

Dumont and Pocock (1957) have underlined how basic assumptions undergirding Srinivas's concept of the dominant caste, along with the framework of village studies he championed, were borrowed from British structural-functionalism, an anthropological school that bore close affinity with colonial forms of knowledge. For example, the notion of the dominant caste drew heavily on ideas about dominant lineages developed by British Africanists.[6] Similarly, Cohn (1987:200-223) noted how most early anthropologists working in India, including Srinivas, adopted British Africanists' penchant for studying closed units, such as the village, that had fixed boundaries and where patterned relationships between groups (i.e., social structures) existed to preserve the proverbial social order. In this way, the unit of the village came to occupy centre stage in the anthropological imagination of India as an enclosed physical space where inter-caste relations and associated forms of power produced what Srinivas (1955) termed village solidarity. Among other things, this framing of villages in India both

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[5] *The Political System of the Jats* (1966) by M.C. Pradhan is the sole exception to this. The book, however, remained shrouded in controversy as Pradhan included some evidently forged letters attributed to historical figures like the Maratha general Sadāśiva Rāo (Chowdhry 2007 Guha 2013).

[6] It is of interest to note that Srinivas completed his PhD in Social Anthropology from Oxford University under the supervision of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, the two leading patriarchs of British structural-functionalism.

drew on and reproduced the colonial idea of the Indian village as a self-sufficient and harmonious totality (Inden 1990; Mines and Yazgi 2010).

The second important aspect of scholarship on the Jats is that anthropologists have tended to pigeonhole the khap panchayat into a timeless and static conception of 'tradition.' As noted by Deshpande (2003), the proclivity among anthropologists to view tradition as a static backdrop to the unfolding of state-led modernization was the result of the advent of 'modernization' as an overarching theme for research in social science in India (Deshpande 2003:63). Beginning in the 1950s, modernization studies, a US-sponsored multi-disciplinary academic project, aimed to understand how newly-independent nations of South Asia, among other formerly colonized regions, were transitioning from traditional to modern social forms. In the context of post-Independence India, anthropologists and sociologists alike started to inquire into how various aspects of social change, e.g., the agrarian (land reforms, expansion of networks of irrigation canals, the start of Green Revolution), the political (the advent of democracy, including at the village level), the economic (the entry of market economy and rise in non-farm employment opportunities), the educational (building of new schools and colleges), among others, were reshaping villages in India. Anthropological studies exploring these state-led pathways of modernization complimented and supported basic assumptions of village studies.

Legacies of such scholarly trends have been so enduring that even a recent article by Gaurav Sahay, an Indian sociologist of caste, described the khap panchayat as a "traditional institution" that "maintain[s] social order and solidarity" through the application of "positive and negative sanctions" (Sahay 2015: 235-6). Similar anthropological formulations have been deployed by others, for instance, by Gupta (1997) and Ramakumar (2016) who explored at the role of the khap panchayat in the context of agrarian politics and spread of Hindu majoritarianism in northern India. Gupta (1997:157), for

instance, held that the institution of the khap panchayat has become "moribund"; Ramakumar (2016:6) views it as performing "only marginal functions." Their approaches can be viewed as an extension of a much older concern in anthropology, i.e., how order was maintained in so-called stateless societies, the originary inquiry of British structural-functionalism (Evans-Pritchard 1940). In this way, the khap panchayat has been configured as anterior to administrative and economic rationality, as well as forms of authority associated with the modern state, the key driver of modernization projects. Such accounts have accomplished what Fabian (1983) famously termed a 'denial of coevalness,' or what Banerjee (2006) called 'politics of time.' The politico-juridical institution of the khap panchayat is denied contemporaneity as it is inserted in temporal frames (the tradition-modernity dichotomy) other than the one occupied by the ethnographer and their audience. Within this framing, it becomes conceptually accessible to the ethnographer only as a remnant or vestige of static tradition, which will either disintegrate with more modernization or, if preserved, will become an inert feature of caste.

Ethnographic research is especially well-suited to counter such limiting and one-sided analyses of the khap panchayat. When I began my fieldwork in November 2015, I therefore started by spending time in various Jat-dominated villages of Haryana, specifically, among Jat elders called panch who regulate the workings of the khap panchayat. In what follows, I briefly outline certain key themes and problems that frame this dissertation.

Governance of marriage and sexuality

Over the past few decades, the khap panchayat and its leaders have made headlines for their complicity, if not direct participation, in cases of honor killings of young couples who transgressed Jat codes of marriage based on principles of endogamy (the Jats must marry within the same caste) and exogamy (Jat marriage is disallowed within certain proximate degrees of kinship) (Gupta 2010; Kapila

2022:25-48; Thapar-Björkert 2014). In addition, the khap panchayat has been central to the governance of Jat norms and practices of marriage and sexuality in another way, i.e., by processing domestic disputes through male-dominated customary procedures of adjudication. Studying this domain entails investigating norms and practices of Jat descent and marriage (structural kinship), customary techniques of their enforcement by the khap panchayat, and, as a result, the contentious relationship they enter into with the state, its agents, and more broadly, its legal system (Chowdhry 2007; Ahlawat 2012; Srinivasan 2020).

At the start of this project, I was keen to reflect on the nature of public scandal that takes shape once cases of honor killings, as well as suicides/attempted suicides by married women (mostly victims of domestic violence), come to light.[7] In particular, I was struck by how the scandal of an honor killing was defined in two remarkably different ways. For the perpetrators, together with their caste supporters, the scandal culminated in the act of killing of the transgressive couple, but it was originally constituted by what had preceded the killing, namely, the breach of caste norms of marriage.[8] On the other hand, for others, especially the mass-media publics constituted through television and print news, the scandal lay in the act of killing itself. It stymied the individual's right to marriage by choice promised by two constitutional laws in postcolonial India, namely, the Special Marriage Act 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 (Mody 2008). Also, by exercising physical violence or the threat thereof, the khap panchayat, and its leaders, engaged in private vengeance, thereby challenging the state's sovereign order and its impersonal monopoly of violence (Weber 1978).

Though while writing this dissertation, I focused less on honor killing and more on adjudication of domestic disputes in the khap panchayat, this line of ethnographic inquiry has nonetheless enabled

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[7] Cases of honor killings and suicide/attempted suicide are typically hidden—first within the family and then at the level of the village. Consequently, only some cases are able to break through village localism (Chaudhry 2014).
[8] Jat leaders heading the khap panchayat may not publicly defend honor killings carried out by Jat families, but they do not shy away from claiming their right (*adhikar*) to enforce customary marriage practices among the Jats.

me to critically interrogate the idea of caste dominance, which, in my view, has relied rather too heavily on economic, cultural, and political indices of Jat power. An ethnographic focus on village networks of the male-dominated khap panchayat, and how its leaders reserve the cultural right to govern and administer norms of marriage and sexuality (of the women in particular), brings into bold relief the gendered character of Jat power. Anthropological studies of kinship have already shown how structures of caste power and privilege are reproduced through endogamous marriages that enable male control of women's reproductive and productive labour in domestic contexts (Uberoi 1993; Chowdhry 2007; Rao 2009). Also, as noted by Chowdhry (2007), it is the affront to the notion of male honor (*izzat*) constituted by transgressions of Jat rules of marriage and sexuality, especially by the women, which has produced an array of practices of patriarchal violence, among which honor killings have received the most public attention. In this way, an anthropological focus on gendered dimensions of Jat power not only expands the analytical lens through which to examine caste dominance, but it also puts the politico-juridical institution of the khap panchayat at the centre of ethnographic analysis of Jat power. Lastly, it is important to add that patriarchal violence 'provoked' by both inter-caste unions, as well as Jat marriage disputes, also emanates from male insecurities concerning alienation of land in the wake of the Hindu Succession Act 2005, which granted women an equal right to inherit ancestral property (Chowdhry 2007; Choudhry 2021). In sum, by focusing my research on caste governance of marriage and sexuality, I was able to ask how Jat marriage disputes, and inter-caste marriages, threaten male Jat landholdings and other gendered configurations of caste privilege.

In cases of marriage disputes, as well as inter-caste unions, Jat women are exposed to varied forms of patriarchal violence ranging from physical beatings and torture to kidnapping and killing. I study how women's bodies are subjected to competing discourses of legality and justice. Put simply, a wide spectrum of patriarchal figures like the father, agnatic uncles, and brothers, and even leaders of the khap panchayat, were able to collude with local state, especially the police and the lower-level judiciary,

to uphold caste codes of male honor (*izzat*). As recent works by Srinivasan (2020), Mody (2008), and Chowdhry (2007) have outlined, this is an ethnographically messy terrain wherein the boundary separating local law and state law becomes blurry as police officers, lawyers, public prosecutors, and trial judges affirm localized notions of patriarchal control over women's bodies often in violation of constitutional law. This line of inquiry draws on a strand of feminist scholarship that has brought into bold relief how state law, especially concerning rape, kidnapping, and abduction, may normalize physical and sexual violence against women (Das 1996; Mody 2008; Baxi 2014). By state law I refer to its two dimensions: first, how a patriarchal logic may be inbuilt in the letter of the law; and second, how the law's institutional avatars—e.g., the police and lower-level judiciary—may apply it in the service of patriarchal authority. At a broader level, this line of inquiry reveals how the khap panchayat, and its leaders, are resisting the liberal work of state laws that disrupt caste-based norms and practices of marriage and sexuality, as well as gendered patterns of landownership and inheritance.

Territory and violence

Apart from its gendered character, I study another manifestation of Jat power that has been closely associated with the khap panchayat but is not easily comprehensible through the conventional anthropological lens of caste dominance. This modality of Jat power coalesces around three broad coordinates—territory (it unfolds in local and regional spheres of politics), violence (it assumes violent forms), and numbers (it depends on the capacity to assemble male caste bodies). More specifically, I examine to how various networks of the khap panchayat are able to mobilize Jat clansmen in large numbers to sway an array of political issues in their favor. Their tactics include holding a series of caste assemblies also known as panchayat, and the much bigger *maha-panchayat*, which are attended by thousands, and in some cases even hundreds and thousands of Jat clansmen. In these enormous caste assemblies, Jat leaders discuss contentious issues and, in many cases, mobilize members to pressurize

the state. There is a broad spectrum of issues around which Jat mobilizations typically cohere, such as, inter-caste rivalries, agrarian policies, state laws pertaining to marriage and inheritance, the reservations policy (quota-based affirmative action).

Through such massive caste assemblies, Jat leaders demonstrate their caste's power in two broad ways. First, the sheer volume of participants is physically imposing within the host region, and results in the blocking of many of its territorial pathways, such as, arterial roadways and railway routes. Second, the assemblies contain a latent threat of violence not only against the state, its officials, and its physical infrastructure, but also against rival or subjugated caste groups. Srinivas (1987:6) recognized this modality of caste power as "a tradition of violence" and Dumont (1980:161) termed it "brute force." Importantly, for Srinivas, this tradition of violence is a remnant of pre-British political systems whose lower levels were marked by constant warfare serving as opportunities for local chiefs from dominant castes to rise in regional political hierarchies. In this framework, caste power is not only localized— i.e., it coheres in a multi-village territorial framework—but it is also contingent on whether a caste group can showcase "strength of numbers" (Srinivas 1987:6). Public articulations of this modality of Jat caste power may be episodic, but they are invariably spectacular in nature, thereby becoming important nodes—points around which public memory may coalesce—in local narratives of violence.

Excerpts from my fieldnotes from two brief trips to Jat-dominated villages of Ramayana and Mayad in Hisar, Haryana in February and March 2012 help illustrate these points. I had visited these villages to observe how the Jats had assembled under the banner of the *sarv khap panchayat*, a conglomeration of different networks of the khap panchayat, to blockade important rail and road routes as part of their campaign to pressure the state to include the Jats of Haryana in the reservations system (quota-based affirmative action).

February 27, 2012

This is my first trip to Jat villages of district Hisar, Haryana. For the past two days, I have been travelling from Hisar city, where I spend the night at a men's hostel, to villages of Ramayan and Mayad in the countryside. Large groups of Jat men have been camping on rail tracks that pass through the lands of these two contiguous Jat villages. Depending on the occasion, their numbers may oscillate from fifty to a thousand. They have been sitting here since February 20. Similar blockades have been erected on rail tracks passing through other districts of Haryana like Bhiwani, Jind, Fatehabad. These activities are coordinated by various networks of the khap panchayat strung together as Akhil Bharatiya Jat Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti (ABJASS), an umbrella group established to demand reservations from the Haryana government. For this visit, Arvind (a pseudonym) served as my point person. Through him, I met with different leaders of the khap panchayat, along with several ordinary Jat farmers.

As Jat men lay siege to rail tracks in Ramayan and Mayad, a group of Jat leaders are in talks with the state government of Haryana. These talks have exposed deep-rooted factionalism among the khap panchayat of various Jat clans. While one faction is in favor of withdrawing these protests, the rival faction wants to continue. Both factions accuse each other of many wrongdoings. Jat men blocking railway lines in Ramayan and Mayad have decided to continue with their protest.

By using tactics like blocking railways and highways, the Jats are able to enter into a dialogue with high-ranking state bureaucrats and elected politicians. This is not a one-off event. Exactly the same script played out last year when a faction of the khap panchayat had laid siege to a locality of the Jind district for 14 days in March 2011. The Jats lifted the blockades when Bhupinder Singh Hooda, the then Chief Minister of Haryana, promised to constitute a formal committee to include the Jats in the reservations structure. Similarly, in September 2010, blockades were erected near Mayad and Ramayana villages. A violent confrontation between local police and protestors erupted when the former tried to remove Jat blockades from highway connecting Delhi to Hisar. Sunil Sheoran, a young Jat protestor, died when the police fired on the protesters. His death immediately 'provoked' widespread public violence and rioting by the Jats. Roadways in different parts of Haryana were blocked and multiple state-run buses and government buildings in Hisar were damaged or torched. The Jat protestors I spoke with in Ramayan and Mayad recall these scenes in an emotional register. Repeated

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articulations of these past events in Jat panchayat and maha-panchayat infuse strength (shakti) and unity (ekta) among the caste group.

These mobilizations are mostly rural. First, the blocking of railways and roadways is organized in the countryside where the Jats own most village lands and thus constitute the local dominant caste. Second, most Jat men mobilized to participate in these events are farmers living in villages. Though networks of the khap panchayat mostly enjoy a rural base, they also organize massive maha-panchayat in various cities and towns. These maha-panchayat are attended by Jat farmers in larger numbers who arrive in their tractors (towing trollies) grinding townships to a halt. Visually, the scene is striking. Hundreds of tractor-trollies filled with Jat men (each trolly typically holds around 20 men) heading towards the panchayat venue in a serpentine queue (almost like a military cavalcade). The tractors are fitted with loudspeakers from which the farmers blast folk songs (ragini). In this way, Jat farmers appropriate not merely the physical space of the township but also its sonic landscape. Earlier this year, I was at a Jat maha-panchayat in Gohana, Sonipat, that was attended by around six to seven thousand Jats.

<u>March 14, 2012</u>

Incredible events have unfolded over the past week. On March 4, when I last went to the rail tracks of Mayad and Ramayan, the site of Jat protest, Arvind and others told me an agreement might soon be reached between the state government of Haryana and Jat leaders. The following account is based on what I could piece together after having spoken with Arvind and many other Jat protestors.

On March 6, between 3:00-5:00 am, Haryana police, along with Rapid Action Force (RAF), a para-military unit, arrived at the site of protest to swoop away Jat protestors while they were asleep. Their tents were uprooted and protestors (in various accounts I have heard, their numbers vary between 50-200) were beaten up and chased away. Soon after, the Jats regrouped in the neighbouring Ladwa village. Ladwa has acquired a symbolic significance in this Jat-dominated multi-village locality. Sunil Sheoran, the Jat protestor who had died on September 13, 2010, hailed from here. From Ladwa, an emotional appeal was made by local Jat leaders to regroup and reoccupy the rail tracks in Ramayan. A

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narrative outlining how police brutality was inflicted on Jat protestors was stitched together and circulated widely. Messages were sent out to other Jat villages in the vicinity. Around noon, as protestors marched towards Ramayan, their numbers swelled as thousands of Jat men from neighbouring villages joined. About 3000-4000 Jat men had gathered. They were armed with stones, agricultural tools, and even pistols.

Upon seeing a sea of Jat men heading towards rail tracks, the police used water cannons and fired tear gas shells to disperse them. In response, the Jats hurled stones at the police. Soon, the conflict intensified as Sandeep Kadwasra, a Jat youth from village Mayad, died after being hit by a bullet. The Jats eventually reoccupied the rail tracks of Ramayan. Afterwards, Jat leaders, along with Sandeep's father, refused to cremate Sandeep's body. It was instead placed in what was called an air-conditioned coffin on the rail tracks. Among Hindus, the body is customarily cremated just a few hours after the death. The decision to not cremate carried tremendous symbolic valence and became a rallying point that encouraged the Jats to continue protesting. Like Sunil in 2010, Sandeep was also declared a martyr (shahid) and his sacrifice (balidaan) for the caste was publicized. His body was eventually cremated yesterday (March 13) after another round of promises from the state government to grant reservations to the Jats.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Spectacular qualities of Jat power are writ large over these events. As these entries from my field-diary show, the Jats gathered in large numbers under the umbrella of the sarv khap panchayat to ask for a greater share in state resources by demanding inclusion in the state's reservations system. The Jats made this demand not only by laying siege to a territory but also by repelling attempts by the state and its coercive arms to disperse them. Moreover, the ensuing drama of non-cremation of the dead body of a protestor reveals how Jat politics unfolds not merely through direct political action but also through symbolism that fosters sentiments of caste unity (*ekta*) and strength (*shakti*). Among other things, these excerpts also reveal how such public displays of caste dominance (*shakti-pradarshan*) are

able to crystallize across various territorial levels—the village, the multi-village, and the local and regional.

The obvious factor underpinning this territorial character of Jat power is the status of Jat farmers as landowners. By focusing on the fact of Jat landownership, I want to highlight not so much the economic benefits that Jat farmers have accrued from it. The events described above call attention to a slightly different inflection of Jat power stemming from landownership, which draws on how land is perceived as an unbroken ancestral territory jointly owned by a kin body of Jat clansmen. I have earlier noted how the Jats are internally distributed into numerous patrilineal clans, each of which spans over a multi-village locality (Pradhan 1966). Throwing light on this pattern of multi-village Jat settlement, Madsen (1991:353) writes, "the ideal Jat landscape thus consists of clan territories each containing a large number of villages acknowledging a historical head village of the clan." Historical constitution of Jat power, and its relationship with the khap panchayat, must be considered in light of such centuries-old entanglements between caste, kinship, landownership, and power.[9]

The khap panchayat, and its leaders, have also been in the news for their role in instances of caste violence, especially against the landless Dalits, a modern self-emancipatory identity adopted by the former untouchable castes in India. Even as recently as the 1990s, anti-Dalit violence was perpetrated by dominant castes in nearly all regions of India (Bhatia 1999; Illaiah *et al.* 1991; Rao 2009). Importantly, many instances of caste violence targeting Dalits in Haryana do not get reported to local police as victims are often prevented from registering complaints or pressured to withdraw them through an array of coercive tactics sanctioned by the khap panchayat. This lends a double character to caste violence: it is not only inflicted by members of a dominant group (often with impunity) within

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[9] Given this, it is unsurprising that each village is publicly recognized not only by its official name, but also by the title of the caste group controlling its village lands, e.g., '*jatan ka gaam*' (It's a Jat village). This metonymic relationship between a territory and the name of landowning caste indexes historical logics of Jat power I draw on.

the bounds of the village, but any attempt at delocalizing the conflict by the Dalits (for instance, by appealing to state law for redress or by approaching supra-local networks of Dalit activists) risks 'provoking' another spurt of caste violence (Rao 2009). As in cases of honor killings, leaders of the khap panchayat may not physically participate in acts of caste violence, but they lend public support to perpetrators by arranging legal aid or by raising money through caste-based donations. Two recent examples of anti-Dalit violence in Haryana illustrate these points.

In 2005, a local khap panchayat was reported to have incited the Jats to target Dalits from the Balmiki caste in retaliation for the murder of a Jat youth in the town of Gohana, Sonipat, Haryana. This produced a spectacular theater of caste violence, which included but was not limited to setting about 55 to 60 Dalit houses on fire by an armed mob of 1500 to 2000 Jat men who had congregated in Gohana from the surrounding Jat-dominated villages.[10] The violence lasted from August 27 to 31 and is reported to have received support from local police, resulting in a mass exodus of Dalit families. Later, a sarv khap panchayat was held where Jat leaders publicly articulated their demands of the state, one of them being the dropping of criminal charges against Jat men who were booked for violence and arson. Likewise, in 2010, a congregation of twelve khap panchayats blocked a national highway (*rasta roko*), along with a cluster of local roads and an inter-state railway line, for eleven days after 98 Jat men were arrested for burning an entire Dalit neighbourhood in village Mirchpur, Hisar, Haryana. Again, by congregating in large numbers to lay siege to a sub-region and block its territorial pathways, leaders of the khap panchayat coerced democratically elected leaders and senior bureaucrats to negotiate with them and make promises that be or may not eventually may be fulfilled.

These two examples are paradigmatic in that they delineate certain key logics of anti-Dalit Jat violence—what the Dalits call 'Jat's tyranny' (*Jat ka zulum*). Most notably, they show how village

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[10] See https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article30188052.ece and https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/the-shame-of-haryana/228490; accessed on May 5, 2022.

networks of the khap panchayat demonstrated their power by assaulting Dalits and then congregating in large numbers to oppose police arrests of their caste brethren. Criticism of such events, especially by city-based liberal publics, typically feature strong moral overtones: the Jats, and the institution of the khap panchayat, get accused of moral bankruptcy for inflicting violence against marginalized groups, breaching the rule of law, and publicizing false narratives to justify their violence. However, others trained in this modality of caste politics may read the situation differently, perhaps more as a political strategy best understood in terms of legal pluralism, i.e., co-existence of two or more distinct but also overlapping legal orders. The Dalits approach state law for redressal as victims of caste violence, a process that is in itself shrouded in uncertainty as dominant groups like the Jats exercise their clout over local state (Jeffrey 2000, 2010), whereas the Jats initiate negotiation with the state by assembling in large numbers, thereby approaching state law not from a position of victimhood but that of strength. Not surprisingly, in their demands made to the state, which included release of Jat men from police custody, they seek to undo legal implications of delocalization of caste violence.

Haryana's countryside is also dotted with a slew of other forms of caste violence which are no less brutal and oppressive than largescale episodes of violence, but that are often unable to break through the localism of a single village. They include public beatings, armed assaults and lynching, rape and murder of Dalit girls and women, caste boycotts, and imposition of spatial constraints like prohibiting the Dalits from using a source of water or disallowing them from gathering green fodder for their cattle, among others (Jodhka & Dhar 2003; Jeffrey 2010).

Historical logics of caste power

From the start, my interest in studying these logics of Jat power, whose public articulations oscillate from the infliction of caste and patriarchal violence to anti-state protest, exceeded a simple ethnographic tracing of 'functions' of the khap panchayat, i.e., what they do and do not do. Instead,

by foregrounding these inflections of Jat power, my wider aim was to not merely focus on instances of its manifestation in the countryside, but to also inquire into its embeddedness in a broad historically constituted terrain comprising of overlapping relations of caste, kinship, landownership, and power.

To tap into these historical logics of Jat power, and their performances through the khap panchayat, I turned to post-Independence classic ethnographies of South Asia. Since the 1980s, anthropologists of South Asia have critically revaluated older anthropological literature and its concepts, including the framework of village studies (Cohn 1987; Fuller & Spencer 1990; Inden 1990), caste (Appadurai 1988; Dirks 2001), the *jajmani* system (Fuller 1989; Mayer 1993), and kingship (Appadurai 1981; Dirks 1987; Inden 1990; Price 1996). This vein of scholarship has brought into bold relief how several of the earlier anthropological models and concepts were undergirded by colonial forms of knowledge. It also highlighted how much of what was counted as 'tradition' in India had, in fact, taken shape during the colonial period (Fuller 1977; Dirks 1987, 2001).[11] For instance, it was noted that the proverbial Indian village—understood by both colonial administrators and early anthropologists alike as a self-sufficient and harmonious functional totality—was to a considerable extent a product of the colonial encounter. This gave birth to a scholarly commitment to decolonize anthropological knowledge. As part of this decolonization project, however, contemporary anthropology of South Asia has ended up sidelining many topics from its scholarly repertoire, such as the village and the multi-village territorial framework, along with a wide array of attendant concepts to study caste and its various dimensions, a development also noted by Breman *et al.* (1997), Shah (2002, 2005), Madan (2002), Mines and Yazgi (2010), among others.

In my view, the zeal to decolonize anthropological knowledge may have given rise to a new problem: a refusal to engage with the earlier anthropological scholarship by dismissing it in a wholesale fashion

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[11] Fuller (1977:107), for example, wrote, "I submit that what anthropologists are prone to call 'traditional India' is, in fact, British India."

for reproducing colonial frameworks. What gets glossed over as part of such blanket dismissals is the internal diversity of scholarly positions in early anthropological scholarship. For instance, though village studies was the most dominant anthropological framework between 1950s and 1970s, it was nonetheless resisted by many anthropologists of that period. Dumont and Pocock (1957), for example, criticized Srinivas for privileging the unit of the village as the territorial framework for conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Like anthropologists of the present, they pointed out how Srinivas imported concepts from British structural-functionalism and colonial frameworks. Also, the idea of the 'little kingdom', which was conceived as a multi-village caste and clan territory by Cohn (1959, 1962), and later developed as a broader framework to examine Hindu kingship by Dirks (1987), represents another strand of resistance not only to Srinivas-inspired village studies but also to Dumontian theory of caste. In sum, the critical distance that has emerged between contemporary and early anthropological scholarship is vital but must not obviate older ethnographic insights. In this dissertation, I attempt to suture this gap by drawing on both early and contemporary bodies of anthropological literature, along with historical scholarship on northern India, to study the logics of Jat power I have highlighted.

From earlier anthropological studies, I have drawn on a different genealogy of caste power and dominance. This genealogy is composed of certain anthropological coordinates—both theoretical concepts and ethnographic insights—which throw light on historical logics of Jat power I am at pains to work out. Perhaps ironically, I found Srinivas's idea of how dominant landed castes wielded not only strength in numbers but also a tradition of violence instructive. This drew my attention to how the territorial character of caste dominance, as suggested by Srinivas, is a legacy of pre-British political systems.[12] Also, I found Cohn's (1959, 1962) concept of the little kingdom—how patrilineal descent

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[12] Importantly, this line of inquiry was explored by Srinivas in his later years and was a product of revisions he had undertaken of his earlier village studies works in light of a long queue of criticism coming from Dumont (1957, 1966,

groups control a multi-village territorial domain—applicable to the study of the khap panchayat of the Jats.

Dumont's insights on kinship and its entanglements with the multi-village territorial framework has been useful too (Dumont 1980). For instance, instead of the village, Dumont & Pocock (1957) and Dumont (1980:152-166) argued, relations of caste and kinship that extend over a multi-village locality must be at the centre of sociological reflection in India. A similar view was articulated by other anthropologists like Miller (1954), Mayer (1960), and Bailey (1963). Bailey (1963:108), for instance, noted the presence of multi-village caste territories that he called "blocks" within which relations of caste and kinship were structured. With respect to my own research, these older ethnographies on caste, kinship and territory enabled me to do two things. First, they offered me a conceptual vocabulary emerging from specific ethnographic cases to help me move beyond the territorial unit of the village to analyze the khap panchayat as an organizational framework that had crystallized through territorial segmentation of patrilineal clans of the Jats. Second, it prompted me to reflect on how the khap panchayat may exemplify a much wider pan-Indian political structure, whose origins, as suggested by Srinivas and Cohn, lie in pre-British polities.

Another anthropological formulation that has enabled me to effectively explore Jat power is how dominant landowning castes have historically drawn on indigenous notions of kingly sovereignty to establish power and influence through a land-based system of patronage, commonly referred to as the *jajmani* system. Replication of royal functions of the Hindu king enabled locally dominant groups to govern their locales of caste power also through *kshatriya* (kingly/warrior) traditions of armed conflict. The kingly idiom of authority and how it configured relations of caste was termed by Srinivas (1987:6) as "the royal model" and by Mayer (1960) as the "warrior tradition." Dumont (1980:162) too noted

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1980), Dube (1968), and Oommen (1970), among others, for presenting a static and unchanging portrayal of villages of India.

"a homology between the function of dominance at the village level and the royal function at the level of the larger territory."[13] Likewise, Raheja (1988b) studied how the landowning Gujars replicated royal functions of the king in the village of Pahansu, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh. In Haryana, the Jats are addressed by locally popular titles like *illaqe ke malik* ('lords of the countryside') and *gaon ke rajah* ('kings of the village') (Tiemann 1970:168; Madsen 1991:352). These titles reveal how the Jats have historically deployed and built on indigenous notions of kingly sovereignty. These anthropological perspectives enabled me to envision caste not as a village-centered hierarchical order with the Brahman at the top, but as a politico-ritual organization with the king or the dominant landed caste at the center of a wider political system (Dirks 1987; Raheja 1988b).

A final strand of early anthropological scholarship that explored how caste power and dominance is constituted through various sites of legal pluralism prevailing in the countryside also enabled me to apprehend key juridical features of the khap panchayat. More specifically, this body of socio-legal studies analyzed how dominant landowning groups—represented by the figures of the village and caste headmen with titles like *patel, deshmukh, chaudhari, muqaddam*—historically exercised juridical authority to frame village laws, to assign punishments to those who infringed them, and to mete out justice (*nyaya*) through customary procedures of dispute settlement in the village/multi-village panchayat. These works brought into bold relief the moment of regime transition from the colonial to the postcolonial, along with the implications it had for old figures of village authority who were suddenly confronted with the prospect of losing their customary privileges. In this regard, Cohn (1965), Ishwaran (1964), Khare (1972), and later others like Mendelsohn (1981), Moore (1998), Hayden (1999), and Kokal (2020) drew attention to how two analytically distinct yet overlapping socio-

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[13] According to Dumont (1980:162), landowning castes reproduced kingly functions by holding superior rights in land and its produce, by making land grants to religious figures like Brahmins and Muslim ascetics (*fakir*), by protecting and supporting a retinue of other occupational caste groups, by subjugating them to control their artisanal and agrarian labour, and by meting out justice (*nyaya*) through dispute settlement in the panchayat.

legal norms and arenas have prevailed in postcolonial India's countryside—local 'law-ways' and 'lawyer's law' (Galanter 1963:2). While local 'law-ways' refer to socio-jural norms that are underpinned by non-state sites of authority, 'lawyer's law' calls attention to how legislation, administrative procedures, and modern courts 'encroach' upon old ways of village administration and dispute resolution. From this standpoint, earlier anthropologists analyzed various ways in which both state law and local law mutually impinged on each other.

Newer manifestations of caste dominance

The present-day realities of caste power and dominance in India's countryside have changed over the nearly seventy-five years of India's independence. Indeed, the postcolonial period has been characterized by consecutive makings and remakings of the countryside involving the unparalleled expansion of state structures, the advent of electoral democracy and universal adult enfranchisement, land reforms, the criminalization of forms of caste oppression, a rise in non-agricultural employment opportunities, the development of social welfare schemes, and, more recently, the entry of private capital in Indian economy (Chari 2004; Chatterjee 2011; Gidwani 2008; Gupta 1998; Jeffrey 2010; Levien 2018; Rudolph & Rudolph 1987; Witsoe 2013). These rural transformations have profoundly altered contours of caste power and dominance.

For starters, the totalizing hold of older forms of caste power has loosened considerably. These include the severity with which powerful landowners used to extract unpaid bonded labour (*begar*) from the Dalits, especially by making them work on farms, though coerced labour continues to persist in various disguised forms (Gorringe 2005; Jodhka & Manor 2018; Waghmore 2018). The near disintegration of the land-based jajmani system of patronage, which enabled landowners to subjugate poor landless castes for centuries, has resulted in varied redistributions of caste power. In villages of Haryana, for instance, the Dalits are no longer required to perform 'impure' services like removing polluting

substances from the households of caste Hindus. The rise of non-farm employment opportunities, especially in the unorganized manufacturing sector, has reduced Dalit dependency on farm labour.[14] As these changes indicate, pathways to social mobility in postcolonial India, especially for the Dalits, have expanded considerably (Ciotti 2010). From western Uttar Pradesh, for instance, Pai (2000, 2001) reports how the Dalits now exercise a high degree of political autonomy while voting in elections. Moreover, the rise of networks of Dalit activists has been identified as helping restrain caste violence perpetrated by dominant castes (Rao 2009). Lastly, the political rise of the Other Backwards Classes (OBCs), a medley of peasant and artisanal castes formerly oppressed by forms of landlordism, especially in the Hindi-speaking belt of India, has been critical (Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2007; Witsoe 2013; Yadav 2000).

My research on the khap panchayat, and its relationship with logics of Jat power, serves as a useful entry point into these anthropological dialogues. Perhaps one of the most critical questions inviting anthropologists to reflect on conventional frames of caste dominance is why the landowning Jats, in addition to other farming castes from different Indian states, e.g., the Pattidars in Gujarat, Marathas in Maharashtra, and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, have recently started aggressive political campaigns to be included in the reservations system, a policy originally instituted to uplift the lower castes and tribes of India? Does it suggest that Jat power, and by extension the phenomenon of caste dominance itself, is on the decline? If yes, as argued by Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan (2020), then what are the reasons for this decline, and what is emerging from its ruins? As argued by Deshpande (2016), Palshikar (2016), and Srinivasan (2020), this has much to do with India's precarious farming economy and its 'jobless' neoliberal economic growth. More broadly, to what extent is caste power and dominance still tied to ownership of land (Mendelsohn 1993)? Has caste in contemporary India come to denote 'difference'

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[14] Their historical dependence on the landowning dominants has come down but many Dalits still earn wages by working on farms as labourers and also remain tied to their former masters via informal credit (Jeffrey & Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2001).

rather than 'hierarchy'? In other words, as suggested by Manor (2010, 2012) and Gupta (2005), is the vertical caste order characterized by hierarchical relations on the wane? Has caste turned into a collection of "'horizontally' disconnected ethnic groups, putatively differentiated by their own styles of life" (Fuller 1996:22)? My research on the khap panchayat contributes to addressing these questions by studying both the nature and limits of Jat power in postcolonial Haryana. I ask how the khap panchayat, the historical sovereigns of this region, recalibrate and adapt to such transformations in northern India's countryside.

Also, an emerging body of scholarship on kinship, gender, and law has started to interrogate the means and strategies deployed by dominant landowning groups like the Jats to restrict transgression of their caste marriage codes, the breakdown of marriages, and the concomitant disruptions in male patterns of landownership (Chowdhry 2007; Srinivasan 2020). Inter-caste marriages, as well as disputes arising from marital separation and divorce, disrupt norms and practices of Jat kinship, which undermines the reproduction of male domestic power and privileges (Uberoi 1993). I ask what threats are posed to Jat patriarchy by changing marriage patterns, especially in the light of the Hindu Succession Act 2005, which has granted women an equal right to inherit ancestral property. In this dissertation, I study how the wider complex of Jat patriarchy—led by the institution of the khap panchayat—has set up a wide array of practices of patriarchal violence that serve as instruments to contain the economic implications of alienation of land from the patriline.

As mentioned earlier, state law as administered by lower-level courts, police, and lawyers not only normalizes but also participates in such patriarchal operations (Mody 2008; Srinivasan 2020). Rao (2009:217-240), on the other hand, has astutely pointed out that dominant landowners need not be 'provoked' through transgressions of caste codes of marriage, to inflict caste violence on the Dalits. She contends that a sexual economy of caste, which thrives on "ritualized performance[s] of sexual

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humiliation" of Dalit women at the hands of dominant groups, is critical to the formation of caste power in the first place (Rao 2009:222). In this fashion, Rao attends to how signs of caste violence get inscribed onto bodies of Dalit women, bodies to which male dominants have had unrestrained access. Recent works like Rao's show how the gendered character of caste power, which has historically crystallized around norms and practices of kinship, gender, and landownership, cannot be analyzed by divorcing them from state law.

An ethnographic focus on the khap panchayat of the Jats, both in its inter- and intra-village incarnations, has enabled me to bring together these different strands of literature (one rooted in conventional anthropological frames, the other emerging from feminist inquiries into kinship, gender, and law) into a single framework. In light of these works, it has become evident that perceiving Jat power and dominance in terms of the kingly royal functions has become insufficient. As my dissertation notes, for the most part, this is an outcome of an increased penetration of postcolonial statecraft and law in the Jat-dominated countryside of Haryana. In addition, wider economic forces, including the influx of private capital after the liberalization of Indian economy in 1990s, have almost dismantled caste as a localized domain of production and consumption, which had for centuries pivoted around agriculture and a cluster of caste-based occupations—the peasant, the agrarian labourer, the carpenter, the locksmith, the potter, the barber, the oil-presser—positioned around it (Srinivas 2003; Gupta 2005). In my dissertation, I study wider implications of these postcolonial remakings of the countryside that have reconfigured historical logics of Jat power and dominance.

Lastly, the khap panchayat has been anything but moribund. Despite an overall decline in influence during the postcolonial period, these multi-village caste and kinship networks have skillfully adapted to an array of larger political, economic, and legal transformations. As observed by the Jeffreys, "a mutually reinforcing relationship between older forms of dominance rooted in control over land,

access to urban social networks and privileged position within the Hindu caste hierarchy and social advantages based upon access to educational facilities and salaried work" persists (Jeffrey & Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2008:61). This suggests that present-day strategies of dominance as deployed by the landowning Jats to reproduce their privileges continue to be effective, but in a much transformed social and political context (Jeffrey 2010). Indeed, as the fieldnotes I shared earlier show, the khap panchayat plays a key role in the contemporary reproduction of Jat power. It leaders stake a claim to state resources by demanding reservations for the Jats, they preserve Jat male landholding patterns by obstructing the application of state laws on marriage and land inheritance, and they continue to evolve in ways designed to dominate old rivals and subjugated caste groups. This dissertation explores these strategies of adaptation and the myriad ways in which they have been put into action. It examines what it means to wield caste power in modern India by keeping the centuries-old khap panchayat at the centre of analysis.

II

Field Research

My dissertation is based on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork (November 2015 to June 2017) during which I stayed in two Jat-dominated villages of the state of Haryana. I pseudonymously call these villages Lakhanpura and Peepalvas. I also maintained a modest residence in Sonipat city (see map 1). From these three bases, I was able to track events unfolding within the two Jat villages and an urban center. When able, I travelled around a wider region consisting of (i) Jat villages nested in centuries-old multi-village clusters; (ii) small bazaar towns (*kasbah*) and rapidly expanding cities (*shahr*) that were hubs of commercial activity; and (iii) sites of local state authority such as police stations, government courts, state-run schools, and administrative offices.

Lakhanpura and Peepalvas are situated deep in the agrarian landscape of Rohtak and Sonipat districts respectively, not too far from district Jind. Hence, there were hardly any signs of the advancing urban frontier in these villages. By that, I refer to the logic of expanding urbanity unfolding in post-liberalization India, especially in and around metropolises like Delhi, where the growth of middle-class residential communities and industrial complexes are jointly enabled by an influx of private capital and the state's acquisition of farmland, creating a trail of what are known as 'urban villages' (Kennedy 2020; Sheth 2017; Searle 2018; Levin 2018). Indeed, both Lakhanpura and Peepalvas are nested in an unbroken landscape of agricultural farms growing rice and millet in the *kharif* season (July-October) and wheat and mustard in the *rabi* season (November-April). Moreover, both villages are about 15km away from a larger town, though farther still from a city. Thus, unlike the Jat villages located along the Delhi-Haryana border, most of which have been either subsumed into satellite cities like Gurgaon and Faridabad or into Special Economic Zones (SEZs) comprising small manufacturing complexes, economic activity in both Lakhanpura and Peepalvas largely pivot around agriculture, its allied activities, and the seasonal ebbs and flows of agrarian work.

To view Lakhanpura and Peepalvas as stuck in a time warp or 'rural backwaters' would be a mistake. These two villages, along with hundreds and thousands of others like them dotting the vast agrarian landscape of northern India, are in many ways thoroughly modern. As outlined earlier, consecutive makings and remakings of the countryside in the postcolonial period have profoundly transformed village life. The Green Revolution, for instance, a state-led project of agricultural modernization stretching over multiple decades starting in the 1960s, has thoroughly redrawn the landscape of agriculture, such as centuries-old practices of cultivation and harvest, patterns of agrarian labour, and thus, more broadly, inter-caste relations (Gupta 1997; Gupta 1998). As Gupta (1998) astutely noted, the Green Revolution did not merely introduce factory-made machines like the tractor, but also reshaped farmers' agronomical and ecological knowledges. Furthermore, old configurations of

agrarian labour wherein the subjugated castes, mostly the landless Dalits, worked on the farms of landowning Jat peasants have been transformed (Jhodka 2014). Today, for instance, Jat farmers mostly harvest their crops by using combine harvesters. And agrarian labour is provided not so much by the Dalits of the village, but by teams of migratory labourers from poorer eastern states of the Hindi-speaking belt like Bihar.

In a broader context, the Green Revolution is also central to the story of increased economic prosperity of dominant landowning castes like the Jats who were strategically positioned to benefit from it (Gupta 1998; Jeffrey 2010). Equipped with agricultural machinery, High Yielding Varieties (HYVs), new infrastructure for irrigation, and agro-chemicals like fertilizers, landowning farmers started to produce crops for sale in the market, as well as became beneficiaries of state-funded agricultural subsidies on fertilizers, electricity, and water, among other resources (Gupta 1997). This economic ascendancy of the Jats was coupled with their political rise in electoral politics (Jeffrey 2010; Rudolph & Rudolph 1987; Varshney 1995). Of course, as noted by both Chowdhry (1984) and Datta (1999), the economic and political rise of the Jats in the postcolonial period was built on their already dominant position under British rule, first as revenue-paying landowning peasants and then as sturdy soldiers serving in the British army. In the early twentieth century, with the rise of regional political leaders like Chottu Ram (Chowdhry 1984), together with caste-based attempts at upward mobility through widespread adoption of Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement (Datta 1999), the Jats had consolidated their dominance in what is now Haryana.

Recent studies, however, have highlighted that the economic power accrued by Jats and other dominant farming castes thanks to the Green Revolution is gradually fading (Manor 2012; Jeffrey 2010; Jodhka & Manor 2018; Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan 2020; Srinivasan 2020). First, the average size of landholdings is rapidly shrinking because of inter-generational fragmentation of land. For example,

according to a report by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), "landholdings in the marginal category (less than 1 hectare) constituted 67% of all operational holdings in the country in 2010–2011" (cited in Ashraf 2015). Second, the cost of agricultural production has been on the rise, whereas market prices have been rather stagnant. This has trapped many farming families into spirals of indebtedness perpetuated by usurious practices of moneylending. Indeed, data released by the National Sample Survey Office (2014) indicates that more than 60% of farming households in India are trapped in rural debt (Ashraf 2015). Against this backdrop, recent legislation like the Hindu Succession Act 2005 giving inheritance rights to women have exerted further pressure on male Jat landholdings. This has resulted in an increase in gender violence, especially directed towards Jat women choosing to marry outside their caste as this jeopardizes patrilineal land rights (Chowdhry 2007; Srinivasan 2020). Along similar lines, scholars have also suggested that present-day economic volatilities shaping agriculture, along with political assertions by low-ranking castes, especially the Dalits, have led to a higher incidence of caste violence in Haryana and its neighbouring regions (Jeffrey 2010; Jhodka 2003, 2014; Jhodka & Manor 2018).

These wider developments unfolding in the rural political economy constitute important points of discussion among Jat farmers, especially in their all-male neighbourhood gatherings called *baithak*. In the villages of Lakhanpura and Peepalvas, Jat famers discussed an array of topics ranging from formal and informal sources of credit to rising costs of cultivation to the recent entry of private corporations like Reliance and Adani into the agricultural economy. From these ethnographic dialogues, I learnt about strategies adopted by Jat farmers to not only negotiate changes and economic stagnation in the agrarian economy, but to also reproduce their economic dominance. As rightly noted by Jeffrey (2010) in the context of western Uttar Pradesh, Jat farmers reinvest much of their surplus agricultural income, together with hefty loans from banks and village moneylenders, to provide private education to their children, especially male children. In addition, wealthy farmers may also pool money to start non-farm

entrepreneurial economic activity like opening a brick-kiln or a small shop in the nearest town (Chari 2004; Gidwani 2008). These strategies bring into bold relief how Jat farmers are imagining post-agrarian futures for their children (Srinivasan 2020:83-104).

Apart from entering avenues of higher education and entrepreneurial activity, establishing control over Gram Panchayat, i.e., the statutory village council set-up by the postcolonial state, constituted another important strategy through which the Jats of Peepalvas and Lakhanpura reproduced their power (Jeffrey 2010). Gram Panchayats are entrusted with providing a range of public services and implement all state-funded development programs and welfare schemes at the village-level. In this way, they function as gatekeepers and dispersers of high-tier state grants. Jat village leaders, who serve as representatives of their patrilineages, i.e., localized descent groups that coalesce into intra-village units of the khap panchayat, gain tremendous economic benefits by controlling the flow of resources in the village through practices of corruption often carried out in collusion with state officials (Lieten & Srivastava 1999; Jeffrey, Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2001). In addition, by controlling these statutory village bodies, Jat village leaders, backed by the khap panchayat, are also able to reproduce old caste and gender hierarchies (Chowdhry 2005, 2007). Furthermore, rural transformations, which are not merely limited to economic aspects but also include spread of legal consciousness about state-led reforms, such as, granting women the right to inherit ancestral property, are also affecting the domain of Jat domesticity. As I study in the dissertation, despite an increased expansion of the modern legal system in the countryside, the khap panchayat continues to serve as critical socio-legal forum where the Jats adjudicate domestic disputes pertaining to inheritance, marriage, and women's sexuality, thereby reinscribing male authority.

A map of Haryana
Field sites
1. Village Peepalvas 2. Village Lakhanpura
3. Sonipat City

The advancing urban frontier in a village near Sonipat city.

A seasonal labourer from the state of Bihar.

A team of seasonal agrarian labourers from eastern Uttar Pradesh.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I understood how such strategies to reproduce Jat power are also riddled with deep uncertainties. For instance, despite earning college degrees and diplomas, for many Jats non-farm employment opportunities are limited, especially in the state sector. In the private 'corporate' sector, Jat youth often find themselves lacking the required cultural skills to be successful, such as the ability to correspond in English (Jeffrey & Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2008; Srinivasan 2020). An overwhelming majority of marginal Jat farmers lack economic capital needed to invest in entrepreneurial projects of any kind. As a result, a sizeable number of Jat men are now participating in the informal economy where they work in manufacturing units alongside members of formerly subjugated castes. Thus, more often than not, the aspiration to enter the rural middle-class held by Jat youth goes unfulfilled. As argued by Chowdhry (2005), and more recently by Srinivasan (2020), this has produced a 'crisis of masculinity' among the Jats leading to greater gender and caste violence. In Lakhanpura and Peepalvas, I often found myself surrounded by large crowds of college graduates who have now resigned themselves to agrarian lives that are dependent on landholdings much smaller than their parents' generation.

The khap panchayat has been central to how the Jats have responded to such wider challenges emerging from the rural political economy. For instance, in the 1980-90s, organized as Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), the khap panchayat held large-scale farmers' agitations against the state's agricultural policies (Hasan 1995; Gupta 1997; Sahay 2004, 2015). Likewise, the khap panchayat of Haryana protested against the entry of private capital through state-led land acquisitions in 2008-10 (Kennedy 2014, 2020). Since the farming and land-related interests of Jat peasants align with other farming castes like the Ahirs, Gujars, Rajputs, they all often come together under the headship of Jat khap leaders, e.g., Mahender Singh Tikait – the former headman (*chaudhary*) of the khap panchayat of Baliyan clan (Gupta 1997), to produce long-running farmers' mobilizations. Again, the year-long farmers' protest (2020-21) along the borders of Delhi against the three 'farm bills' passed by the Indian parliament in

September 2020 showed how various networks of the khap panchayat from Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Rajasthan can work jointly with trans-regional unions like Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) and Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) to advance farmers' interests (Singh 2022). During fieldwork, in the context of the two state-wide public protests held by the Jats of Haryana in February 2016 and 2017 in support of being included in the reservations system, I examine what goes into the making of large-scale mobilizations and how they crystallize through village networks of the khap panchayat to produced spectacular (often violent) forms of Jat power.

By keeping the two Jat villages of Lakhanpura and Peepalvas at the centre of my analysis, I inquire into the nature of moral bonds of patrilineal kinship that continue to tie Jats to the khap panchayat. As my dissertation argues, despite having declined in importance over the postcolonial period, the khap panchayat powerfully illustrates its continued influence when drawing hundreds and thousands of Jat clansmen from contiguous Jat-dominated villages to participate in the panchayat and the much larger maha-panchayat. These assemblies act as sites of collective reflection and publicity wherein Jat caste leaders discuss an array of issues related to the wider political economy—agricultural policies of the government, the rising costs of cultivation, the rampant shrinking of landholdings (land fragmentation), and high rates of unemployment, among other related issues. As much as the Jat mobilizations I witnessed were about perceiving the reservations as a panacea for the ailing rural political economy, they were also occasions to discuss centuries-old caste antagonisms between the Jats and other rival and subjugated caste groups. These Jat mobilizations serve as critical sites to reflect on how the centuries-old khap panchayat adapts to postcolonial politics.

III

Argument and Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation studies how a precolonial framing of caste power, exemplified by the centuries-old politico-juridical institution of the khap panchayat among the Jats, has adapted to both colonial and postcolonial incarnations of modernity. More specifically, it examines how diverse transformations set afoot by the colonial and postcolonial states, which I refer to by the expansive term 'political modernity' (Kaviraj 2000:141), have shaped and reshaped Jat power and dominance in the state of Haryana across different historical periods.

In its inception, the khap panchayat was a species of what Cohn (1959, 1962) called the 'little kingdom'—a territorial domain where arms-bearing patrilineal descent groups from a range of landowning castes established localized sovereignty over vast tracts of Indian countryside. Internally, the little kingdom was disaggregated into multi-village clusters over which male-dominated kin-bodies like the khap panchayat replicated the kingly idiom of sovereignty by controlling the land and its produce, as well as the artisanal and agrarian labour of lower castes, and lastly by adjudicating disputes. By exercising power this way, dominant kin groups were able to stitch together a diverse range of values, practices, actors, and institutions to produce what Dirks (1987:284) has called "totalistic social institutions," an intricate tapestry of caste powers constituted by overlapping strands of religion, politics, economics, law, kinship, and territory. My dissertation is an anthropological study of what happened to little kingdoms of various Jat clans and lineages whose powers were shaped through the khap panchayat. Specifically, I examine points of contact between the khap panchayat and modern statecraft and law over the past two centuries to foreground the complex history and permutations of Jat power.

While British rule was extractive and thus heavily dependent on land and revenue administration, the postcolonial state in India is guided by principles of constitutional democracy, state-led programs of development and welfare, and other attendant projects of modernization like universal education.

Given such dissimilar orientations of colonial and postcolonial governments, each have shaped Jat power in unique ways. The colonial state, for example, solidified Jat powers by incorporating them first in its land policy and later into customary law, whereas the postcolonial state, along with much wider economic forces like private capital, has gradually eroded the special privileges and authority of the Jats. As I argue, both the influence and perceived political legitimacy of the khap panchayat has eroded throughout the postcolonial period, yet they continue to perform what those who comprise them view as 'rightful' work. This includes but is not limited to protecting Jat male landholding through regulation of marriage and sexuality (Chapter 2), controlling democratic structures of village governance (Chapter 3), and staking claim to state resources like government jobs and seats in institutions of higher education by demanding reservations (quota-based affirmative action) (Chapter 4). These developments have regularly produced contestations unfolding between the khap panchayat, the historical sovereigns, and the state, its bureaucrats, and, more broadly, its legal system. It is by working through these diverse political issues and manifestations of Jat power that my dissertation gives an anthropological account of caste dominance in contemporary India.

The first chapter traces the evolution of the khap panchayat from roughly the late precolonial to the end of colonial period, focusing on how Jat power and dominance evolved within its intra- and inter-village frameworks. It first gives a brief overview of the pre-British local and regional political systems that existed in northern India—a patchwork of multi-village territorial domains (little kingdoms) constituted by arms-bearing unilineal descent groups of semi-pastoral and peasant peoples among whom the Jats were territorially and numerically the largest. It then delves into the British period (1803-1947) to foreground how pre-existing Jat caste powers were solidified through being inscribed in British land policy and customary law. Here, I show how the panchayat gained a legal personality through the recognition of a customary tenurial system called *bhaichara* (literally, brotherly relations) in whose framework the pre-British land rights of the Jats got translated as modern land rights. At the

heart of this tenurial system was 'the village brotherhood,' a body of male co-sharers of village lands who descended from a founder of the village. It was through such lengthy statist processes that a relationship between caste, kinship, landownership, and power was forged.

The second chapter marks the start of the ethnographic part of the dissertation. In it, I study the gendered character of Jat power, specifically how the male-dominated khap panchayat seeks to control women's sexuality, marriage, and productive and reproductive labour to preserve structures of Jat kinship and male landholding. I analyze the story of a Jat marriage dispute by tracing a series of domestic conflicts and how they were processed (often simultaneously) across state and non-state legal forums, thus illustrating how the khap panchayat is no longer an autonomous juridical institution but is part of a pluralistic postcolonial legal landscape. By tracing this dispute, I also sketch how Jat patriarchy has crystallized across two broad axes—the material and the ideological. By the material dimension of Jat patriarchy, I refer to the historical logics of Jat male landholdings; by the ideological dimension, I draw attention to what Chowdhry (2007) has identified as the male ideology of guardianship, i.e., to be placed under the guardianship of male relatives. Disputing in the khap panchayat shows how the material and ideological reinforce each other producing a robust framework of patriarchy, which, as I examine, also extends to state law. More broadly, the chapter shows how Jat power is applied not merely externally, for instance over a subjugated caste, but also internally over its own members, especially women.

Chapter three studies how village units of the khap panchayat recalibrate and adapt to postcolonial village democracy. In post-Independence India, village democracy was introduced through a new species of panchayat called Gram Panchayat, the statutory village council through which all state-funded development and welfare schemes are implemented at the village level. Anthropological and sociological research has pointed out how dominant figures from landowning castes have been able

to extent their political influence over the official functioning of Gram Panchayat, thereby reproducing older forms of caste and gender hierarchies. In this chapter, I examine how influential Jats reinvigorate the tradition(s) of the khap panchayat, and an array of other customary practices, to control the position of Sarpanch, the official village headman. That the khap panchayat, plus the historical forms of Jat power and privilege they stitch together, dominated the constitution and routine functioning of democratic Gram Panchayat indexes the blurring of boundaries between the two species of panchayat that in theory remain separate from each other. In this way, the chapter gives an account of village politics that is far removed from the democratic ideals and institutional norms articulated in Indian law.

The final chapter of the dissertation examines how various networks of the khap panchayat mobilized the Jats in Haryana in 2015-17 to demand reservations in government jobs and institutions of higher education. Since the Jats have traditionally been a privileged caste in northern India, their demand for inclusion in the reservations structure, which was originally instituted as a policy to uplift the lower castes and tribes of India, makes for a compelling puzzle to be studied. Tracing recent shifts in the rural political economy of Haryana like shrinking landholdings and unemployment, along with political rise of lower castes, I explore present-day challenges to Jat power. Then, by focusing on discourses tied to reservations, which were first articulated in Jat panchayats and maha-panchayats and later circulated through inter-village networks of the khap panchayat, I study how the Jat demand for reservations was a direct response to the growing economic precarity of marginal Jat farmers. Lastly, I study how Jat mobilizations covered in this chapter also provoked acrimonious public debates with rival caste groups who opposed the inclusion of the Jats in the reservation system. This yoked centuries-old caste antagonisms with new ones, which came to a head in February 2016 with large-scale incidents of inter-caste violence and the targeting of state buildings and other infrastructure by Jat protestors.

Chapter 1

Kinship, Territory, and Power: Legacies from the Past

Introduction

In this chapter, I trace the trajectory of Jat power across precolonial and colonial periods in the territory that comprises present-day Haryana and its neighbouring regions. The chapter starts with an ethnographic vignette outlining how I first learned about the founding story of Peepalvas, a Jat-dominated village in district Sonipat, Haryana. Specifically, I describe an encounter with Jai Singh, a Jat elder (*panch*), in which he recounted amidst other male heads of his patriline how their ancestors had settled the village centuries ago. Like many unstructured conversations that transpire during fieldwork, this one was with an interlocutor who had a broader story to tell.

Over time, I came to understand that every Jat village has a founding story involving the migration of male ancestors of landowning lineage(s) who settled the village either by clearing forested land or by conquering previously inhabited communities centuries ago. When recounted by Jat elders in the company of male heads of the patriline, these oral histories took the form of performance-like recitations, suggesting that the past evoked in them was not inert or severed from the present. Instead, through these oral narratives, Jat villagers recognized themselves as descendants of the original male ancestor(s) and thus masters (*malik*) of the village, its lands, and its lower-caste residents. In other words, they function as cultural mediums through which the centuries-old story of Jat power is bequeathed from one generation to another.

In this chapter, I examine these oral narratives to tease out how they reanimate historical linkages between caste, kinship, landownership, and power in the present. Similar narratives also exist at the multi-village level where they describe how male ancestors of a Jat patrilineal clan (*got*) settled over a

large territory comprising multiple villages. Jat elders, many of whom actively participate and lead local units of the khap panchayat, shared how their clan ancestors first brought a territory under their control and how their lineages then expanded it by establishing contiguous villages, thereby constituting a clan territory locally known by various names like *tappa*, *khap*, and *illaqa*. It was over this centuries-old multi-village architecture of Jat clan territories that village networks of the khap panchayat first emerged. As I read them, these narratives of the past adumbrated certain historical logics of Jat power. Specifically, they help explain how the powers and privileges of Jat lineages crystallized in the inter- and intra-village organization of the khap panchayat. In terms of my own research trajectory, these founding stories made me more attentive to how the maintenance of Jat power through the khap panchayat rests on centuries-old linkages between caste, kinship, land ownership, and power. These linkages constitute the focus of this chapter.

The nature of Jat power, as it has been embedded in the khap panchayat, has been anything but stable and fixed over time. When discussing village founding stories, Jat elders often reflected on how the powers of the khap panchayat have declined considerably in the postcolonial period from their historic high in precolonial and colonial periods, so much so that their contemporary avatars are now described as 'empty repositories' (*khali dhancha*) that contain 'dried-up caste power' (*sookhi chaudhrahat*). This decline was not viewed in isolation but in relation to how the postcolonial state, its apparatuses, including its legal system, have been expanding in ways that directly challenge Jat power in the countryside. Further, as various historical manifestations of caste power—such as the land-based system of patronage (the jajmani system)—have declined in the postcolonial period, so too have the inter- and intra-village units of the khap panchayat that administered them. These fieldwork inquiries come close to what Hirsh and Stewart (2005) describe as 'ethnographies of historicity': namely, how people learn about their past, the performances and genres through which knowledge about the past gets articulated, and how past, present, and future are mutually implicated with each other.

In this chapter, I argue that Jat power, their clan territories, and khap panchayats constituted, in their inception, a species of what Cohn (1959, 1962) called a 'little kingdom'—a precolonial territorial domain wherein arms-bearing patrilineal descent groups claiming *kshatriya* (kingly/warrior) status established localized sovereignty over tracts of Indian countryside. Internally, the little kingdom was disaggregated into village-clusters of varying size over which male kin-bodies of powerful clans and lineages, such as the khap panchayat of the Jats, replicated the kingly idiom of sovereignty to control land, its produce, and the artisanal and agrarian labour of dependent castes. By exercising power this way, dominant groups like the Jats were able to stitch together a diverse range of values, practices, actors, and institutions of caste to buttress their authority. As I show in the final section of this chapter, the power and influence that Jat lineages had accrued prior to the advent of British rule in 1803 came to be enshrined in British land policy and customary law. Here, I emphasize that any understanding of how Jat power was transformed under British rule cannot be divorced from the history of colonial state formation. This is because state formation did not merely give rise to institutions of power, but also shaped social identities like caste.

Ethnographies of the Past

Initially, my research project was limited to analyzing contemporary manifestations of Jat power. To explain how I first became interested in the past of Jat lineages and their villages, and how critical it became to the framing of the research problem I study in this dissertation, I begin this chapter by sharing an ethnographic vignette from the early months of my fieldwork in April 2016.

Oral narratives of the past

One afternoon in early April 2016, I sat with Hari Om in his ancestral farms in village Peepalvas quizzing him about how farmers like himself were preparing for the approaching wheat harvesting season. Our discussion was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a team of agrarian labourers—the

Dalits of village Peepalvas—whom Hari Om had hired for the harvesting period. Hari Om quickly excused himself and left with the labourers to survey the matured wheat crop that stood in his farms. After an hour or so, he and his team of labourers returned. Taking shelter under a tree, Hari Om issued to them a final set of instructions, which they received diligently before departing. Looking exhausted by all the running around, Hari Om then sat down heavily on a wooden stool. He wiped the sweat off his face, drank water, and smoked hookah, before asking me a volley of questions about my research and why I had chosen to stay in village Peepalvas to do it. The fact that I had been asking questions and taking notes about transforming farming and labour practices, among other things, had vaguely informed Hari Om of my interest in 'knowing' about the village and aspects of its collective life. However, for him, 'knowledge' (*gyan*) lay not so much in understanding the quotidian agrarian practices I was tracking, but rather in learning about Peepalvas's history.

> HARI OM: Your knowledge about the village will remain incomplete till you learn about
> how it was founded.

He then took it upon himself to instruct me on how to overcome the lacuna he had just identified.

> HARI OM: You must visit my house this evening to meet my father, Jai Singh. Nobody
> in the village can tell you about its past better than him.

In the evening, when I arrived at Hari Om's house, I found myself in the midst of a gathering of male heads of his extended patriline who routinely assembled in his courtyard towards the end of the day to smoke hookah over what Tiemann (1970b:488) called "long hours of leisurely talk."[15] As part of this patrilineal gathering, Jai Singh, Hari Om's 74-year-old father, lay in his cot fingering prayer beads

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[15] While doing fieldwork in Dalalpur, a Jat-dominated village in district Rohtak, Haryana, Tiemann (1970b) observed that male heads of Jat households belonging to the same patrilineage often gathered in the neighbourhood to smoke hookah. Other anthropologists like Lewis (1958) and Jeffrey (2010), who conducted fieldwork among the Jats of northern India, have noted that such neighbourhood Jat male gatherings are known as 'baithaks.'

and quietly humming Hindu devotional songs (*bhajan*) to himself. Jai Singh was widely regarded as one of the most knowledgeable (*gyani*) men in the village. The repertoire of customary knowledges that he commanded included not only knowledge about the village's past, but also about norms and practices of Jat patrilineal descent and marriage, as well as attendant rules relating to landownership and inheritance. A thorough mastery of these topics had qualified Jai Singh to be recognized as a *panch*— a Jat elder who embodies the authority to call and lead panchayat to resolve village disputes.[16] In fact, before having suffered a stroke in 2010, which left the right-side of his lower body paralyzed, Jai Singh's jurisdiction as a panch was not limited to a single village but extended to the chau-gama (a group of four villages) that Peepalvas headed. It was within this context of patrilineal gathering that I received my first lesson about the village's past.

That evening, Jai Singh told the story of how the village was founded. Though many among those gathered had heard the story before, their chatter died down as soon as Jai Singh started to talk. This was a marker of deference customarily shown toward caste elders in the village. Jai Singh began by emphasizing how Peepalvas was one of the oldest villages in the vicinity and how many villages nearby had emerged (*nikasi*) directly from it. Specifically, the village was founded about six centuries (or 31-32 generations) ago by Raje and Jite, two Jat brothers.[17] Raje and Jite, along with their families and a small retinue of dependent castes (*kamin*) attached to them, had left Karoda, the village of their origin. Jai Singh narrated two versions outlining why the brothers had departed to establish a new village. According to the first, they were banished from Karoda by a Jat panchayat for killing a patrilineal cousin and his adolescent son in a village feud. Stricken with remorse, Raje, Jite, and their entourages

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[16] According to writings of British administrators from the early nineteenth century, each Jat village had multiple panch— the smaller village had two to three whereas the bigger ones had about ten—and they collectively constituted the village panchayat. Panch did not hold any superior rights in land but functioned as representative of the village in its external dealings with the British state and its revenue agents (Campbell 1853:83-89).

[17] In the nineteenth century, British settlement officers noted that many old Jat villages in present-day Haryana were settled about 35 generations earlier (Bhattacharya 2019:102), thus slightly further back in time than Jai Singh's oral history suggested.

wandered in the wilderness for days. "They roamed around like *khanabados* (vagrants)," Jai Singh said, "nobody could tell who they were and where they came from." After seven days, they met a *jogi* (a Shaivite Hindu ascetic) who advised that to absolve themselves of their sins (*paap*), they must settle a new village next to a nearby water pond (*johad*). In the second version of the founding story, the two brothers were not banished but had instead volunteered to establish a new village as their parent village had become overcrowded. After wandering for many days in search of better lands, Raje and Jite came across a pond at whose edge they spotted a jogi seated in deep meditation. After camping near the pond for seven days, the ascetic broke his samadhi and counselled Raje and Jite, his new-found disciples, to settle a village next to the pond. This encounter with the Hindu ascetic has been monumentalized in form of a *shivala* (a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva), which was originally built by Raje and Jite at the edge of the same village pond.

Tiemann (1970b:483) has astutely noted that local histories of Jat clans and lineages begin "not with fixed [village] settlements, but with migrations by successive stages." In fact, early ethnographies of villages in northern India, including Cohn (1961), Hitchcock (1959), Kessinger (1974), Miller (1975), and Tiemann (1970b), among others, have reported similar village founding stories, which are structured around the migration of male ancestors of the locally dominant landowning caste. In southern India too, Srinivas (1987:7) has noted the popularity of analogous narratives of founding of villages, writing that "Splits in dominant caste lineages, and factions drove individuals to found new villages and this meant the clearance of thick jungle, a task calling for heavy investments of labour. One expects that the labour came largely from the dominant castes and their servants, primarily landless labourers." In both versions of the founding story of village Peepalvas, Raje and Jite, their families, and their dependent castes cleared the jungle surrounding the pond to make room for the

site of the new village. While the Jats settled in what eventually became the center of the village, their dependent castes occupied its fringes.[18]

A shivala at the edge of a village pond.

Over time, the patrilineages of Raje (the Rajain lineage) and Jite (the Jitain lineage) expanded to constitute two distinct Jat neighbourhoods in the village, namely, the Rajain *pana* and Jitain *pana*. The principle of Jat patrilineal descent also underpinned the distribution of agricultural lands of the village. Even today, farms of the Rajain patrilineage are concentrated mostly in the north and north-east of

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[18] The spatial organization of the village residential site mirrored local caste hierarchies. While neighbourhoods of dominant castes were at the center, dwellings of the Dalits were at outskirts of the village (Bhattacharya 2019:102).

the village, whereas those of Jitain patrilineage are in its southern and western parts.[19] Over the village's history, rivalries have mirrored these geographic axes, including an armed conflict between the two founding patrilineages about a century-ago that resulted in the killing of several Jat families on both sides. Repeated narrations of these past events (though not always narrated in the same way) establish how the two founding Jat brothers, along with their patrilineages, have occupied center stage in the life of the village since its inception. In this fashion, the Jats of Peepalvas have what Cohn (1961:243) has called a "historic past," i.e., a past that has crystallized around "known ancestors and events involving these ancestors."

During fieldwork, I often found myself sitting in such gatherings of the patrilineage (*biradari*), where Jat male elders would evoke the 'historic' past of the village, such as the names of the original male settlers, their village of origin, and the chain of events that had led to the founding of the village. This happened not only in Peepalvas and Lakhanpura, the two Jat-dominated village where I lived during fieldwork, but also in other villages I visited for shorter periods. Put simply, each village has its own founding story, which, as I gradually learnt, is often closely tied to the histories of neighbouring villages. These accounts of the past were received reverentially, especially by younger members of the patrilineage who often asked a series of follow up questions. Reiteration of these narratives by Jat elders like Jai Singh suggested that the past evoked by them was not inert, as if tucked away beneath layers of time and disconnected from the present. On the contrary, these narratives rehearsed a past intimately tied to the present: these narratives enabled Jat patrilineages to recognize themselves as descendants of the original male settler(s), and, by that logic, the rightful masters of the village and its lands—'lords of the countryside' (*illaqe ke malik*).

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[19] Similar landownership patterns exist in other Jat villages of present-day Delhi and Haryana. See Tiemann (1970b) and Lewis (1958).

In this sense, these narratives of the past are also narratives of power that reinforce durable interlinkages between unilineal descent groups, land ownership, and ideologies of caste power. For instance, while discussing how the founding of village Khalapur by the Rajputs, a dominant landowning caste in northern India, in the sixteenth century underpinned their status as landowners, Hitchcock (1959:396) wrote, "This fact, plus culturally supported beliefs about their innate capacity for ruling and their right to do so, together with their high status in the caste hierarchy and their strongly held conviction that the village is theirs by right of conquest and ancient possession, have made them the ultimate seat of authority in most village affairs." Over time, I too discerned how such local oral traditions served as cultural mediums through which the story of Jat power is bequeathed from one generation to another. For instance, by claiming the right of original occupancy and reclamation from the jungle, the two Jat brothers, had centrally installed themselves and their descendants as landowning superiors who could legitimately subjugate a range of other dependent occupational castes through land-based patronage. Allow me to elucidate this point further.

Like the Jat caste, each caste group in Peepalvas has its own origin tale, which is recounted by their respective caste elders. It is usually a migratory tale recounting the names of their ancestors and the sub-region they migrated from. For instance, the Gaur-Brahman lineage had migrated from a village near Mehrauli, Delhi, whereas the Saraswat Brahman lineage located their origins in distant Alwar, a historical town in Rajasthan. Both Brahman lineages maintained they were invited (*nyota jana*) to settle in Peepalvas by the Jats who had gifted them parcels of land (*dohli zamin*).[20] Similarly, families of service castes, such as the Nais (barbers), Khatis (carpenters), Lohars (locksmiths), and Telis (oilpressers), together with the so-called untouchables castes like the Dhanaks (weavers), Chamars (tanners), and Chudas (sweepers), also remember how their ancestors came to settle in the village several generations

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[20] Dumont (1980:162), Raheja (1988b), among others, have noted that dominant landholding castes reproduced royal functions of the king in their village by making land grants to religious figures like Brahmans and Muslim ascetics (*fakir*).

ago. Many of these migratory histories were recorded by Miller (1975:23-27) while doing fieldwork in village Badipur, Jhajjar, Haryana. The multiplicity of historical narratives existing in a single village lends credibility to Cohn's (1961) insight that in places like Peepalvas there is in not one but multiple village pasts. These disparate pasts, however, coalesce around the narrative of the landowning Jats. Indeed, all caste groups recognize that they initially came to the village as tenants and labourers of Jat patrilineages, the local sovereigns. In this way, the composite past of the village reinforced the narrative of Jat primacy and dominance.

Similar narratives of the past also exist at the multi-village level. Jat village elders like Jai Singh are not only well-versed in the histories of their own village, but also in the past of the multi-village locality. As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the Jats are internally segmented into numerous patrilineal and exogamous clans whose localized dominance is inextricably tied to the historical architecture of their multi-village settlements (Madsen 1991:353-4; Sahay 2004:406; Nagla 2014: 358-9). At this level, narratives of the past recited by Jat elders sketch out how the male ancestors of the clan settled over a large territory encompassing multiple villages. These oral histories outline a specific pattern undergirding the formation of multi-village Jat settlements. Members of a patrilineal clan brought a tract of land under their control either by clearing forest or by colonizing a previously settled territory. Once the territory was occupied, members of the clan founded villages nearby once their home villages reached a certain size. Village settlements of some Jat clans were unbroken and consolidated, whereas others were fragmented and dispersed. For example, Dahiya Jats are settled in more than fifty contiguous villages around their parent village, Sissana, Sonipat, whereas villages settled by Gathwala Jats are scattered across different sub-regions of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Variations in these settlement histories notwithstanding, the oldest village in a region settled

by the clan is treated as the parent village, and the rest are viewed as having sprung from it.[21] In this way, villages settled and occupied by the same clan share kinship ties. For instance, Lewis (1958:30) noted how villages in the Dabas *beesgama* (a cluster of twenty villages headed by the Dabas Jat clan), were referred to using titles like *dada* (grandfather), *dadi* (grandmother), and *vazir* (minister).

Jat clan territories (scattered or consolidated) are internally separated into smaller village-clusters like *du-gama* (two villages), *chau-gama* (four villages), *aath-gama* (eight villages), *bees-gama* (twenty villages), and further. Though each separate village, as well as the village cluster it is part of, have historically managed their affairs rather independently, they have always recognized the pre-eminence of the wider clan represented by the parent village. Historically, these overlapping gradients and jurisdictions of intra- and inter-village networks have been articulated in terms of networks of the panchayat (council). Each separate village in the territory of the clan has its own panchayat, which is dominated by the local landowning patrilineage represented by its headmen. Moreover, each village-cluster, such as a *chau-gama* or an *aath-gama*, has a separate multi-village panchayat with a distinct leadership. Lastly, all villages of the clan, along with the village-clusters they are part of, constitute the panchayat of the clan under the headmanship of the parent village. In this way, various gradients of intra- and inter-village panchayat are embedded in the clan's territorially segmented kinship networks. Among the Jats, these assemblages of village and multi-village panchayats are known as the khap panchayat, where the word khap refers to the territory originally occupied by the clan (Madsen 1991:353).[22]

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[21] For instance, Tiemann (1970b:491) gives the example of how village Nurenkhera had been settled by the Jats of the neighbouring Butana village. Likewise, village Ghiji was settled by the Jats from Ismaila village.

[22] These oral accounts outlining the formation of multi-village clan territories may have standardized a variety of historical factors that went into the making of the khap panchayat, especially of Jat clans whose village settlements are territorially dispersed. For instance, in *From Hierarchy to Stratification*, Miller (1975:24) noted that though Kinha Jats had settled Badipur, a Jat village in Jhajjar, Haryana, their original ancestral territory – symbolized by the Kinha khap panchayat of 12 villages – was in Ghaziabad, western Uttar Pradesh. Thus, this portrayal of the formation of the khap panchayat must be viewed as something close to a Weberian 'ideal type' – a construct that builds on selective accentuation of some characteristics, together with the attendant downplaying of others.

Jai Singh.

After having listened to the founding story of village Peepalvas and the multi-village network of which it is a part on more than one occasion from Jai Singh and other Jat elders, I started to take Hari Om's suggestion to include local thinking about the past within the purview of my research with more seriousness. As I reflected on the significance of the stories I heard, three things stood out. First, these narratives conveyed well-developed oral traditions. As part of these traditions, Jat elders function as specialists who memorize and transmit these accounts of the past to future generations. Second, these oral histories are instructive in discerning the social boundaries separating different caste groups inhabiting these villages; various castes and lineages have their own versions of history to drawn upon to validate or contest their standings in local caste hierarchies. Lastly, these narratives of the past adumbrate certain key historical logics of Jat power. Specifically, through them, I started to learn about the centuries-old architecture of intra- and inter-village Jat clan territories, the nature of local dominance exercised by Jat lineages, and how their powers and privileges had crystallized in terms of village networks of the khap panchayat.

Dried-up caste powers

From that point onwards, I also began inquiring into the past of other Jat-dominated villages that I was intermittently visiting not only in Jhajjar, Rohtak and Sonipat districts, but also elsewhere in Haryana. As part of this fieldwork exercise, which was designed to reconstruct the past not simply of an individual village but also of a supra-village locality, I held discussions with various Jat elders like Jai Singh who either headed or actively participated across different levels of the khap panchayat. Specifically, I was keen to learn how Jat leaders, as well as ordinary Jat farmers, viewed the past of their khap panchayats, especially against the backdrop of the ongoing postcolonial transformations. In response to my inquiries, Jat caste leaders often measured the present-day versions of the khap panchayat against their earlier forms. As part of this comparison, they emphasized how the traditional

power of the khap panchayat has considerably declined in the postcolonial era. To characterize this decline, their contemporary avatars were often described as 'empty repositories' (*khali dhancha*) that contained 'dried-up caste power' (*sookhi chaudhrahat*). When I asked Jai Singh to reflect on the supposed erosion of the historical powers of the khap panchayat, he explained his viewpoint through a brief account of a Jat panchayat meeting of four neighbouring villages in which he had participated a few years ago.

> JAI SINGH: I will tell you a real story. In 2014, an unmarried Jat girl from our village, Peepalvas, was kidnapped [*uthana*] by a Chamar [a Dalit caste] boy. Though the family of the boy lived in Rohtak city, they originally belonged to one of the neighbouring villages. To resolve this matter, we called a panchayat of four villages. Jat elders [*panch*] from neighbouring villages [*guhand*] gathered to put pressure on the boy's extended family but nothing came out of it. The boy seduced [*bahlana-fuslana*] the girl and married her in a temple. The girl's family wanted revenge. They wanted to kill the Chamar boy. The Jats were also preparing to attack the Chamar neighbourhood as many among them had spoken in support of the boy in the panchayat. Fearing violence, local Chamar leaders approached district police who warned Jat panchayat leaders that they would arrest us if any violence took place. In the end, the panchayat could do nothing to retrieve [*wapas lana*] our daughter.

As I had expected, upon some inquiry, I found that the Jat girl from Peepalvas had not been kidnapped but had instead eloped with the Dalit boy. Chowdhry (2007), Mody (2008), and Srinivasan (2020) have each noted that male kin of an eloping bride often describe her as a kidnapped subject for admission of sexual agency of an unmarried woman is closely tied to loss of male honor (*izzat*). After getting married, the couple did not return to live in Haryana fearing an honour killing at the hands of the girl's

family, who had already issued multiple death threats. Inter-caste marriages, especially between a Jat girl and a Dalit boy, transgress norms and practices of caste endogamy (i.e. marriage within the same caste group). Among the Jats, intra- and inter-village units of khap panchayats deploy a range of practices from the surveillance of unmarried girls to patriarchal violence to enforce Jat endogamy, a practice essential for maintaining separation between caste groups occupying different social positions. Though outwardly this case of elopement pertained to the domain of marriage and sexuality, it was also an act of political subversion. By eloping with a Jat girl, the Dalit boy had also undermined the caste order, which has historically rested on the subjugation of the Dalits by deploying arguably one of the most insidious forms of inequality against them, i.e., untouchability. The khap panchayat of four villages had gathered to adjudicate upon this 'crime' (*gunah*). By wanting to retrieve the Jat girl and punishing the Dalits, the Jats wanted to restore old caste and gender hierarchies.

For Jai Singh and other Jat men who sat in his courtyard, this case illustrated how changing inter-caste relations in postcolonial Haryana have contributed to the erosion of historically constituted Jat power, aspects of which continues to be shored up by the khap panchayat. As previously noted, the socio-economic position of the Dalits, who until a few decades ago not only worked as labourers on Jat farms but were also responsible for the removal of polluting substances, has undergone considerable change. In the context of Haryana, Chowdhry (2009) has noted how a variety of factors like spread of education, the state policy of reservations, electoral democracy, mechanizations of agriculture with the rise in non-farms jobs, migration, and urbanization have encouraged the entry of Dalits into non-traditional occupations. Such transformations—reflecting material, legal, and ideological changes—have made the Jats and other landowning caste groups palpably insecure (Jeffrey 2010; Pai 2001). Given this context, dominant castes invariably try to turn instances of Dalits boys eloping with higher-caste girls into public spectacles in which the Dalits are beaten, their houses torched, and they are made to flee the village.

These cases also throw into bold relief how the Dalits are increasingly deploying state law to fight against such historical practices of discrimination and violence that are at least supported if not directly organized by the khap panchayat. In this specific case, for instance, networks of Dalit activists, which string together urban centers with villages in the countryside, approached local state administration and the police to seek protection against the impending Jat violence. For his part, Jai Singh viewed such strategic use of the state by the Dalits as needless 'interference' in the internal affairs (*andaruni mamle*) of the village. He pointed out that rules and norms related to both the family and to women's sexuality—which, as many scholars like Uberoi (1993), Rao (2009), and Solanki (2007) have noted, are at the heart of the Hindu caste order—must be administered not by state law but by traditional Jat norms and practices. The Jats oppose not only state laws that permit inter-caste marriages, but also other legal provisions deployed by Dalit leaders to oppose Jat power. Lastly, the state policy of reservations, which was introduced in post-independence India to alleviate historical injustices practiced against the Dalits, was also part of the broader Jat tirade against the Dalits. For instance, Jai Singh and other Jats not only resented the fact that the Dalit boy who had eloped with the Jat girl was employed as a government clerk in a local bank, but also that his family could escape the khap panchayat's village justice (*nyaya*) precisely because they could afford to migrate to Rohtak city. In this way, the reservations policy was framed as a root cause (*nas ki jad*) for upsetting the caste order.

In my conversations with Jai Singh and others Jat elders, I also came to learn that the khap panchayat used to enforce other caste powers and prerogatives at both intra- and inter-village levels. These included but were not limited to land-based patronage (the jajmani system), local politics and administration, and juridical powers to frame village laws (customs) and mete out justice (*nyaya*) by settling village disputes. It was not until I started delving into the history of the region by studying British archives alongside historical and anthropological scholarship pertaining to northern India that I grasped the wider import of this narrative of decline. During the British rule, for instance, Jat

patrilineages owned all village lands, and thus controlled the land-based patronage system (Chakravarty-Kaul 1996; Lewis 1958; Miller 1975).[23] They also dominated internal village affairs as the formal position of village headmanship called the *lambardarry* was occupied by leaders representing landowning patrilineages.[24] As noted by Marriott (1953:182-184), this produced a "mutual penetration" between lower levels of British administration and "parts of local kinship organization." As early village ethnographies have informed us, dominant landholding groups like the Jats also wielded wide-ranging juridical powers (Cohn 1959, 1965; Dumont 1980; Lewis 1958; Srinivas 1959), as well as commanded a range of means of persuasion and coercion to induce compliance. This suggests that the khap panchayat have historically served as politico-juridical frameworks through which a diverse set of values, practices, actors, and institutions associated with localized forms of caste power and authority were stitched together.

In today's Haryana, while most of these historical structures of Jat power and dominance have eroded, some persist. First, the Jats continue to own agricultural land, but the size of their landholdings has shrunk considerably. They also no longer own the village commons and its residential site (Chakravarti-Kaul 1996). Further, though a handful of features of the land-based patronage system survive, much of it is on the verge of disintegration. As a result, the control that Jat patrilineages used to wield over the labour of landless lower castes has lessened significantly.[25] Second, local village administration is no longer a fiefdom, as it were, of Jat patrilineages as the formal position of village headmanship is now nested in a democratically elected three-tiered state system of local self-government called Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) (Lieten & Srivastava 1996). Third, as shown in

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[23] In fact, members of all other caste groups (perhaps with the exception of the Brahmans) paid a hearth tax (*kodi kamini*) to the Jats—an old but now non-existent caste privilege attached to landownership (Chowdhry 1984).

[24] Likewise, at the multi-village level, the official position of the *zaildar* was also occupied by leaders of the dominant caste (Gilmartin 1988).

[25] As explained by Srinivas (2003:455) in his "obituary on caste as a system," village economy as a localized unit of production and consumption resting on caste-based division of labour "has been breaking down all over rural India."

the case discussed by Jai Singh, though the Jats continue to make efforts to impose old village customs and caste laws, especially in the context of marriage and women's sexuality, they no longer exercise any formal law-making powers. Further, their customary judicial authority to adjudicate disputes and mete out justice (*nyaya*) is wanning as an overwhelming number of village disputes now travel to government courts and police stations. And in today's Haryana, the landless castes deploy state law to oppose Jat power and dominance in the village. As these historical arrangements of Jat power declined in the postcolonial period, so too did the khap panchayat that administered over them.

Becoming attuned to this contrast between the khap panchayat in the past and present, and taking seriously village founding stories, the broad orientation of my research evolved over time. My task became not to produce a static ethnographic snapshot of the khap panchayat. Instead, I decided to study on it as an object of analysis that has been transforming across different historical periods leading up to the present. To do this, I could no longer rely solely on participant observation, but had to incorporate other scholarly methods into my research. The past, of course, is accessible not merely through oral traditions and memories, but also through written sources preserved in archives.

Approaches to the Past

In the previous section, I highlighted how local histories inform present-day power dynamics. More precisely, through various fieldwork encounters, I learned how narratives of the past—oral traditions whose renditions by Jat elders recount village founding stories—invoke and reinscribe a history of Jat ascendancy within a given territory. Such historically constituted entanglements between Jat patrilineal kinship, landownership, and power are also reflected in how Jat-dominated villages are publicly recognized as *jatan ka gaam* ("It's a Jat village").[26] The inclusion of these oral histories, together with

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[26] In addition, each village is also identified with the name of its landowning clan, e.g., *Gulia ka gaam* (It's a Gulia village) (Tiemann 1970b:491).

the contrast Jat leaders drew between older and contemporary avatars of the khap panchayat, influenced my research on a conceptual level. Most importantly, to me, their diachronic emphasis carried the potential to disrupt the ahistorical nature of anthropological knowledge about caste and its forms of power in South Asia. In this regard, Witsoe (2013) has perceptively traced the sway of ahistoricism in anthropological studies of caste to the popularity of Srinivas's concept of the dominant caste. About the dominant caste, Witsoe (2013:111) wrote, "the concept takes caste-based dominance as an analytical starting point, failing to address how caste dominance is produced in the first place." To resist legacies of these earlier anthropological paradigms of caste, I explored the history and formation of village settlements so as to reflect on Jat power, and its relationship with the khap panchayat, in historical terms. In other words, in this dissertation, I have posed Jat power not as an a priori fact, but instead as a historically constituted problem whose relationship with patrilineal kinship and land control requires critical attention. I contend that it is precisely by adopting a historical perspective that the khap panchayat appears not as constituting a static tradition but rather as a historically contingent politico-juridical framework of caste power.

In this way, though my study of the khap panchayat began in the present, it was, at the same time, also drawn towards its historical antecedents. Broadly, I was interested in how the past has given rise to contemporary forms of the khap panchayat. To delve into the past, I did not merely analyze local oral traditions and memories of Jat elders, but also official colonial documents like revenue reports, district gazetteers, and formal correspondences between colonial administrators. I also examined historical and anthropological scholarship to ascertain how precolonial state systems and the modern colonial state shaped the caste order in what is now Haryana. This approach enabled me to discern various ways in which British land policy and customary law enshrined the power that Jat lineages had accrued prior to the start of colonial rule in northern India in 1803. In this way, to reconstruct the past of this

region, I have drawn on wide range of sources, namely, oral history, colonial historiography, political history, and caste and kinship studies.

Some skeptics might be unconvinced of the adoption of historical perspective taken in this dissertation. For instance, they may point towards myriad transformations that this region has undergone, especially in the postcolonial period, to ask what an ethnographic study may gain from such a turn towards history. Such skepticism is based on two interlinked assumptions held not too uncommonly by anthropologists. Firstly, as a mode of inquiry, fieldwork may blind an anthropologist to the issue of historical change as the impulse to infer directly from the present is often too dominant. Secondly, the anthropologist may inadvertently believe that postcolonial transformations have been so radical that almost all links with the past have been ruptured. In this dissertation, my endeavor is to resist both assumptions. There is no gainsaying that postcolonial transformations have reshaped India's countryside, however, there also exist deep-rooted continuities along with such ruptures with the past. For instance, as I show in this chapter, the centuries-old entanglements between caste, kinship, landownership, and power continue to characterize agrarian Haryana and its neighbouring regions. It is only by adopting a historical perspective that lines of continuity and discontinuity with the past come into focus.

My approach in this chapter is not far away from what is commonly known as ethnohistory—a reconstruction of the past of societies with no written history. For Dirks (1987:10), ethnohistory was another version of historical anthropology, which he described as "the use of anthropological theory and methods in historical practice." In simple words, it refers to posing anthropological inquiries of historical sources. But an anthropologist's approach to studying the past differs from that of a conventional historian, for the former combines ethnographic knowledge with historical inquiry. Mostly commonly, the anthropologist is not so much interested in the past per se, but in how

knowledge of the past enables rethinking of the present in radically different terms. In the study of South Asia, Bernard Cohn was one the first to have adopted this approach in a series of articles published in the 1960s and 1970s, which were later put together as books like *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (1987). Cohn (1968:441) noted that an anthropologist's interpretation of historical material is "deepened" by how ethnographic knowledge gained through fieldwork is deployed to reflect on the past. He added that, unlike the historian who is mostly concerned with larger problems and well-documented events, an anthropologist's research focuses mainly on local history, or what he called "the minutiae of the past" (Cohn 1968:443). Since the archival record may offer only limited information about local histories of caste dominance, the anthropologist typically works inductively, piecing together small fragments from oral histories and ethnographic knowledge to reconstruct a wider historical canvass. Simply put, tacking back and forth between historical sources and ethnographic knowledge constitutes the basic character of ethnohistory. In addition, Cohn also offered a word of caution: since the historical documents that an anthropologist deals with are seldom written by those among whom fieldwork is carried out, these accounts are invariably biased as they were written by officials "who only half understood what they were recording" (Cohn 1968:444). Thus, for an anthropologist, and even for a historian for that matter, to understand archival documents, it is essential to decode the categories used by colonial administrators, and the biases they reflect.

Lastly, to study the history of Jat power, together with the constitution of their clan territories and the khap panchayat, I also draw inspiration from Foucault's idea of 'genealogy' or 'history of the present.' According to Foucault, genealogy begins with an inquiry about the relations of power and forces active in contemporary practices and institutions, and then traces how they emerged out of historical processes, struggles, and exercises of power, many of which are no longer remembered (Foucault 1995). In this way, history of the present is not driven by a historian's impulse to study the past, but is instead "a means of critical engagement with the present" (Garland 2014:367). Certain parallels exist

between my approach in this chapter and Foucault's history of the present. For instance, my interest in studying the history of Jat power was motivated not by a concern to understand the past, but rather to reevaluate how certain anthropological and sociological studies have framed the khap panchayat as an example of ossified tradition that is regarded as anterior to administrative and economic rationality of the modern state. This scholarly tendency comes close to what Fox (1985:10) called "organismic conceptions of culture," which views culture as static. I argue that Jat power, and its relationship with the khap panchayat, has a deep but mostly forgotten history, which must be unearthed, as it were, from oral traditions and memories, along with British records. When these sources are brought together, two inter-related features of khap panchayats become apparent. First, they are not static and unchanging, but have always and continue to adapt to the political realities of different historical periods. Second, they are not untouched by or anterior to modern statecraft but have instead evolved in close interaction with precolonial state systems and the modern colonial state.

There is, of course, precedent for the approach I adopt. In the anthropology of South Asia, literature exploring the relationship between history and anthropology has acknowledged that that much of what had long been regarded as traditional features of caste were largely products of the colonial encounter (Appadurai 1988; Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Fuller 1977, 1989). Some adherents of this perspective, however, tend to overstate their case, as they often deduce (if not explicitly then implicitly) that caste (as it exists today) was created *in toto* during the colonial period. To give the reader a summary of all the historical literature on this topic would be unwieldy, so here I articulate my position vis-à-vis this problem by drawing on historian Christopher Bayly's synthesis. In his view, both the colonial idea of timeless India and the position that colonialism alone transformed India into caste society are undefendable (Bayly 1988). Many anthropologists tend to overlook how formative stages of caste, i.e., its norms, practices, and institutions, pre-date the colonial period. Susan Bayly (1999), for instance, has traced the historical roots of modern caste to precolonial state systems, especially to the post-

Mughal successor states.[27] She noted that despite the rigidifying impact of colonial rule, which was perpetuated by Orientalist thinking, together with its economic, political, and legal policies, caste remained relatively open and flexible for the non-elite peasant and pastoral groups like the Jats well into the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I have taken a similar perspective to studying Jat power and its relationship to the khap panchayat. Though the colonial state was instrumental in shaping Jat identity as a stable class of peasantry and sturdy soldiers, I argue that no account of Jat power is complete without reference to their precolonial history where their landowning lineages (kinship organization) were deeply implicated in precolonial political systems.

Jat Power in the Precolonial Period

In the remainder of this chapter, I study the historical trajectory of Jat power across the precolonial and colonial periods. In the absence of precolonial written records for present-day Haryana, much of my knowledge of Jat power, as it was embedded in customary village institutions like the khap panchayat, is derived from the British archive, as well as historical and anthropological scholarship. Though historians of the neighbouring regions of Rajasthan and Punjab have had access to precolonial state records, historians of Delhi and its countryside (including Haryana), such as Datta (1999) and Spear (2011), have not had that privilege. They have instead relied on early colonial documents inasmuch as they are reflective of certain precolonial realities.

In the precolonial period, the contemporary states of Delhi, Haryana, and parts of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh constituted the Mughal province (*subah*) of Delhi, or what Dalrymple (2019:7) called "the Mughal heartlands." Classified as *khalisa* (crown) lands (i.e., lands from where revenue was collected directly for the Mughal Emperor's treasury), the region was described as one of the most fertile in the

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[27] Along the same lines, Sumit Guha (2013:45-82) has traced the history of the formation of dominant caste multi-village clusters, or clan territories, such as those of the Jats, to the pre-Mughal period.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; according to Abu'l Fazal, a Mughal minister, it contributed fifteen million rupees as land revenue annually (Spear 2011:116). With the decline of Mughal Empire in the mid-eighteenth century, the city of Delhi and its vast countryside underwent tremendous political and economic deterioration. For instance, Mughal administration in Delhi, where each *pargana* (district) was served by its revenue and judicial authorities, broke down in 1748-61. Likewise, the network of irrigation canals covering different parts of Delhi's countryside had collapsed by 1761 (Spear 2011:116). By this time, the Jats had already spread to Punjab, Rajputana, the Yamuna valley, and the Indo-Gangetic plains (Datta 1999:1-21).

As Bayly has noted (1999:25-63), this was also the period when values and practices associated with the lordly kshatriya identity, which valorized royal power and beneficence, were gaining popularity among non-elite peasant and semi-pastoral groups such as the Jats. The Jats acquisition of kshatriya status, along with its various martial and regal attributes, was catalyzed by a series of Jat rebellions against the Mughals in the south of Delhi in the early eighteenth century, which led to the rise of the Jat kingdom of Bharatpur (Rana 2006). Thus, not surprisingly, in Mughal records from 1710, the Jats were described as "plunderers and bandits preying on the imperial lines of communication" (Bayly 1983:28). Also, around this time, Jats, many of whose village settlements in the sub-regions of Rohtak, Gurgaon, Hissar, Panipat, and Karnal were seven to eight hundred years old (Bhattacharya 2019:102), were actively colonizing lands along the banks of river Yamuna (present-day Haryana). In this regard, Datta (1999:11) has noted how popular historical narratives have considered Haryana as Jat country (*Jatiyat* or *Jatiyar*)—a formerly green forest that was originally settled by the Jats. Projecting themselves as heirs to the scriptural kshatriya ideal, the Jats asserted their power and legitimacy in the villages they founded by embodying an arms-bearing peasant-warrior identity (Bayly 1999).

With the signing of The Treaty of Surji Arjangaon on 30 December 1803, the East India Company gained control of the city of Delhi, the capital of dwindling Mughal Empire, and its vast countryside, including present-day Haryana (Datta 1999:14; Panigrahi 1968:24). The newly conquered region was named the Delhi Territory.[28] To ascertain its territorial boundaries and to lay the foundation of a new revenue administration, the Company sent its officials throughout Delhi's countryside. As part of this effort, in December 1807, Charles Metcalfe, who later famously described Delhi's Jat villages as 'little Republics,' toured the Jat-dominated parganas of Haveli Palam, Sonipat, Ganour, and Panipat, in order to enter into revenue settlements with their villages.[29] Based on these early forays into the countryside, the Company's officials noted the absence of high-born landowners known in other parts of British India by titles like *talukdar, jagirdar, zamindar*. Instead, in Delhi Territory, a different form of customary land tenure prevailed wherein each village was jointly controlled by a kin body of hereditary peasants who claimed superior proprietary rights in all village lands. For instance, in 1820, Thomas Fortescue, the Civil Commissioner of Delhi, observed how "Each village…belonged to one caste or clan of persons."[30] Fortescue further noted that the kin bodies of hereditary peasants traced their descent to a common male ancestor(s) who had originally settled the village by clearing the jungle. With time, the original shares in land were subdivided among the descendants. When the sharers became too many, some individuals would be asked to settle a new village in the vicinity (Spear 2011:115-136; Panigrahi 1968:24-70).

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[28] Delhi Territory was spread over a region flanked by river Yamuna on the east and river Satluj on the west. In the south, it merged with the hills of Aravalli in Mewat and in the north it reached the town of Ambala sitting next to the foothills of lower ranges of Himalayas (Spear 2011:116).

[29] For a rich flow of official letters that passed between Archibald Seton, the Resident of Delhi Territory (1806-1810), Charles Metcalfe, First Assistant (1806-1808), Delhi Territory, and Charles Dowdeswell, the Revenue Department, Fort William, Calcutta, see *Records of the Delhi Residency and Agency*, pp. 1-40 (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1911). Among other things, in these official letters, one comes across lengthy discussions between these colonial officials who struggled to devise ways to collect land revenue by subjugating local structures of clan- and lineage-based authority prevailing in Jat villages of what is now Haryana.

[30] See Report on the Revenue System of the Delhi Territory (1820) in *Records of the Delhi Residency and Agency*, p. 74 (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1911).

Bayly (1999:37) perceptively noted that such historical overlaps between patrilineal kinship and land control among the Jats had produced *bhaichara* tenures—common units of landownership "with each co-sharer being a fellow member of the same descent unit (clan or *gotra*)."[31] The bhaichara land tenure, whose 'truest forms' were believed to have existed in Jat villages in Delhi Territory's countryside, differed significantly from Bengal's *zamindari* system.[32] While the bhaichara tenure was structured around the figure of the *khudkasht* (the self-cultivating proprietor) who valued the physical toil and labour of cultivation, the *zamindari* was dominated by the aristocratic and pleasure-loving landlord (Bhattacharya 1983). In the same vein, Datta (1999:16) observed that "The bhaichara system was not a system dominated by landlords. It depended instead on the power of the khudkasht belonging to a single Jat got (clan)." In British revenue administration, the bhaichara tenurial system was enshrined through different legal categories, such as 'the village brotherhood', 'the village proprietary body', and 'the body of proprietary co-sharers' (Chakravarty-Kaul 1996). Yet all these terms referred to the same thing: a body of male co-sharers in village lands who were unilineal descendants from a male ancestor.

The politico-juridical institution of the panchayat performed a key role in the bhaichara tenurial system. The first official treatise on Jat villages of Delhi Territory, which was written in 1820 by Fortescue as a revenue report, sketched out how the Jat village panchayat regulated the land and its produce, for instance, by dividing both cultivable and common land among various Jat lineages and sub-lineages, laying out their rights and obligations, and supervising the collection of land revenue. In addition, Fortescue noted the role of the panchayat in adjudication of village and multi-village disputes.

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[31] Bayly drew on Stokes (1978: 77) who had noted that "The hallmark of the true bhaiachara was, indeed, that it was tribal, that practically all cultivators belonged to a single clan or tribe, that all held equal shares and almost all shared in the proprietary management."

[32] In 1838, John Lawrence, the Collector of Delhi Territory, wrote the following about the Jat-dominated parganas of Sonipat and Panipat: "In a flourishing *pargana* on this side of the river, we have no large *zamindar* with his lac or two lacs of annual income, but on the hand, we have thousands of small proprietors each with his brood mare, his buffaloes, his oxen…In no part of Western Provinces…are the tenures so complete and so well recognized as here, no district where the ancient village communes are in such excellent preservation, or where the practice of our Civil Courts has hitherto done so little harm (quoted in Spear 2011:103-104)

Following Fortescue, the subsequent generations of British officers also described the panchayat in terms of village governance and arbitration of disputes. According to them, the Jat panchayat, which was most commonly described as 'a council(s) of elders', controlled all external and internal affairs of a Jat village. For instance, in *Tenure of Land in India*, George Campbell, a British administrator, wrote,

> A Jat village community consists of a body of freemen of one caste, and who traditionally derive from a common ancestor – clansmen…The community is managed by a council of elders, who rule it so long as they retain the confidence of the people, and who conduct all negotiations with the Government. In such a village, then, the body of the cultivators consider themselves to be proprietors. They are united, and very strong; they exercise rights of property; and no one would dream of attempting to disturb them (Campbell 1870:156).

Likewise, the Gazetteer of District Rohtak (1883-84) outlined the juridical power of Jat panchayat in these words,

> The council or *panchayat* settles everything of common interest for the village, – the cultivation of any common lands, – the rent to be paid for these, – the realization of grazing and hearth fees, – the exemption of certain persons from payment, – the building and repair of certain rest-houses, – the supervising of the system of special watchmen (*thikar*), – the cleaning of village tanks and such like…Certain other matters by general custom also need their special assent, such as the breaking up of jungle land, the cutting and selling of the trees of the common land, the grant of a revenue-free holding by the village, and the like.[33]

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[33] Gazetteer of the Rohtak District 1884-4, p. 72.

Such descriptions of Jat villages reveal the extent of the powers exercised by the self-governing institution of the panchayat, specifically over the management and use of village lands and other resources. Notably, historians of northern India have echoed the same point. For instance, Datta (1999:13) observed, "The Harianavi Jats…had their villages managed by their *panch*, a committee of elders (head of families)."

The British also noted that the territorial extent of Jat power, especially in the present-day districts of Rohtak, Sonipat, and Jhajjar where I carried out fieldwork, was not merely limited to individual villages. For example, the 1839 settlement report of pargana Rohtuc Beree (sic) noted that the Jats controlled 80 out of 104 villages. Among the Jats, the Hooda clan controlled 19 villages, and Ahlawat and Kadyan clans had 9 villages each. [34] Similarly, in pargana Gohana, the Jats controlled 51 out of 71 villages, out of which the Gathwala (Malik) clan controlled 23.[35] In the adjoining pargana of Khurkhouda Mandhowtee (sic), Dahiya and Dalal were recorded as the most preponderant clans among the Jats.[36] A much wider view of the territorial extent of Jat clan territories emerged from later colonial settlement reports, such as the Settlement Report of 1873 of the Rohtak district, which reported that the Jats controlled 366 out of 511 villages.[37] At the local level, Jat-dominated sub-regions were disaggregated into multi-village territorial units called tappa.[38] Each tappa was headed by the *tappedary* village, the parent village, and surrounded by its offshoot villages (Baden-Powell 1892:687-89). As Datta (1999:13) noted, the tappa was "controlled by the dominant landholding Jat clan group." The tappa presented

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[34] M.R. Gubbins, *Settlement Report, Pergunnah Rohtac Beree*, pp. 57-58. In Selected Reports on the Revision of Settlement under the Regulation IX of 1833 in the Delhie Territory, No. 1. (Agra: Secundra Orphan Press, 1846).

[35] M.R. Gubbins, *Settlement Report, Pergunnah Gohana*, pp. 81-82. In Selected Reports on the Revision of Settlement under the Regulation IX of 1833 in the Delhie Territory, No. 1. (Agra: Secundra Orphan Press, 1846).

[36] C. Gubbins, *Settlement Report, Pergunnah Khurkhouda Mandhowtee*, p. 35. In Selected Reports on the Revision of Settlement under the Regulation IX of 1833 in the Delhie Territory, No. 1. (Agra: Secundra Orphan Press, 1846). Acceptable English spellings for all these places now are Rohtak, Beri, Kharkhoda and Mandothi.

[37] H.C. Fanshawe, The Settlement Report of the Rohtak District, 1973-1879 (Lahore, 1880), p. 19.

[38] Cohn (1962:316) noted that the precolonial unit of tappa represented local sociological and political groupings. He wrote, "The word tappa is sometimes used for the territory of a lineage and sometimes refers to the home territory of a lineage, as well as the lands which the lineage may have conquered from other lineages."

itself as a united body of clansmen who took joint decisions pertaining to a range of affairs in inter-village units of the khap panchayat, or what the East India Company revenue official M.R. Gubbins had called "a separate body corporate." Gubbins explained that kinship and territorial ties unpinning a tappa "retain much influence over people, and on occasions of feud, or quarrel, the cause of either village is generally espoused by all the brethren of the tappa." [39] This is a classic depiction of the panchayat as a body of dispute settlement that first emerged in colonial sociology and was later echoed in modern anthropological studies.

That the East India Company's officers discovered Jat villages, which were nested in wider clan territories governed by the panchayat, in the early decades of their rule suggests in no uncertain terms that these forms of Jat power predated the start of the colonial period. Thus, I argue, they must be viewed as a species of a precolonial framing of power. How did such multi-village territories dominated by the landowning Jats, and their kinship organization, come into being? To delve into this question, I draw on historical and anthropological works to outline how such entanglements between caste, kinship, land, and power had first crystallized in the precolonial period.

My argument is that the formation of dominant caste village clusters and clan territories (not only in present-day Haryana, but also elsewhere in South Asia) must be understood in terms of their relationship with political power and traditional kingship. Scholars like Bayly (1999), Cohn (1959, 1962), Dirks (2001, 1987), Fox (1971), and Guha (2013) have argued that caste and kinship in the precolonial period were profoundly political and deeply implicated in state building. For instance, Fox (1971:14-57) noted that arms-bearing patrilineal descent groups claiming kshatriya status not only performed political and military roles in precolonial state systems, but were also given land and revenue collecting rights at both village and regional levels. In the same vein, Bayly (1999:25-63) observed that

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[39] M.R. Gubbins describe a tappa as "a cluster of villages, owing the supremacy of one tappedary village, generally the largest among them." M.R. Gubbins, *Settlement Report, Pergunnah Rohtac Beree*, p. 57.

a king established many co-sharers in his sovereignty by granting vast tracts of land, combined with revenue-collecting rights, to kshatriya lineages. This highlights how land rights in precolonial South Asia had a strong political character. Likewise, while studying entanglements between caste, kinship, land, and power among the Kallars in the Tamil countryside, Dirks (1987: 130-131) persuasively argued that caste was not, as Dumont would have it, shaped by the religious logic of purity and pollution, but was rather embedded in "political community" centered around the king and his distribution of royal honors. In sum, this body of literature has shown how caste (at both village and regional levels) existed as lineages whose power and status depended on proximity to royal authority.

Beyond Delhi Territory, the Company's officials also came across similarly structured multi-village clusters led by a dominant caste in other parts of India. For instance, H.M. Eliot noted the presence of territories structured as *chaubisa*, *bealisi*, and *chaurasi* in northern and central regions. While explaining *chaubisa*, Eliot (1869:47) wrote, "From chaubis, twenty-four; is a name applied to a tract of country containing that number of villages in the occupation of a particular tribe." Likewise, his entry for *chaurasi* noted, "The word means, literally, eighty-four: and is territorially applied to a sub-division of parganah, or a district, amounting to eighty-four villages" (Eliot 1869:47). Eliot reported that each multi-village cluster was controlled by one or more clans belonging to caste groups like the Rajput, Jat, Ahir, Gujar, Taga, and others who claimed kshatriya status. In southern regions of India, multi-village clusters were known by different names, such as *dēsam* in the Malabar region (Miller 1954) and *nātu* or *nāḍu* in the Tamil countryside (Dirks 1987:203-246). In the Sanskritic tradition they were identified as *janapada* (Guha 2013:46). These historical examples support the historian Sumit Guha's description of dominant caste multi-village clusters, or clan territories, as constituting "a regional level of authority" (Guha 2013:46). Put another way, they constituted the substrate, as it were, of the political landscape of precolonial India.

Following this, I contend that Jat villages and clan territories are an example of what Cohn (1959:80, 1962) has called the 'little kingdom'—a precolonial territorial domain in which lineages "acted as local rulers…controlled anything from a few villages up to several hundred." In the context of southern regions of India, Ludden (1985:66) called them "dominant caste domains," and Champakalakshmi (2011:28) termed them "peasant micro-regions." Cohn first developed the concept of the little kingdom in the context of Dobhi tappa, a Rajput-dominated territory comprising one hundred villages in Jaunpur, eastern Uttar Pradesh. Like the Jats, the Rajputs viewed their lands as ancestral territory. To Cohn, they described themselves as descendants of an agnatic ancestor who had conquered the region in the seventeenth century. Through armed conquest of this territory, an enactment of kshatriya status, the Rajputs had established themselves as landlords at the helm of the land-based system of patronage (the jajmani system); thus, other castes were dependent on them "through social, economic, ceremonial, and traditional ties" (Cohn 1959:81). As a direct allusion to their dominant status, Cohn noted, the Rajputs were known as *raja* (the king) of their little kingdom. As noted earlier, the Jats of northern India are also known through similar titles like *illaqe ke malik* (lords of the countryside) and *raja* (the king) which underscores their kshatriya status and, by extension, their inherent right to rule (Madsen 1991:352; Tiemann 1970b:168). In this regard, anthropologists have noted that these are not arbitrary titles but draw attention to how landowning castes have historically drawn on indigenous notions of sovereignty centered on the figure of the Hindu king (Raheja 1988; Srinivas 1987:9; Dumont 1980:162).

Cohn (1959, 1962) further explored how little kingdoms, and their arms-bearing kshatriya lineages, were intimately implicated in precolonial state systems and traditional kingships. The little kingdom constituted the lowest level of the pyramid-shaped framework of political authority whose upper levels were occupied by imperial powers like the Mughal Empire and other large kingdoms. As loci of power in the countryside, little kingdoms largely functioned as autonomous political domains, but were

nonetheless firmly nested within imperial states. Specifically, they were responsible for the payment of land revenue, maintenance of law and order, and provisioning of troops to their superiors. In return, the Mughals and their successor states lent them legitimacy by recognizing their territorial domains. The figure of the headman of dominant kshatriya lineages illustrates the politically symbiotic relationship that existed between the little kingdom and transregional empires and larger kingships. Known by various titles like *chaudhari, deshmukh*, *muqaddam*, headmen functioned as critical nodes in local and regional orbits of power. On the one hand, as head of clan, they controlled many internal clan affairs and on the other hand, they were invested with state power (Fox 1971:14-57). This meant they were responsible for revenue collection and were delegated police and civil powers within a region. Elucidating this relationship between locally dominant castes and traditional kingships, Dirks (2001:65) wrote, "Whatever the particular political history, dominant landed groups could not sustain their power within either villages or localities without establishing and maintaining strong relationships with chiefdoms and kingdoms well beyond their local domains." The nature of this relationship highlights how the precolonial state in South Asia was characterized not by the centralization of power and monopolization of coercive force, but rather by the diffusion of administrative, police, and civil powers among regionally-dominant kin groups (Bayly 1999; Cohn 1962; Dirks 2001, 1987; Fox 1971; Frykenberg 1963; Shah 1964).

Scholars have studied how many territory- and kinship-based political domains also grew into larger kingships, especially in the wake of the decline of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century. These include the Sikh kingdom of Punjab and the Maratha kingdom of central India (Bayly 1983; Guha 2013:45-82; Fuller 1977). Prior to British rule, local and regional polities were heavily prone to violence and warfare; for instance, the death of a local king often resulted in a scramble for political power among his heirs and their supporters providing opportunities for politically ambitious clan and lineage heads to capture power at the little kingdom level (Srinivas 1987:1-19). Often, the king (and his chiefs)

belonged to the locally dominant caste and his caste-brethren from local village clusters in the kingdom came to "his aid in a crisis" (Srinivas 1987:29). Such political dynamics set into motion cycles of successive colonization of territories producing what Habib (1963:163) called the "circulation of elites." Likewise, Fuller (1977:97) noted the fact that many Hindu kings had peasant and pastoral backgrounds, which suggests that instead of an absolute distinction between peasant and royal statuses, "a continuum of greater and lesser powers" existed in precolonial state systems. Similar political dynamics had led to the rise of Pudukkottai, a kingdom established by the Kallars, who were widely regarded as highway robbers and thieves in other parts of the Tamil countryside (Dirks 1987). Dirks (1987:203-246) astutely noted that the clan and sub-caste structure (what he termed "social organization") among the Kallars in the countryside shored up the power of Kallar families sitting on the throne. In villages, for instance, the Kallars controlled most of the land, occupied positions of village headmanship, exercised a corporate control over means of violence and coercion, and received royal honours in temples (Dirks 2001:63-80). It is in light of such territory- and kinship-based political power of the Kallars, spread across the countryside, that Dirks justified using Cohn's idea of little kingdom.

How did these political dynamics manifest in Delhi and its countryside in the wake of the decline of the Mughal Empire? Specifically, what do we know about the participation of the Jats, and other arms-bearing mobile pastoral and peasant groups in Delhi's post-Mughal political systems? Towards the end of the eighteenth century, multiple political forces—such as the Marathas of the Deccan, the Jats of Bharatpur, the Sikhs of Punjab, Begum Samru of Aligarh, and European mercenaries like George Thomas—were often in conflict with each other as they each vied for land adjacent to the imperial city of Delhi (Dalrymple 2019). Recurring warfare among them had produce small kingdoms with unstable boundaries; for example, Irishman George Thomas had created a small but short-lived principality that stretched from Hansi, Meham, and Beri to Jhajjar between 1797 and 1799 (Franklin

1806). These armies recruited heavily from the Jats and other pastoral and peasant groups, thereby creating a stable military market in the region (Alavi 1995). Underneath this chequered political landscape were networks of clan territories, among which that of the Jats was not only numerically the most prominent, but also controlled the greatest number of villages and village-clusters. According to Bayly (1999:37), in the precolonial period, the term 'Jat' referred not so much to a caste group in the modern sense, but rather functioned as an occupational title adopted by numerous tightly-knit, non-servile, semi-pastoral and peasant lineages. Likewise, for Stokes (1986:129), Jat lineages were characterized by "the solidity of their occupation of the soil, which bore all characteristics of tribal possession." Simply put, Jat clans and lineages functioned as political organizations that established control over ancestral territories through self-governing institution of the panchayat and were united against rivals who disputed or tried to eject them from their lands. Since larger Jat lineages controlled the oldest villages and their off-shoots, smaller clans with comparatively younger villages sought protection of larger clans to survive (Bhattacharya 2019:102). As observed by Joshi (2019), this was done in return of a payment of tribute or military manpower in times of crisis. These peasant-warriors of the eighteenth century were armed with the lance, the sabre, and the matchlock muskets and could deter well-trained cavalry when positioned behind the village mud-walls (Franklin 1806:131; Khan 2004: 164-190).

Lastly, apart from functioning as the basic unit in regional politics, the little kingdom was also the earliest unit of social and jural organization (Cohn 1959, 1965; Dumont 1980:152-183; Guha 2013:45-82). The authority to frame laws (customs, rules, and the means to coerce or induce compliance to them), and to settle disputes and mete out justice (*nyaya*)—the juridical character of caste powers—rested with the dominant caste. This played a critical role in binding various social groups into a politico-ritual order of caste in Hindu society. The law-making authority of the landowning castes pertained to a medley of superior and inferior rights in land and its produce, imposition of taxes on

artisanal and trading castes, and allocation of land for cultivation and grazing, among other things (Cohn 1962; Ludden 1985). For instance, the Jats collected a hearth tax (*kodi kamini*) from the Dalits and other artisanal castes serving them (Chowdhry 1984). In this context, the authority to settle disputes at both village and multi-village levels between different caste groups necessitated recognition of a higher adjudicating authority. As noted by many, the panchayat of the dominant caste, which could assemble at various territorial levels, served as this authority, designed to preserve the politico-ritual ordering of various caste groups (Dumont 1980; Raheja 1988b; Srinivas 1987:1-115). In maintaining this hierarchy, it replicated the royal court of the Hindu king (Mendelsohn 1993).[40]

To reflect on these political and juridical dimensions of caste power and authority, I find it helpful to think with Sally F. Moore's idea of 'semi-autonomous social fields' (Moore 1973). According to Moore, the semi-autonomous social field is the one that,

> can generate rules and customs and symbols internally, but… is also vulnerable to rules
>
> and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which it is surrounded.
>
> The semi-autonomous social field has rule-making capacities, and the means to induce or
>
> coerce compliance; but it is simultaneously set in a larger social matrix which can, and
>
> does, affect, and invade it, sometimes at the invitation of persons inside it, sometimes at
>
> its own instance (Moore 1973:720)

The concept of the little kingdom bears a striking resemblance to Moore's semi-autonomous social fields. In the precolonial period, forms of Jat authority safeguarded their ancestral territories and enabled Jat lineages to lead a semi-autonomous existence. In their little kingdoms, Jats made both laws

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[40] While outlining the similarity between the juridical powers of the dominant caste and the king, Srinivas (1987:9) noted, "The informal council of the leading elders of the dominant caste maintained law and order in the village… [ensured] that each caste performed its duties and did not assign to itself the rights and privileges which belonged to the higher castes…it did feel responsible for the maintenance of the social order just as the chief or raja felt a similar responsibility at the higher levels."

and the means to enforce them. But since they were nested in wider precolonial state systems, they were also vulnerable to their political superiors. What happened to Jat power and authority in the British period? This is the story to which I now turn.

The British Period

To build its imperial dominion, the East India Company engaged in a systematic breakdown of numerous small but independent post-Mughal kingdoms, many of which had emerged on the strength of their clan and lineage networks (Dirks 2001). At the same time, local and regional precolonial structures of power, what Cohn called the little kingdom, also began undergoing far-reaching political, economic, and legal transformations. Broadly, these early colonial transformations were of three kinds. First, as noted by Cohn (1996), Fuller (1977), Metcalfe (1962), among others, were changes catalyzed by the introduction of British land policy. Though the precise effects of British land policy on locally dominant groups varied from one region to another, an outcome throughout British India was the creation of a revenue administration whose objective was to find exclusive 'owners' of land upon whom legal obligations of the payment of land revenue could be placed (Cohn 1996:57-75; Fuller 1977:103-107). Thus, the advent of British rule was marked by the introduction of private property rights in land, which were backed by statute law and the colonial state's coercive power. Second, the British curbed private control over the means of force and violence—basic prerequisites to establishing and retaining political power in the precolonial period (Dirks 2001; Fuller 1977). Third, the colonial state was more extensive in its territorial reach and more vigorous in its bureaucratic form than any other precolonial power; as a result, its formal structures of rule could permeate the interiors of the countryside.[41] Thus, with reference to these developments, Fuller (1977:106) rightly observed,

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[41] Though the territorial and bureaucratic reach of the colonial state had developed over time and reached its zenith in the 1900s, its seeds, so to speak, were sown early, i.e., with the establishment of East India Company's rule in the early nineteenth century.

"British political control over their subjects was tighter than any that had previously existed." However, at the same time, the basic character of these colonial transformations was "far from revolutionary" (Stokes 1959:26; Witsoe 2013:23-50). This was because colonialism largely preserved pre-existing structures of power so as to avoid "a disruption of the traditional order of local society" (Whitcombe 1972:17). In this sense, while colonial rule was marked by ruptures with the precolonial past, it was also accompanied by underlying continuities.

How did these colonial transformations shape Haryana's countryside? More specifically, how did they impact the political and economic status of Jat lineages? I contend that these transformations are best understood as produced by an interplay between two contrasting political impulses. On one hand, the British restricted participation of arms-bearing Jat lineages in local and regional spheres of power by curtailing private control of the means of force and violence. In addition, the gradual penetration of the colonial state's apparatuses into the countryside, such as through revenue collection and the introduction of government courts, also diminished the clout of locally dominant lineages throughout British India (Mendelsohn 1993:839). On the other hand, British rule also helped formalize and fortify the power of Jat lineages within the bounds of their individual villages. This was achieved by enshrining in British land policy and customary law Jat proprietary claims over village lands and Jat control over village governance and the economy through the panchayat. In this way, Jat lineages succeeded in adapting and maintaining their social prominence despite changed macro-political conditions. Their caste powers, however, were treated as part of a radically different framework of colonial statecraft and law. These transformations were not sudden outcomes of colonial rule but unfolded slowly and steadily.

In Delhi Territory, the fundamentals of British land policy initially rested on preserving customary land tenures and the village institutions (like the panchayat) that supported them (Spear 2011:84-136;

Panigrahi 1968:24-71). Before I examine how British land policy originated, and its impact on landowning Jat lineages, I will first briefly lay out basic characteristics of precolonial land tenures. In precolonial Haryana, land in Jat bhaichara villages was held in common by patrilineal families or lineages whose members held shares: since the idea of private property rights in land did not exist, land was controlled not by individuals but by kin bodies (Oldenburg 2002:109-111). In addition to these shareholders, precolonial land tenures included those who Oldenburg (2002:101) has called "implicit coparceners." These included women and members of dependent castes who participated in or enabled agricultural labour. This resulted in an overlapping but hierarchical arrangement of interests in land where everyone ranging from the king to the dependent castes had definite and permanent rights over land's produce (Fuller 1977). Notably, since a number of people were co-sharers in land and its produce, "no one could claim to 'own' the land in the sense that he could dispose of it and its produce as he chose" (Neale 1962:33). Finally, what enabled precolonial tenurial systems to function with autonomy was that imperial powers did not penetrate below the administrative unit of pargana (district); as a result, state revenue agents dealt mainly with clan and lineage headmen, who along with other village elders constituted the panchayat that governed land relations and other village affairs. In this regard, Saran (1941:207) wrote, "The parganah was the lowest official unit of administration, and below the parganah was the village panchayat, which was popular in origin but recognized by the government." In the remaining part of this section, I examine how different features of this precolonial tenurial system were incorporated into British land policy and, as a consequence, underwent changes that transformed relations of land and power in the countryside.

Starting from the early nineteenth century, British revenue officials in Delhi Territory entered into what were known as village settlements that were made "neither with great hereditary revenue farmers like the Bengal *zemindars* nor with the humble cultivators as in Madras, but generally with the co-sharing village brotherhoods" (Stokes 1959:85). As mentioned previously, early forays into Delhi

Territory's countryside by British officials had revealed that the kin body of hereditary peasants—what the British had called the co-sharing village brotherhood—considered themselves masters of the village and its lands, and of other dependent caste groups who inhabited the village. Since these individuals descended from the original male founder(s), each village had passed within the same patrilineal families for centuries. From those early years of colonial rule, village settlements made in Delhi Territory largely aimed to preserve these features of the bhaichara tenurial system: as Spear (2011:88) noted of village settlements, their "essential principal was to preserve the old intact…the confirmations of customs were fundamental." Specifically, village settlements continued to be made through the co-sharing village brotherhoods as represented by their muqaddam or panch, i.e., village headmen representing various landholding Jat lineages. Once the revenue demand was fixed, its distribution happened in the panchayat constituted by a larger agnatic body of the lineage (Panigrahi 1968:33-35).

Also, in the early decades of British rule, efforts were made to keep the countryside, and by extension the indigenous village institutions that governed it, untouched by the British legal system. For instance, Metcalfe, who served as the Resident of Delhi from 1811 to 1819, resisted the imposition of British courts in the region. It was only after his exit that Delhi's countryside was divided into five districts in 1820, each served by a Collector and under the jurisdiction of a British court (Spear 2011:102). Thus, in the face of the limited reach of British legal system, the politico-juridical institution of panchayat continued to have a free rein in the countryside. In addition, old practices like *khoji* were retained to curb robberies and cattle theft, which occurred frequently as part of rivalries between neighbouring villages and clans (Spear 2011:93; Gilmartin 2003). In the same vein, the old system of village watchmen called *thikar* was preserved by the Company (Spear 2011:125). Broadly, village settlements were made "without upsetting the existing social order" in Delhi's countryside (Panigrahi 1968:31).

In the first decade of colonial rule, village settlements in Delhi Territory were made for one year. They were later extended to triennial settlements. In the 1820s and 1830s, Summary Settlements ranging from three to ten years were made (Spear 2011:86; Bhattacharya 2019:53). To inform the Summary Settlements, the British began creating village land records following guidelines laid down by Regulation VII of 1822, a law structuring revenue administration in Delhi Territory and the neighbouring North-Western Provinces (Panigrahi 1968:99). Among other things, Regulation VII proposed conducting land surveys, creating a record of rights of both landowners and other inferior classes of cultivators, and recording customary practices in the village. It broadly reiterated the official colonial position to interfere as little as possible with the internal affairs of village communities, including the attendant village-based framework of revenue and property rights. For instance, in 1827, proprietary rights in village Kewali (presently in Sonipat district) rested with 34 Jats families.[42] Four lineage (*pana*) divisions existed among the Jats of Kewali, each represented by their panch in the Jat-dominated panchayat (Panigrahi 1968:92).

In 1833, Delhi Territory came under the jurisdiction of the High Court and Board of Revenue of the North-Western Provinces (NWP) (Datta 1999:14). The following year, the Board of Revenue introduced Regulation IX, which gave a firm legal footing to revenue practices followed in Delhi Territory. This regulation preserved the village system and gave legal form to most pre-existing features of Jat authority. First and foremost, it translated the precolonial land claims of Jat lineages into modern land rights, classifying the men of landholding Jat lineages as sole proprietors and thereby enhancing their economic status in the village. Second, the position of lineage-cum-village headman, who functioned as a bridge between the co-sharing village brotherhood and the British government,

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[42] In addition, the village was also populated by a few *ryot* and *pahi* families, i.e., inferior classes of cultivators, who held customary rights in land for as long as they paid land revenue.

was incorporated into the British revenue administration.[43] Third, the village continued to be treated as the basic unit of land revenue and property rights, thus formalizing the power of the panchayat (Bhattacharya 2019:142-151; Panigrahi 1968:117). Marriott (1955) rightly observed that these developments produced an interpenetration between lower segments of British administration and the local kingship organization of the landholding caste. Regulation IX is therefore significant not only for what it says about British aspirations to standardize and increase land revenue as its empire in India expanded, but also because it formalized precolonial linkages between caste, kinship, landownership, and power in northern India.

Following the introduction of Regulation IX, the First Regular Settlement was made in 1837–38. This was followed by the Second Regular Settlement in the 1870s, which was revised in the 1910s. Under colonial rule, fixing revenue settlements went hand in hand with recording proprietary titles. Driven to create individual property rights in land, the male peasant proprietor was framed as the lynchpin of their modern revenue policy. This transformed the basic relationship between peasants and their land. Specifically, the precolonial bundle of overlapping tenures, combined with family and community interests in land and its produce, was flattened and converted into modern proprietorships (Oldenburg 2002:99-130). With the classification of men of landholding Jat lineages as proprietors, the implicit land rights of coparceners (i.e., women and members of dependent castes) were either diluted or erased. As noted by Bhattacharya, customary entitlements were replaced by a new binary shaping land relations: the proprietor and the tenant (Bhattacharya 2019:152-182). Any one not belonging to the dominant lineage of the village was not recorded as a proprietor. Thus, under this regime of private property rights, women and members of non-dominant dependent castes could never be recorded as proprietors of land, which directly led to an erasure of their earlier status as implicit coparceners.

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[43] Under Regulation IX, the position of village headman was renamed *lambardar*. Lambardar was a corrupt version of the original term of *numberdar*, i.e., the keeper of numbers.

About this, Bhattacharya (2019:160) rightly noted, "As the male village brotherhoods consolidated their power, these exclusions were strengthened." In this way, the recording and then translating of customary land rights into European legal categories not only changed their nature, but also their source of authority.

Since the start of colonial rule, the panchayat had an important place in the British imagination. Most saliently, since British authorities wanted village communities to be governed through their own indigenous institutions, the panchayat was empowered as the site of village arbitration. British officials saw the panchayat as dispensing justice through a small nucleus of panch—bearers of local customary norms and practices, who were typically seated around a tree or in the *chaupal* (the village rest-house). Through preserving the self-adjudicating character of village communities, the British government envisaged embedding itself in village customary institutions. In addition to perceiving the panchayat as a site of dispute settlement, the British also regarded it as an instrument of governance used by the co-sharing village brotherhood (or the landowning lineages). For instance, while describing Jat villages in Delhi Territory in 1820, Fortescue wrote, "The assemblies for determining the village matters were and still are termed as punchayets."[44] Along the same lines, Campbell (1853:83) observed, "common affairs were managed…by the Committee or Punch elected by the proprietary community." Though the panchayat was led by its panch, each co-sharer of the village brotherhood was described as equal in terms of rank and status. In practice, though, the panchayat was anything but democratic since relations of brotherhood and equality existed only among the male members of the village brotherhood. Women and dependent castes were excluded from the panchayat and thus had no say in village governance. In this way, the panchayat was in part an instrument of caste dominance. Its

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[44] See Report on the Revenue System of the Delhi Territory (1820) in *Records of the Delhi Residency and Agency*, p. 121 (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1911).

formalization through British policy consolidated the power of the male village brotherhood and marginalized those who did not belong to it (Bhattacharya 2019:142-151).

In 1858, Delhi Territory was added to the newly conquered province of Punjab (Datta 1999:14). The recently developed system of revenue collection and property rights—popularly known as the Mahalwari system—served as an administrative model that at the time was extended to colonial Punjab. As noted by Bhattacharya (2019:116), "Since the Jat villages of Punjab appeared similar to those in the North-Western Provinces, these officials perceived the newly annexed territories through the classificatory categories with which they were already familiar." Moreover, most officials deployed in the Punjab, like John Lawrence and George Campbell, had initially gained administrative experience in revenue administration in Delhi Territory and North-Western Provinces. By this time, a formulaic definition of the village community was already in place, which did not only underpin British land policy but was also reiterated by colonial intellectuals like Henry Maine in their writings (Mantena 2010). Specifically, the village community was defined as an undivided joint body (or an internally cohesive unit) bound by ties of blood and lineage, capable of warding off external threats and surviving seasonal crises like droughts and famines.[45] With regards to such interlinkages between colonial governance and knowledge production, Bhattacharya (2019:136) noted, "Observations about Delhi villages were to become the premises of a universal theory." In other words, the Jat village community had acquired an epistemic status that was extended to Punjab through colonial statecraft and law. In the 1860s, a few years after Delhi Territory was made part of Punjab, a new activity was added to the

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[45] The most popular definition of village community was given by Charles Metcalfe as part of his description of Delhi Territory's fortified Jat villages in the early nineteenth century (Dumont 1966a). Metcalfe wrote, "The Village communities are little Republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindus, Pathan, Mughal, Mahratta, Sikh, English are masters in turn, but the village communities remain the same" (cited in Spear 2011:117). Siddiqi (1973:9) noted that Metcalfe's description (though exaggerated in nature) is reflective of precolonial realities of the time when the power of the Mughal state around the city of Delhi had declined so far that a much greater degree of local independence than previously had emerged.

official duties of British revenue officers: the compilation of "customary law." With the codification of customary law, power and authority of the male village brotherhood were enhanced further.

Just as the introduction of private property rights in land had transformed land relations, so did the codification of customary law change the matrix of social relations in northern India's countryside (Bhattacharya 2019:183-220; Oldenburg 2002:131-174). In this context, customary law referred to how selective precepts of precolonial law had come to be recognized by the colonial regime (Hooker 1975). Specifically, customary law (whether in British Punjab or elsewhere in the British Empire) was never simply an adapted or transformed version of precolonial law. Instead, it was a new legal form comprising only those customary norms and practices that were compatible with British ideology of land ownership and legal relations. Further, precolonial customary norms and practices tended to be unwritten and flexible rather than written and fixed, and were derived from sources of authority outside the colonial state. Thus, in the making of customary law, "The complex and plastic universe of oral, implicit, flexible and informally transmitted customary practices" was transformed "into a written, fixed, judicable, actionable, and enforceable corpus of laws" (Oldenburg 2002:133-134).

In colonial Punjab, patrilineal kinship, along with its norms and practices of agnatic succession, constituted the overarching framework within which customary law was codified. For instance, C.L. Tupper, who oversaw the systematization of customary law in Punjab, wrote, "The general formula . . . is that the clan originates in the tribe, the village in the clan, and the joint family in the village" (cited in Bhattacharya 2019:126). In this way, the imperial authority perpetuated itself by establishing a direct link with forms of dominance wielded by the landowning clan and lineages in the countryside (Gilmartin 1988:11-38). Early efforts to codify customary law were visible in revenue settlement operations in Delhi Territory and North-Western Provinces where a record of customary village practices (*wajib-ul-arz*) was maintained. This record included the rights of all cultivators, rights to

common lands and forests, customs relating to village irrigation, rights in village ponds (*johad*), and dues paid to the dependent castes (the jajmani system). In the 1850s, the same efforts at codification were extended to colonial Punjab. Thereafter, these records of village customs formed the bases for the compilations of Punjab Civil Code, which comprised various manuals of customary law consulted by judges and officers. Later, in 1865, the British decided that tribe, and not the village, should be the relevant unit for recording of customs. As a result, within a few years, customs of landowning tribes and clans (*rivaj-i-am*) were compiled for various districts of Punjab. During that period, the emphasis on customs as a source of legality became "a new language of power and legitimation" (Bhattacharya 2019:185).

This is most visible in how customs were codified through an ethnographic dialogue between the settlement officers and the village elders of each landowning caste (Bhattacharya 2019:182-220; Oldenburg 2002:102). The practice of treating village elders as the holders of local knowledge, and as figures who established social order by disciplining community members and adjudicating disputes, was first established in the Jat villages of Delhi Territory and later extended to Punjab. By treating them as sources of authentic knowledge about the village and the tribe/clan, the British solidified the power of village patriarchs from dominant landowning castes. Their perspectives shaped the codification of customary law, which influenced the entire legal structure of the Raj. As a result, claims of women and members of dependent castes were regularly dismissed by British courts. In other words, the customs recorded by the British were constructs of male heads of the dominant landowning clans and lineages, who opposed the rights of women and members of the dependent castes, i.e., the precolonial implicit coparceners. In this way, the centuries-old entanglements between caste, kinship, land, and power were affirmed by the British and became part of official and judicial common sense.

To sum up, in the colonial period, the Jats of present-day Haryana and neighbouring regions successfully adapted to new political circumstances. Specifically, the Jats consolidated and solidified their local authority through British land policy and customary law. That apart, the Jats' proclivity for settled cultivation, together with their settlement in contiguous multi-villages localities, was compatible with the British imperial ideal of the revenue-paying farmer. By 1833, the Company had repaired the network of irrigation canals and expanded stable agriculture in much Jat-dominated territory (Datta 1999). The Jat cultivator was often perceived in idyllic terms by the colonial regime, bestowed with lavish titles like 'the flower of the peasantry' and 'the pillar of the state' (Aitchison 1892:30). The Land Alienation Act of 1900, which prevented the sale of agricultural land from the so-called agricultural tribes to the Bania, the village moneylender, further consolidated the Jats' identity as the peasant proprietor and recipients of imperial patronage (Oldenburg 2002). The British also heavily recruited the Jats into the army where they received a regular salary and pension. Before they were celebrated as one the most indispensable 'martial races' of British India during the First and Second World Wars, the Jats had made a reputation for themselves as sturdy soldiers in military campaigns to Bhutan, Afghanistan, Burma, and elsewhere during the second half of the nineteenth century (Datta 1999).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the historical foundations of Jat power, and the khap panchayat, by synthesizing insights and methodologies from both anthropology and history. Specifically, I first analyzed the founding story of Peepalvas, a Jat village, by asking how male ancestors of the landowning Jat lineages had settled the village centuries-ago. Narrations of these founding stories by Jat elders, I have argued, have enabled the Jats to recognize themselves as descendants of the original settlers of the village, and thus the rightful masters of its lands, as well as its lower caste inhabitants. Further, by tracing similar narratives of the past at the multi-village level, which described how male ancestors of

a Jat clan established contiguous villages thereby constituting an ancestral clan territory called khap or tappa, the chapter sketched out historical conditions under which the khap panchayat, the multi-village repositories of Jat power, had first emerged. In this fashion, I have examined these narratives of the past as narratives of power that reinforce historical interlinkages between caste, kinship, land ownership, and ideologies of power in the present.

However, the historically constituted powers of the khap panchayat, namely, their ability to subjugate lower castes through land-based system of patronage, to keep a stranglehold on local politics and administration, and to frame village laws and mete out justice by settling disputes, have waned considerably in the postcolonial present. The story of the decline of the khap panchayat intersects with the expanding power of the postcolonial state, especially, its apparatuses of governmentality and legal system, and more recently, the entry of private capital, in the countryside. As mentioned in the chapter, the Jats use local idioms like *khali dhancha* ("empty repositories") and *sookhi chaudhrahat* ("dried-up caste power") to express the loss in power suffered by the khap panchayat. Inclusion of these fragments of oral histories—the history of village settlements and the attendant inscription of Jat ascendancy within a given territory—has enabled me to disrupt the ahistorical nature of anthropological knowledge about caste and its forms of power in South Asia. Further, to move beyond oral histories, I also delved into the colonial archives, along with historical and anthropological research, pertaining to this region.

Studying colonial documents like revenue reports, district gazettes, official correspondences between administrators, together with historical and anthropological scholarship, enabled me to respond to a fundamental question, namely, how did such multi-village territories dominated by landowning castes, their kinship units and panchayats come into being? I have argued that the khap panchayat exemplifies a much wider pan-Indian political structure whose origins lie in precolonial state systems. As observed

by colonial administrators and historians, similar multi-village caste territories (known through different names in various regions of India) used to characterize precolonial India's countryside and were intricately nested in its state systems. Termed as 'little kingdom' by Cohn (1959, 1962), or as 'dominant caste domains' by Ludden (1985), these territories were controlled by patrilineal descent groups who claimed kshatriya status and replicated royal functions of the king by controlling land, its produce, as well as the artisanal and agrarian labour of dependent castes. In the final section, I have examined how power and authority amassed by Jat lineages before the arrival of the East India Company in 1803 came to be enshrined in British land policy, and its regime of customary law. More broadly, in tracing the evolution of the politico-juridical institution of the khap panchayat, this chapter has provided the historical context for the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter 2

Gendered Jat Power: Scenes from a Marriage Dispute

Introduction

This chapter examines how the male-dominated khap panchayat has shaped family and domesticity among the Jats, especially by governing women's marriage and sexuality. Scholars of South Asia have long noted that regulation of women's marriage through caste marriage codes—i.e., norms and practices of caste exogamy and endogamy—has been central to the formation of caste (Chowdhry 2007; Dumont 1980; Parry 1979; Solanki 2011; Uberoi 1993). While exogamy requires marriage outside a defined circle or group of relatives to preserve boundaries marking kinship units, caste endogamy, i.e., marriage within the caste, is essential for maintaining separation between caste groups. For these reasons, Uberoi has rightly held caste marriage as "one of the essential pillars of caste society" (Uberoi 1993:230).

In Haryana, village networks of the khap panchayat enforce customary norms and practices of Jat exogamy and endogamy (Chowdhry 2004, 2007). Their leaders use the vocabulary of group morality and male honour (*izzat*) to raise objections not only to self-choice marriages that breach Jat marriage codes, but also against state laws, such as the Special Marriage Act 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act 1955, that give legal validity to such marriages. More severely, the khap panchayat and its leaders have gained much notoriety for carrying out honour killings of such couples, especially in cases of hypogamous unions where a young Jat girl elopes with a young Dalit boy (Baxi, Rai & Ali 2006; Srinivasan 2020; Thapar-Björkert 2014). Such practices of patriarchal violence emanate in part from male insecurities about possible alienation from land, especially in the wake of the Hindu Succession Act 2005 that granted women an equal right to inherit ancestral property (Chowdhry 2007; Ahlawat 2012; Srinivasan 2020).

The khap panchayat of the Jats also exert control over the spheres of family and domesticity in another way: they often adjudicate marriage disputes. This is especially true within tight-knit caste communities where families and neighbours know each other well and thus kin-based surveillance is most stringent. That marital disputes are settled by a body of men constituting the panchayat helps Jat males achieve control over the reproductive and productive labour of the married woman, which is critical for the extension of patriline and central to Jat domesticity. Thus, an ethnographic focus on how the khap panchayat governs family and marriage has enabled me to study the gendered character of Jat power, and how it is applied not so much externally (for instance, over member of lower castes), but internally over its members, especially over women and their bodies and sexuality.

In this chapter, I study the story of a multi-year marriage dispute by tracing a series of domestic conflicts and how they were processed (often simultaneously) in village units of the khap panchayat, a government court, and a police station, i.e., in both state and non-state legal forums. Specifically, I examine how the use of violence by a husband, and his family members, against his wife was engulfed by customary disputing practices unfolding in the khap panchayat. Though women are often at the center of male-dominated deliberations in the khap panchayat, they are not allowed to participate in them. Adopting the perspective of dispute settlement, I piece together various fragments of a series of disputes to arrive at a much broader picture of Jat patriarchy, which, as I argue, is rooted in structural kinship, male landownership, and a pervasive ideology of male guardianship. In this way, I am able to outline what Comaroff and Roberts (1981) have called the 'sociocultural orders' from where disputes first emerge and later develop a social life. By the social life of a dispute, I refer to how a dispute gets discussed in often minute detail among groups of both Jat men and women. In particular, the actions and characters of the disputants—their speech, comportment, and motivations—are rigorously assessed, and blame is apportioned among the disputing parties who are later instructed by senior Jat males (*panch*) in the panchayat to follow appropriate modes of gendered behavior. These

overlapping ethnographic inquiries have enabled me to outline what goes into the making of caste-based governance of family, marriage, and sexuality.

At the same time as this chapter focuses on the continued influence of the khap panchayat in the settling of domestic disputes, it also highlights the increasing reach of the state. In Haryana's countryside, the khap panchayat is no longer the only forum in which disputes get adjudicated, as many disputing parties now also appeal to state law and its institutions. Indeed, a growing number of scholars have noted how state law in India is deeply interwoven into the private lives of its citizens, especially through laws governing family and marriage (Agnes 1999; Holden 2016; Lemons 2019; Solanki 2011; Basu 2015; Vanita 2011). Many among them have argued against seeing a binary division between state law and customs, for law is often deployed to extend customary control of patriarchs over family and marriage (Kapur 2013; Menon 2004; Mody 2008). This especially holds true for rural regions where police officers, lawyers, public prosecutors, and trial judges commonly subscribe to kin-based notions of male honour, thereby establishing patriarchal control over women's bodies often in contravention of constitutional law (Chowdhry 2007; Srinivasan 2020). For Baxi (2006:62), this draws attention to a nexus between kinship and law leading to what she calls the "privatization of state law." But, as Comaroff (1994: ix) reminds us, law has a "Janus-faced" character, in that it is at once a tool of domination and resistance. For instance, despite their lack of universal enforcement, state laws pertaining to divorce and domestic violence have enabled married women to leave violent marriages, and even to claim civil remedies by raising the threat of criminal prosecution (Basu 2015). My analysis of marriage disputes in Haryana in this chapter aims to simultaneously highlight the legal possibilities opened up by state law for women while also emphasizing the significant limitations and barriers women face in using the law to their advantage.

The Estranged Wife

As is common in northern India, after marrying Ashwani in February 2006, Anjali started to live with him and his family in their ancestral home in village Lakhanpura, Rohtak. They have had what is commonly known as 'arranged marriage,' a form of marriage in which parents and other family members select their children's spouses. Both sets of parents had followed Jat marriage rules of exogamy and endogamy while fixing the match. In March 2013, after having suffered domestic violence for most of her married life, Anjali attempted suicide but survived. Following that event, Ashwani and Anjali separated. In December 2014, Ashwani filed for a legal divorce in a government court. This was followed by a mediation process (interspousal conciliation) held in the family court of Rohtak. Once all attempts at reconciliation had failed, a divorce trail was expected to start.

During this interim period, more specifically on December 24, 2016, the topic of Ashwani's marriage dispute was raised by Narender, his elder patrilineal brother (i.e., a cousin), in an all-male gathering of Jat men of which Ashwani was also a part. As the discussion of Ashwani's separation started to unfold, the gathering of Jat patrilineal brothers, which had originally met to drink whiskey and eat chicken, soon started to resemble in many ways a more formal panchayat. Questions were asked of Ashwani, whose answers revealed the great depths of his marriage dispute. Among other things, blame was laid on him for not following appropriate modes of gendered behaviour. He was not only profiled as an inferior and weak male who could not keep his family together but was also castigated for not following the advice of senior males of the patriline. Ashwani, on the other hand, transferred all blame onto Anjali, her father, and her brothers. Among other things, he faulted them for dragging him and other members of his family to a police station and government court. In ethnographic terms, this informal panchayat-like gathering of patrilineal brothers constituted my entry point in the dispute.

Before delving into the dispute, I will briefly lay out connotations associated with two terms I use throughout the chapter. Firstly, I use the term 'Jat brothers' in an expansive sense—it refers not only to biological siblings but also to kin from a common male ancestor. The second term is 'male honor' (*izzat*)—a cultural idea that not only shaped actions of various people involved in the dispute but also determined the dispute's overall trajectory. Most villagers, especially the dominant Jats, are constantly engaged with the idea of honor. Those viewed as lacking honor are busy cultivating it, whereas those having it are either maintaining it or involved in increasing it. The honor commanded by a man is easily measurable through the degree of respect shown towards him by others. Honor is also closely associated with power, which, on most occasions, is tied with land, money, and formal positions of political authority, e.g., village headmanship (sarpanch) (Wadley 1994:77-105). In addition, male honor is critically dependent on the behaviour (*vyavahar*) of the women—i.e., the daughters, sisters, as well as daughters-in-law. Honor is lost, for example, when an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, or when a married woman is not veiled in presence of elders, or if she roams around village lanes without any good reason, or worse, if she runs away with her lover (Moore 1998). It is precisely for these reasons that women's behaviour becomes the object of strict surveillance in face-to-face kin communities of the Jats. In the context of domestic disputes, male honor is preserved when the dispute is adjudicated by the panchayat constituted by extended patrilineal kin and is lost when it is taken outside to the police and government courts. At its heart is the belief that maintenance of kinship relations (constituted either through marriage or descent) does not fall under the jurisdiction of state law.

Masculine bonhomie

On the night of December 24, 2016, I found myself participating in a 'party' with Amarjit, my Jat landlord, and his close circle of patrilineal brothers, in the government school in village Lakhanpura, Rohtak. In Haryana, the English word 'party' is a commonly-used euphemism that refers to all-male drinking bouts followed by a meal of cooked meat. From the outset, then, the gathering was

founded on a pair of transgressions, as the consumption of alcohol and meat are against Hindu norms. These types of transgressions, however, are numerous, and are generally tolerated if only pursued in quasi-secrecy far away from domestic spaces. Situated on the fringes of Lakhanpura and separated from its the residential area by a large village tank (*johad*), the government school served as a safe spot where such male gatherings could be held.

Jeffrey (2010:62) has observed how chicken and whiskey parties among Jat men serve as a modality to reproduce "masculine conviviality"—a self-presentation of male strength and martial prowess. He rightly notes that by holding such male gatherings, which may include gun-shooting and bouts of arm-wrestling among other 'masculine' activities, affluent Jats cultivate political solidarities with urban-based state officials. To this, I add that chicken and whiskey parties not only enable building of political networks, but they also serve as sites of male decision-making where, for example, a contract-farming agreement may be presented, negotiated, and finalized. In this and other subsequent sections, I explore what goes into the making of Jat masculine sociality. More specifically, I explore how a chicken and whiskey party in Lakhanpura's government school transformed into a panchayat-like assembly which adjudicated Ashwani's marital problems and their repercussions.

That night's party with Amarjit and his patrilineal brothers was special. For starters, its participants were drinking expensive Scotch whiskey, not the cheap brand that could be procured from the roadside shack outside the village. Second, many in the group were part of a notable category of men: middle-aged Jat men who had migrated with their families from Lakhanpura to live in various towns and cities of Haryana. These Jat men had managed to break away from their family's dependence on farming, an occupation that has become more precarious in post-liberalization India, to become part of Haryana's emerging middle-class (Srinivasan 2020:83-104; Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan 2020). Among those gathered that night, Satyajit lived in Gurgaon city, Narender and Satender in Sonipat city,

Mukesh in Rohtak city, and Bunty in the nearby Gohana town.[46] These men, and many others like them, were living examples of the rural-to-urban trend of upward mobility; they were thus seen as objects of emulation within the village. In this sense, they constituted what Jeffrey (2010) has termed as the rural middle class.[47]

December 24 was also a Sunday, when men and their families who have migrated to urban centers often visit their ancestral village. On that day, besides reconnecting with their kith and kin, these men had also come to Lakhanpura to watch the village's annual volleyball tournament.[48] Once the tournament ended in the late afternoon, Amarjit and his brothers loitered around the village. They sat in the all-male neighbourhood gatherings called 'baithak' to smoke hookah and socialize with their other patrilineal relatives. As per Amarjit's plan, they had one more task to attend to before calling it a day and starting the party. As the dusk approached, Amarjit and his brothers joined other Jat men of Lakhanpura to attend a village meeting in Khajan Singh's courtyard. Khajan Singh, one of the 'big men' of Lakhanpura, had called a village-level panchayat to garner support among members of his extended patriline to claim a leadership role in wider networks of the khap panchayat.[49] By leading an entourage of his patrilineal relatives to Jat panchayats and maha-panchayats, Khajan wished to present himself as strong local leader. To me, it signalled how profoundly various incarnations of the khap panchayat structure political activity among the Jats in rural Haryana.

After the meeting, Amarjit and his brothers started to walk towards the government school. As an eager ethnographer, I tagged along. We all entered the building and then proceeded to a room on our

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[46] These names are pseudonyms.
[47] Similar trends of 'embourgeoisement' of farming caste families have been reported by Chari (2004) and Gidwani (2008) from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat respectively.
[48] Lakhanpura has been a local center of volleyball over the past few decades and has produced several state- and national-level volleyball players and coaches.
[49] As I study in chapter four, at that point, village networks of the khap panchayat were busy mobilizing Jats of Haryana in support of their demand to be included in the reservations system (quota-based affirmative action).

left. The room looked anything but inviting. It was dimly lit by a low-voltage bulb, and at the back stood a haphazardly-stacked assortment of classroom tables and chairs. In the front was large dusty table with several chairs around it. In contrast to the disorder of the room lingered the delicious smell of chicken curry being cooked in a large cauldron (*kadhai*) just a few feet away from the table. Stirring it was, Dalbir, the elderly school gatekeeper (*chowkidar*). Several empty boxes of spices lay discarded near him on the floor. Dalbir punctuated his stirring with the occasional sip of whiskey. At one point he grabbed a handful of *namkeen* (a deep-fried snack) to eat and grinned at us, displaying the half-chewed snack inside his mouth that was missing several teeth.

The burden of organizing the party had fallen on Bunty, the youngest among the Jat patrilineal brothers. He had gifted a bottle of cheap whiskey to Dalbir to persuade him to cook chicken. Being the most junior among the group, it was also Bunty's job to make sure that everything at the school was in order for the party. To wipe the dusty table, Bunty took out a piece of cloth from his bag. He then took out four bottles of expensive Teacher's scotch whiskey and placed them on the table along with several glasses.[50] More packets of namkeen were torn open and their contents overturned on a plate making a large heap. In this way, the stage was set for the party to begin. To make this occasion special, many attendees posed for photographs holding expensive scotch bottles, to publicize them on Facebook and WhatsApp.

As Bunty started to pour whiskey in different glasses, men lite and shared cigarettes among themselves. Soon, lubricated with alcohol, freewheeling banter started, often discarding customary etiquettes of conversation between people of different age groups. Meanwhile, Dalbir had finished cooking. He started to put good portions of chicken curry on empty plates. The sight of chicken curry immediately broke the pattern of socialization. Tired and famished, the men pounced on it with bread (*roti*).

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[50] We later discovered that those expensive whiskey bottles were gifts from Khajan.

Another whiskey drinking session in Lakhanpura's government school.

Once the food was finished, men refilled their glasses and leaned back on their chairs to resume conversations. At first, Ashwani sought everyone's attention to reiterate points that had already been discussed at great length in the more formal meeting held in Khajan's courtyard.

> ASHWANI: Brothers [*bhaiyon*], the next one month will be very crucial. On the day of the next Jat maha-panchayat, we will all gather here in the village outside Khajan's house. We will then leave with him as a convoy [*kafila*].

Ashwani was a Jat farmer. He jointly owned 3 acres and 4 bigah of ancestral land with his elder brother, Rajender.[51] Ashwani had worked as a Physical Training Instructor (PTI) in a government school in Jind, Haryana, but was dismissed in 2009 when an official inquiry upheld corruption charges against him. This came as a big blow to Ashwani and his whole family. From being a salaried government employee (*sarkari naukar*), a coveted position in both rural and urban India (Jeffrey & Jeffery & Jeffery 2008), Ashwani was reduced to the status of a marginal farmer.[52] In distress, he approached Khajan for help. Thereon, Khajan took Ashwani under his wings, engaging him in his business activities both inside and outside the village. Working for Khajan boosted Ashwani's meagre agricultural income, but it also brought ridicule as many in the village, including Narender, believed that it had forced Ashwani to be servile to Khajan. Consequently, the villagers gave him several obscene and disparaging nicknames, such as *Khajan ka tatta* ("Khajan's testicles"). This dynamic was on display at the party, in Narender's response to Ashwani's speech:

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[51] Bigah is a unit for measuring land in India. Specifically, 1 acre is made up of 5 bigah.
[52] According to the Reserve Bank of India, a marginal farmer cultivates up to 2.5 acres (1 hectare) of land. Ashwani's share in their ancestral farm was less than 2 acres.

NARENDER: Brother [*bhai*] Ashwani, we just finished discussing this matter at Khajan's house. Why can't you let your brothers drink in peace?

ASHWANI: No problem, elder brother [*bhaisahab*]. We will not discuss Khajan anymore. Tell us what you want to talk about tonight.

NARENDER (irritatingly): Is there nothing else we can talk about? We brothers are meeting after a long gap. Should we not inquire about each other's wellbeing?

Narender was the eldest in the group. Despite belonging to the same patrilineage as Khajan, Narender opposed him in village politics. Though he never directly criticized Ashwani for his association with Khajan, he often dropped subtle hints here and there in his conversations with other villagers to that effect. Ashwani, on the other hand, was not much bothered by Narender's disapproval of his proximity with Khajan. Afterall, it had stabilized his economic fortunes, which had dipped rather rapidly after he was fired from government job.

ASHWANI (flippantly): Brother, whose wellbeing in particular do you want to discuss?

NARENDER: Tonight, I want to talk about your marriage. Tell me Ashwani, how long will you continue to live like this? Where is your wife? And your children? Your wife does not live with you and neither do your children. You have no family to go to when you go home at night. You are living like an unmarried man [*randa*] who is free from all responsibilities.

Here, Narender was referencing the fact that for the past three years Ashwani had been separated from Anjali, and only one of the couple's three children (the eldest daughter) continued to live with him in Lakhanpura (the younger daughter and the son had moved to Rohtak city to live in Anjali's father's home).

At first, Ashwani ignored Narender's provocation. Like others in the room, he too was taken aback by how Narender had chosen to raise the topic of his troubled marriage in front of everyone, including myself. But, as I explain in the next section, Narender was well within his rights accorded to him by norms and practices of Jat patrilineality to not only raise Ashwani's marital dispute in an assembly of patrilineal brothers, but also to press him to reconcile differences with Anjali and her family. Indeed, anthropologists of South Asia have noted how family disputes, especially those concerning marriage and women's sexuality, mostly remain limited to kinship circles, which may extend from a small neighbourhood to "a well-knit kin group spreading over the villages of a small area" (Srinivas 1987:127; Moore 1998). Drawing attention to their jural character, Kokal (2020:58-72) regards kinship networks as important "layers of legality" within which disputes are adjudicated.

After a short pause, Amarjit, my landlord, decided to intervene. Like Narender, Amarjit too disapproved of Ashwani's association with Khajan. He started prodding Ashwani to respond to Narender's questions. In doing so, he had also subtly indicated that the issue of Ashwani's separation from his wife was a topic worthy of discussion in this gathering.

> AMARJIT: Brother Ashwani, you cannot ignore what Narender bhaisahab has asked you.
>
> What do the rest of the brothers think about it? Please talk openly.

Narender was 12 years older than Ashwani—a fact that obliged Ashwani to treat his elder brother with honour. By feigning indifference to Narender's questions, Ashwani was failing to observe patrilineal etiquette. Amarjit's invitation to all present to openly discuss Ashwani's marital breakdown received an encouraging response. A child-like excitement emerged on many faces as the party-goers tried to grasp the implications of what was unfolding between Narender, Amarjit, and Ashwani. Ashwani, on the other hand, kept staring at the ceiling, pretending to be absorbed in deep reflection

on an unrelated topic. He then suddenly remembered that Dalbir, the chowkidar, was still present in the room.

> ASHWANI: Dalbir, are you ready to go to sleep? Take your bottle and go to your room to sleep. We will close the main gate of the school on our way out.

Dalbir belonged to a one of the landless lower castes, and hence was not deemed fit to even overhear, let alone participate in, a conversation about the domestic affairs of a Jat man. Though Dalbir was slow to respond to Ashwani's directions, he obediently picked his nearly-finished whiskey bottle, thanked all Jat brothers for the party, and left the room.

Now that he had everyone's attention and sensing an openness (even an eagerness) among the group to discuss Ashwani's situation, Narender provoked his patrilineal brother further.

> NARENDER: Ashwani, had you not been separated from your wife, you would have returned to your family tonight. What about your children? Aren't you depriving them of a father figure? They haven't come to the village in the past three years. This village is as much theirs as it is yours.

According to norms of Jat kinship, descent, inheritance, and succession are traced along the male line (Chowdhry 2007; Madsen 1991; Tiemann 1970a). Correspondingly, the prevailing mode of residence is virilocal and authority rests with males, especially male elders. In this context, a strong cultural significance is attached to raising children in the patrilocal village, which ensures the absorption of subsequent generations into the lineage structure of the village.[53] The confluence of these features of kinship has lent a robustness to the patriarchal character of Jat caste authority.

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[53] With the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, migration from the village to the city has picked up, but even then, considerable importance is placed on nurturing family ties with the ancestral village.

Ashwani sank deeper in his chair and wore a pensive look. The stiff bodily posture he had adopted suggested he was upset by the direction in which the discussion was headed. At that point, I knew that Ashwani had filed for a legal divorce from Anjali in the district-level government court in Rohtak, the nearest city. Besides legal divorce, Ashwani also had the option of getting a customary form of divorce (*nyare hona*) in the village panchayat, which, once granted in the presence of senior males, would allow both the husband and the wife to look for new marriage partners. The popularity of this practice, however, has recently dipped as it is notoriously difficult to establish its legal validity in government courts. Customary divorces granted by the khap panchayat cannot shield the divorced couple from legal claims, including those made by an ex-wife's family for monetary compensation when a man remarries. This is very different from what was observed by Holden (2016) in Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh, where women from lower castes were able to legally validate customary divorces through affidavits issued by a notary public. In today's Haryana, married couples who have registered their marriages with the government have what is called a 'marriage certificate' and are required to obtain a divorce through government courts for it to be valid.[54]

The village rumour had it that Ashwani was all set to marry another Jat woman. However, the formal process of getting a legal divorce in government courts administering Hindu law is tedious. In addition to India's inordinately slow and comparatively costly judicial system, Hindu law emphasizes the sacramental nature of marriage, and therefore fundamentally resists its breakdown (Holden 2016; Solanki 2011). A legal divorce is therefore only granted by a magistrate when all possibilities of reconciliation are viewed to have been exhausted. At that point, Ashwani was also searching for a new lawyer to represent him in the court. He had earlier shared with me difficulties he was facing in finding one. Villagers often call lawyers *dukandar* ("shopkeeper")—a person more interested in extracting

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[54] In 2006, the Supreme Court of India mandated that all marriages get registered before law.

money from clients than resolving disputes. Lawyers are usually hired based on a recommendation from someone in a close kinship circle. Broadly, in light of these developments, after three years of separation, Ashwani had come to regard all attempts to mediate in his marriage dispute, such as the one being made at that point, with skepticism. He believed they would merely delay his plan to legally terminate his marriage with Anjali.

Over the next 10 to 15 minutes, the tension that had been brewing during the party eased as others joined in the conversation. The fact that the entire group had been consuming whiskey served as an excuse for a couple of mischievous junior brothers to quip about Ashwani's marriage. Though their comments had crossed a line, Ashwani uncomfortably laughed them off so as to lighten the mood. At that point, it seemed like the topic of Ashwani's marriage dispute may blow over. I excused myself to go to the toilet. Upon my return, I noted that the discussion among the brothers had heated up again. Ashwani, who had started to look a bit relieved, now had a frown on his face. Narender, on the other hand, had upped the ante.

> NARENDER: You want to act like a leader [*neta-giri*] in the khap panchayat with Khajan but you are incapable of taking care of your own household [*ghar*]. Your family is scattered [*bikhra hua*]. You run away from your responsibilities as a husband, as a father and as a son. Yours and your brother's behaviour is the sole reason for your father's dishonor [*bezati*]. How can you be a panchayat leader? You cannot even lead your own family.

Neta-giri is a Hindi phrase that denotes behavioral patterns associated with a leader or a politician. In common parlance, the phrase is often deployed in a pejorative sense for those who try to emulate the role of a leader but have nothing to show for it. That Ashwani was unable to iron out differences with his wife and her family after years of separation had become his Achilles heel. It had left him vulnerable to accusations like the one Narender was levelling. By working with Khajan in local circuits of Jat

activism, Ashwani had taken on responsibilities that he, according to Narender, was not qualified to handle.

By this point, Narender was visibly upset. He stood up from his chair and started wagging his finger at Ashwani. Ashwani wore a look of humiliation after receiving a reprimand from his elder patrilineal brother. Then came the final blow.

> NARENDER: None of us will go to Jat maha-panchayat with Khajan if you do not bring your wife back to the village.

This was followed by a loud cry let out by others in support of Narender.

> EVERYONE (in unison): We will not go, we will not go [*nahi jaeinge, nahi jaeinge*].

As this decision was taken, many of the younger brothers started rejoicing. They broke into a dance and kept repeating 'nahi jaeinge, nahi jaeinge.' All this drama was starting to have a visible impact on Ashwani. That Narender's push to have Ashwani reconcile with his estranged wife found support posed a political as well as a personal problem for Ashwani, since he had been laying the groundwork to promote Khajan as a local Jat leader for the previous 3-4 months. As part of that campaign, he had met prominent Jat men not only from Lakhanpura but also from the multi-village locality (*guhand*) to convince them to join Khajan's convoy to Jat maha-panchayat. Of course, in doing so, he was largely driven by self-interest: Ashwani wanted to be part of Khajan's inner circle of men—a trusted group who managed Khajan's commercial and political activities and would benefit directly from Khajan's patronage. To see his efforts being boycotted by his close circle of patrilineal brothers rattled Ashwani.

Jat Kinship

At this point, some additional cultural context is needed to fully grasp the import of the events that were unfolding that night in the government school of Lakhanpura. Specifically, I will delve into

kinship relations established by descent and marriage among the Jats to tease out how they structure the sphere of domesticity and how they govern the processing of family disputes. My aim is to throw light on what Comaroff and Roberts (1981) have called 'sociocultural orders' within which a dispute is embedded. It is only by unpacking these principles of kinship, and how they operate within the juridical framework of both intra- and inter-village khap panchayat, that a comprehensive portrayal of Ashwani's marital dispute with Anjali comes into bold relief.

In an overview of kinship studies from the early 1990s, Uberoi (1993:45) observed that kinship systems in India are "extraordinarily heterogenous." More precisely, they differ from each other along the axes of region, religion, caste, and other cultural variables.[55] Karve (1953), for example, discerned three kinship organizations in India based in the north, south, and east of the country. Likewise, Dumont (1966), Trautmann (1981), and Oster et al. (1983) have highlighted the contrast between kinship structures of northern and southern India, especially with regard to marriage. Furthermore, kinship systems of high-caste Hindus differ considerably from those of Dalit castes who do not follow 'pure' upper-caste kinship norms, especially concerning women's sexuality and marriage (Parry 2001).

In addition to their geographical focus, kinship studies in India have also varied in terms of their methodological approach. While Srinivas (1952), Gough (1956), Shah (1977), and others broadly adopted the framework of British structural-functionalism to study unilineal descent groups, other anthropologists like Dumont (1983), Madan (1965), and Trautmann (1981) responded to issues raised by Levi-Strauss's alliance theory of kinship. More recently, Moore (1998), Chowdhry (2007), Mody (2008), Ahlawat (2012, 2015), and Srinivasan (2020), among others, have integrated issues of gender and law in their studies on kinship and caste. In broad terms, their research has examined myriad ways in which inter-caste, as well as inter-religious, marriage unions disrupt structural kinship. Chowdhry

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[55] Uberoi (1993:45) wrote, "there seem to be as many varieties of kinship organization as there are distinct communities."

(2007), for instance, explores how enforcement of the principle of endogamy, i.e., marriage within the caste or sub-caste, one of the central pillars of caste society, establishes strict patriarchal control over women's sexuality and marriage not merely through non-state forums like the panchayat but also by co-opting, as it were, state agencies like the police. In this section, I draw on these overlapping strands of kinship studies and caste to examine Jat norms and practices of descent and marriage. My objective is to explore how they have shaped customary methods of village disputing through the khap panchayat and to reflect on their implications for issues of gender and law. Understanding these themes will paint a fuller picture of the stakes of the dispute between Ashwani and Anjali that I witnessed firsthand.

Descent

In Lakhanpura, as well as in other Jat villages of Haryana and its neighbouring regions, villagers use terms like *ghar*, *kunba*, *thola*, and *pana*, to refer to different levels of patrilineal descent units in a village (Lewis 1958; Yadava 1969; Hershman 1981). Ghar, the most basic consanguineal kin unit, refers to both the household and the house as a physical structure. The masculine title *gharwala* and the feminine *gharwali* are used to denote the marital bond between husband and wife. A single Jat household may take the shape of a nuclear, joint, or even an incomplete family. The household also serves as the basic property-owning unit as its members have joint ownership rights over the physical structure of the house and its furniture, farms, cattle, and other forms of property. There is a division of the household when the brothers get married. For the most part, when the elder brother separates, he constitutes a new household, leaving his younger siblings to live with parents.[56] As Hershman (1981) noted in his

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[56] Tiemann (1970a:172) rightly noted that "three generations are considered to be the limit of effective and intimate relationship between the members of a normal joint family or house (*ghar*) among the Jats." In this regard, he also observed that the annual ritual offerings of *shraad* made by the Jats to their dead patrilineal ancestors are made up to the figure of the *dada*, i.e., the paternal grandfather. Beyond him, Jat ancestors are remembered collectively.

study of patrilineal kinship in a Punjab village, partitioning of the household frequently gives rise to family disputes between brothers and their wives, or between the father and his sons.

Gharon, the plural form of ghar (household), is often used to identify a larger descent unit, for example, a group of agnatically related households that separated recently. This suggests that the concept of household is a malleable one—it can accommodate the changes a household undergoes in terms of its composition over a period of time. A Jat household, for instance, may expand and contract through events like out-migration to the city, marriage, divorce, births, and deaths—a phenomenon famously analyzed in the African context as 'the development cycle in domestic groups' by Fortes (1958). Thus, the precise meaning of the term ghar and the boundaries of descent it refers to become clear through the social context in which it is used. After the household, *kunba* is the next localized unit of descent. It is made up of close-knit agnatic households that have descended from a common male ancestor some generations ago. For example, a two-generation kunba will include a father and his sons (gharon), whereas a five-generation kunba may have as many as ten to fifteen different households. Along the same lines, two or more agnatically related kunba constitute a *thola*, and similarly, two or more agnatically linked thola form a *pana* (Lewis 1958; Yadava 1969). Figure 2.1 represents these different degrees of patrilineal descent among the Jats.

These principles of patrilineality have also shaped the physical architecture of Jat neighbourhoods. More specifically, the core of every Jat village has been configured in such a way that houses belonging to individuals of contiguous degrees of patrilineal descent are situated in close proximity if not next to each other. Put simply, the logic of patrilineal descent underpins the formation of Jat neighbourhoods in the village. For example, as indicated in figure 2.2, besides being descent units, thola and pana are also Jat neighbourhoods with sharply defined boundaries (Lewis 1958; Yadava 1969). Lastly, these different levels of Jat descent group are named after a common male ancestor.

JAT NEIGHBOURHOODS
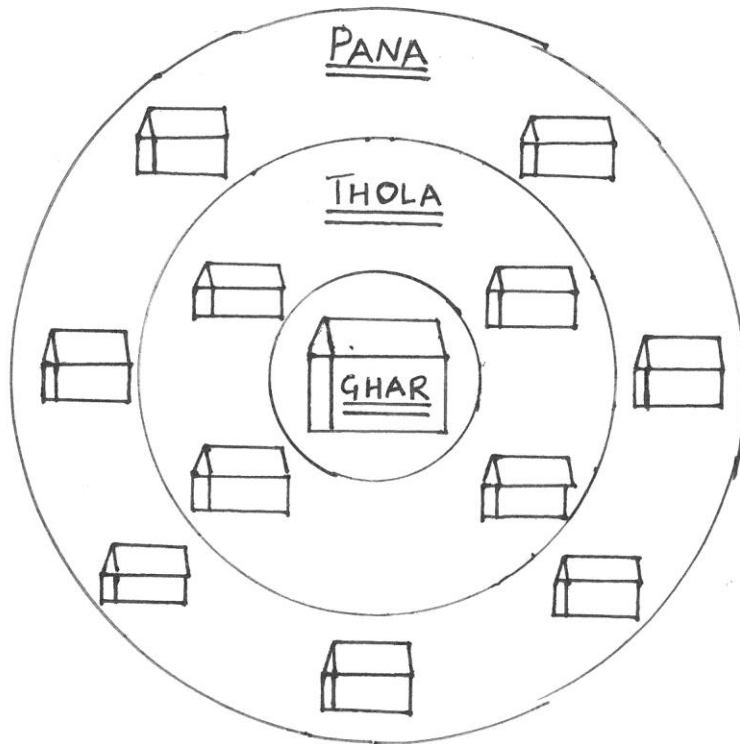
Figure 2.1

Lakhanpura Village

Residential Site

VILLAGE ROAD

VILLAGE ROAD

LOHARS

GOVERNMENT SCHOOL

CHAUTHAI THOLA

RANGA THOLA

POND

POND

KUMHARS

PHADA THOLA

POND

BRAHMANS

BHARTE PANA

CHAMAR

DHANAK

BALMIKI PANA

PACHALA THOLA

NAI

VILLAGE ROAD

FARMAN THOLA

CHAATRE

NURAN THOLA

VILLAGE ROAD

VILLAGE ROAD

POND
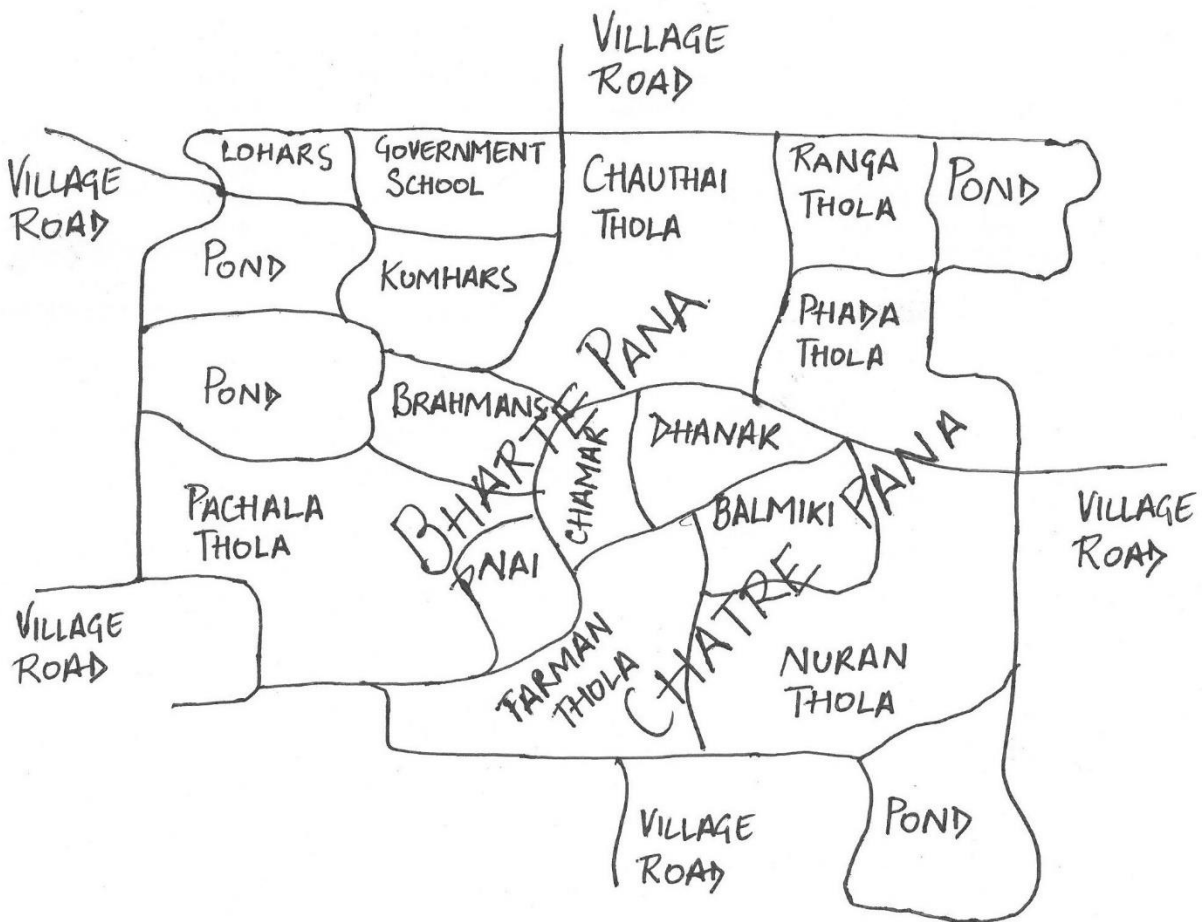
Figure 2.2

All Jat brothers who gathered for the party I discussed above belonged to the Bharte patrilineage. They hailed from Bharte pana, a distinctly Jat neighbourhood in Lakhanpura, which is sub-divided into three main thola, each of which is, in turn, splintered into various kunba (see figure 2.2). Belonging to the same patrilineage and having been raised in the same neighbourhood implies that all patrilineal kin from the same generation (including those at the party I attended) are related to each other as brothers (*bhai*). The ties of patrilineality that bound these men together were demonstrable through inter-generational descent tracing and known to all members of the patrilineage. That Jat patrilineality undergirds even village architecture has produced neighbourly intimacies between different kin and their families.

Domestic relations within and between different degrees of patrilineal descent units among the Jats are marked by two contrasting impulses: unity and cooperation on the one hand, and competition and conflict on the other. These descent groups are collectively engaged in a wide array of political (village politics), economic (farm and off-farm work), legal (dispute resolution), ritual (marriage, death and festivals), and domestic activities in the village. For example, individual households comprising a kunba rely on each other while performing labour- and machine-intensive agricultural activities like ploughing, weeding, and harvesting. Further, in the face of limited resources, agricultural tools, irrigational waterways, and household items are frequently shared among these households. The traffic of men, women, and children between different households in a kunba blur distinctions between them. Women from the same thola, and from its sub-divisions of kunba, perform routine domestic activities together, such as fetching water from the neighbourhood water-wells and taps and making daily trips to farms to cut fodder for cattle. Men from the same neighbourhood regularly assemble in each other's homes after finishing their daily work to chat and smoke hookah in all-male gatherings

called baithak (Lewis 1958; Jeffrey 2010). Along with such quotidian examples of kin-based neighbourly intimacies, these families also have deep knowledge about each other, not only about those who are living but also about dead ancestors. In this matrix of patrilineality, both whole families and individual members are regularly evaluated as *badhiya* (cooperative), *kanjoos* (miserly), *ladaka* (quarrelsome), *bekar* (uncooperative), or *bawla* (foolish).

Collective decision making is an important feature of these close-knit Jat neighbourhoods. While making important decisions like those concerning the buying and selling of land and other forms of property, running an entrepreneurial activity, fixing marriage alliances, and adjudicating disputes, senior male heads of households serve as "private counsellors to each other" (Yadava 1969:501). In fact, the assistance proffered to patrilineal kinsmen and their families has been crucial to historical structuring of landowning Jat lineages both at the village and the multi-village level.

Anthropologists like Jeffrey (2010) and Witsoe (2013, 2018) have observed how such micro- and macro-level patrilineal obligations are constitutive of wider caste networks that also extend into cities and towns. This group forms the smallest unit of what is often known as *biradari*, i.e., the caste brotherhood (Chowdhry 2007). It is a patrilineal gathering of males that takes collective decisions that are largely perceived and treated as morally binding. Furthermore, families bound together by ties of patrilineality are also accountable to each other. If norms are transgressed, especially those related to marriage and female sexuality, it opens space for others in the neighbourhood to intervene by raising public objections articulated in the language of group morality and male honor (Chowdhry 2007). Such collective gatherings of men constitute the panchayat. They form the lowest gradient, more specifically, the intra-village level, of the khap panchayat among the Jats. In these lowest-level panchayat meetings, relations of kinship transform into jural pathways, especially through customary procedures of disputing and collective decision-making. Also, with such a high degree of involvement

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into each other's lives, concepts of private and public are conceived differently. The domestic lives of most families, even in matters regarded in the West as most private, like in the domain of sexuality, are known among other neighbourhood families. The group of Jat patrilineal brothers at the party I attended were nested in such patrilineal neighbourhoods.

Within this context, strong cultural significance is attached to the rearing of children in their ancestral patrilocal village—a norm of patrilineality that Narender had evoked that night to castigate Ashwani. Broadly, this can be explored in two interrelated ways. First, along with parents, other members of the patrilineage constitute the core of the social world of a child. Patrilineal kinsmen, such as a father's brothers (*kaka-tau*), the paternal grandfather (*dada*), and the wider circle of agnatic cousins, constitute the patrilineal kinship network that males in particular remain nested in throughout their lifetimes. Besides supporting the child in tangible ways, they are viewed as repositories of practical wisdom (*gyan*) that the child draws on to navigate various stages of life. This village-based kinship network of patrilineality is so tightly-knit that parents who cultivate excessive attachment towards their children, especially the male child, often get chastised by other relatives, since such behaviour is viewed as hindering a child's assimilation into the wider patrilineal body. Likewise, the circle of kinswomen—including the wives of a father's brothers (*kaki-tai*) and a father's mother (*dadi*)—perform similar tutelary and supportive roles. Furthermore, each figure in the male line—like a *kaka* (father's younger brother), *tau* (father's elder brother), and *dada* (grandfather)—forms a unique relationship with the child that oscillates between varying degrees of pampering and disciplining. Exposure to this gamut of patrilineal relations is perceived as helping to form a child's social personality by giving him/her *tehzeeb*, i.e., the social discipline and training required to conduct oneself in culturally appropriate ways with people occupying various social statues and roles in the village.

A second way to understand the significance of childrearing is to recognize that male descendants receive their respective shares in both moveable and immovable ancestral property through the principle of agnatic succession. Every man, along with his consanguineous brothers, hold shares in their father's ancestral home, farms, and any other property classified as ancestral. The Hindu Successions Act 2005 has granted daughters an equal right to inherit ancestral property, however they frequently waive their inheritance claims in favour of their brothers (Chowdhry 2007; Ahlawat 2012; Chaudhry 2019). In this way, patrilineal kinship is not merely important for helping a child build proper relationships with agnates and their families, but also has significant implications for property and wealth. Indeed, that ancestral property is inherited via the agnatic line is critical to the identity and prospects of a male descendant. Besides giving him the right to possess a home (*ghar*) to live in and land (*zamin*) to cultivate, ancestral property also functions as a masculine signifier certifying his membership in the wider agnatic Jat brotherhood (*bhaichara*) of the village.

Marriage and gender

Jats are further internally subdivided into numerous patrilineal clans called *got*.[57] Besides having a patrilinear structure, each Jat clan is also exogamous, i.e., marriage between members of the same clan is disallowed. This forms the basis of one the most important marital taboos among the Jats: sexual and marital relations among members of the same clan are treated as incestuous. Such relations are popularly viewed as constituting *mota paap* ("a grave sin"), and they never receive social recognition in form of marriage. In fact, instances of intra-lineage Jat elopements and marriages often result in honour killings. In addition to their father's clan, Jats are also prohibited from establishing marriage alliances with their mother's clan and their father's mother's clan (Madsen 1991; Chowdhry 2007).[58]

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[57] Tiemann (1970a) has argued that the Jats' conception of *got* is different from the Brahmanical idea of *gotra*.

[58] Historically, the Jats also used to avoid marriage with the mother's mother's clan, however, as reported by Tiemann (1970a), this prohibition was revoked by leaders of the khap panchayat roughly at the start of twentieth century.

Real-life workings of this Jat marriage code are slightly more complex and can be articulated in the following way—marriage between a Jat man and a Jat woman will not be arranged in case one of their own, their mother's, and their father's mother's clans intersect (Tiemann 1970a; Madsen 1991; Chowdhry 2007). In recent decades, Jat khap leaders have started to advocate for allowing marriages with members of father's mother's clan. Though this marriage trend has gained only limited acceptability, it reveals that caste marriage codes are not permanently fixed but are flexible in nature. As explored by Rubin (1990), this shows how priorities of structural kinship may evolve in response to wider transformations unfolding in the political economy of marriage.

Enforcement of Jat marriage code by intra- and inter-village units of the khap panchayat brings into sharp relief the patriarchal character of Jat power. For instance, the burden of caste endogamy—a marriage norm long regarded as critical by anthropologists in preserving caste status and in maintaining social boundaries of a group (Uberoi 1993)—is borne unequally by Jat men and women. Transgression of caste endogamy by a Jat woman, especially in the form of entering into a hypogamous union wherein the woman marries a low-ranking Dalit man, is widely perceived as defiling the male honour of her kinsmen. It also risks removing ancestral land from the patriline. For these and other reasons, such a transgression can 'provoke' the patriarchal ire, and sometimes results in the honour killing of the couple (Gupta 2010; Chowdhry 2009). These forms of patriarchal violence stand in stark contrast with the social acceptability bestowed on an emerging marriage practice wherein Jat men (who are unable to find brides locally) purchase women for marriage from poorer states of eastern India (Chowdhry 2005; Kaur 2004; Ahlawat 2012). An overwhelming majority of these cross-regional brides, as Chaudhry (2019) calls them, come from low-caste poor households. This shows how rules of caste endogamy are applied more stringently to Jat women than to Jat men.

Chowdhry (2007) reminds us that such gendered asymmetries in the enforcement of caste endogamy are not a recent development. Specifically, she draws on colonial archives to show that marrying women from low-ranking castes was widespread among the Jats and other landowning castes like the Rajputs and Ahirs during the colonial period. For Chowdhry (1994, 2007), this draws attention to the centrality of reproductive and productive labour of women in Jat peasant households. Indeed, a woman's reproductive labour is as indispensable for the perpetuation of the patriline as her productive labour is for the everyday functioning of the Jat household as a unit of agricultural production. Such patrilineal and domestic exigencies constitute the backdrop against which gendered enforcement of caste endogamy is justified by caste elders heading village networks of the khap panchayat.

Jat marriages are also shaped by the added concern of the sexual 'purity' of women. This is most clearly articulated in the Hindu marriage ideal of *kanyadan* ("gift of a virgin bride"). The surest way a family can provide this 'gift' is through pre-pubescent promise of marriage, which can only be consummated after a costly marriage ceremony paid for by the girl's father once she has attained puberty.[59] Embedded in this concept is the idea that the 'gift' of a women's sexuality, and her reproductive and physical labour, is something that can be 'given' by a father; a woman cannot 'gift' herself in marriage (Chakravarti 2003:25-36). Chowdhry (2007) argues that marriage practices like kanyadan must be analyzed alongside what she terms as 'the ideology of male guardianship'—an overarching patriarchal framework that establishes surveillance over women's sexuality, together with their reproductive and productive labour. Right from her birth, the girl child comes under the guardianship of her father and other male relatives. Upon her marriage, she comes under the 'protection' of her husband and his patriline. Breaches of these norms of male guardianship threaten the male honour of the individual, his family, and his whole extended patriline. To counter such

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[59] Along with the marriage ceremony, the bride's father is also expected to give a substantial amount of dowry.

threats, violence is often unleashed on 'transgressive' women and their lovers. These features of Jat marriage practices call attention to how configuring gender relations is vital to the formation of caste (Solanki 2011; Uberoi 1993).

Many events in the long story of marital strife between Ashwani and Anjali, and their families, shed critical light on real-life workings of Jat kinship. Among them, the way in which the couple's marriage was fixed in particular reveals how notions of the honour of the patriline are entangled with the close monitoring of female sexuality. Anjali's natal village, Baliyana, is situated on the outskirts of Rohtak city, but she grew up in the town of Bhiwani, Haryana, where her father was a teacher in a state-run school. Upon finishing school, Anjali lived with her father's elder brother's family in Rohtak city, where she also enrolled in a co-educational college. In the second year of her B.A. degree, Anjali's father decided to fix her marriage with Ashwani. His decision, taken in consultation with his elder brother, had surprised many of their relatives. Most saliently, Anjali had wanted to be trained as a schoolteacher, and fixing her marriage while she was still pursuing college-level education would end her career ambitions. Second, Ashwani lived with his family in Lakhanpura, his ancestral village. Though he had started to work as a Physical Training Instructor (PTI) in a state-run school, a government job, Ashwani's family did not come from an equivalent economic stratum as Anjali's, as reflected in part by the family's inability to leave the countryside. That Ashwani's family lacked both financial and education capital to migrate implied that Ashwani was marrying upwards, whereas Anjali was marrying downwards. Lastly, Anjali's marriage was also fixed in a hurry, and her relatives suspected it was a means to cover up a scandal. Indeed, it later came out that Anjali's father's decision to fix her marriage with Ashwani was a knee-jerk reaction to end Anjali's romantic relationship with a non-Jat collegemate. By marrying off Anjali early, even if to a man from a lesser class background, Anjali's father and uncle prevented the continuance of a situation that might lead to sexual transgressions.

Blame

With this understanding of norms and practices of Jat descent and marriage, let us return to the party with Amarjit, my Jat landlord, and his patrilineal brothers in Lakhanpura. After being put under collective pressure by his brothers, Ashwani started to defend his position.

> ASHWANI: Brother, she [Anjali] wants to live in Rohtak city and I want to stay here in the village. I will not abandon my parents and move to Rohtak city under any circumstance. She filed a police case against me and my family. We requested her to withdraw the case, but she did not. My father placed his *pagdi* [a turban worn by elderly men signifying masculine honour] at her father's feet in the police station. We were then forced to go to government courts [*kacheri*]. Do you not realize the emotional pain and humiliation my family has gone through?

Clearly, Narender's provocations had touched a raw nerve. Now with his back against the wall, Ashwani blurted out more details about his broken marriage. Not surprisingly, his revelations offered a highly biased account of what went wrong. It portrayed him as the victim and Anjali as the aggressor. Among other things, Ashwani stressed how Anjali and her family were the first to approach state courts to process their dispute. In emphasizing this point, Ashwani was appealing to a widely held perspective among the Jats that asking state institutions like the police or courts to settle family disputes was a means of undermining Jat patriarchal authority—a modality of power that is embedded in their kinship and its attendant networks of the khap panchayat.

Most villagers, including those present at the party, are well aware of the social implications of approaching different dispute processing forums (Moore 1993, 1998; Kokal 2020). Approaching caste elders to adjudicate a family dispute, for instance, preserves traditional village power structures, as well

as reaffirms the widely-held perception that the organizational framework of the khap panchayat promotes caste solidarity by bringing together senior males to control and discipline the behaviour of women in particular. Furthermore, popular ideas of justice (*nyaya*) dispensed by the khap panchayat, a customary forum also referred to as 'the court of justice' (*nyaya-sthana*), receive legitimacy by being overlaid with religious rhetoric. The proverb *panch parmeshwar* ('God is in the elder') is often repeated during panchayat meetings, which discursively links the justice meted out at panchayats with God's moral order. In this connection, caste elders (*panch*) are elevated to an almost semi-divine level (Moore 1998).

As outlined in the previous chapter, the politico-juridical institution of the khap panchayat has historically resisted the entry of the state and its institutions into their traditional realms of authority. Even today, senior males in villages often resist state power, especially of its coercive arm.[60] They largely regard the police and government courts as sites of rampant corruption. Stories of bribes paid to the highest and lowest police and court officials to purchase state justice circulate freely. Further, villagers throughout Haryana mostly interact with the state through local police—a state agency they are wary of approaching. Most village disputes filed with the police are noted down as criminal complaints, and while conducting investigations the police invariably demand bribes from both perpetrators of violence as well as victims. When villagers refuse or cannot pay bribes, the police often try to extract them through other means, such as by humiliating an elder or falsely accusing another family member. Against this backdrop, an important feature of the ideology of male honour has been to turn towards each other rather than the state to resolve domestic conflict. According to Jat men, maintaining and repairing caste and gender relations should not fall under the jurisdiction of state law.

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[60] Jeffrey (2010) has rightly noted that rich and powerful Jat farmers cultivate political networks with urban state officials, including the police. Small and marginal Jat farmers, however, lack the economic means required to build such political solidarities and thus often depend on their richer cousins to negotiate with the police.

As Ashwani continued to talk, more details of his troubled marriage came out. In January 2015, 21 months after their separation, Ashwani had filed for a legal divorce from Anjali. She denied this request. Following procedural law, the Family Court magistrate adjudicating the divorce case recommended the couple undergo mediation (Solanki 2011). After several rounds of mediation, which were run by a court-appointed mediator and occasionally included members of both families and their close patrilineal kin, the case had come to hinge on a request made by Anjali that one of two conditions be fulfilled: Ashwini could either live separately with her and their children in Rohtak city, but if he wanted Anjali to return to Lakhanpura to live with him and his family, he would have to come to her parents' house to pick her up—a symbolic gesture to conclude the reconciliation process. This is where negotiations had hit a stalemate.

ASHWANI: She can come back if she wants to. I will not go to her house.

Indeed, Ashwini had refused both conditions. He did not want to live in Rohtak city, nor did he want to go to Anjali's father's house to pick her up. In Haryana, and other parts of northern India, it is customary for the husband to 'collect' (*lana*) his wife each time she visits her natal village. If he chooses not to do so, it symbolically implies that he and his family do not want her to return (Chaudhry 2021). So, when Ashwani did not go to Anjali's father's house in Rohtak city, it was understood that he did not want to take the final step towards reconciliation. Consequently, the entire mediation process had been on the hold for the past six months.

NARENDER (in an accusatory tone): Your ego [*aham*] is the only reason for this separation. Is your ego more important to you than your children?

ASHWANI: Bhaisahab, I will not go to Rohtak. I will not put my family's honour [*izzat*] on the line.

NARENDER: Ashwani, upholding your family's honour is your *dharma* [religio-ethical duty], but being a father to your children is also your *dharma*. Both you and Anjali are married to each other but sleep alone in separate homes at night. What sort of a marriage is this? Let me tell you something that you do not have the courage to share. You do not want to bring her back because of your brother's and your mother's interference in your marriage. It is they who do not want Anjali to return.

Moore (1998) has pointed out that assigning blame or determining responsibility is characteristic of procedures of arbitration that unfold in the panchayat. This entails collective interpretations and evaluations of a person's words, actions, and motives. In most cases, the senior men who control panchayat proceedings assign blame to those they view as responsible for the conflict and instruct the couple and their families to observe appropriate codes of behaviour (*vyavahar*) moving forward. On that night at the party, Ashwani blamed his wife for taking the dispute to government courts, and in so doing undermining his family's honour. He dramatically illustrated this point by recalling how his father had placed his pagdi at the feet of Anjali's father as an act of extreme supplication. This act had completely reversed the grammar of the Jat marriage code where the husband's family was to be treated as superior vis-à-vis the wife's family. For Ashwani and many others in the village, such a compromising of patriarchal authority could only take place in state forums like police stations or government courts. These sites of India's modern legal system are located outside the physical boundaries of the patrilocal village, and its means of jurisprudence were incomprehensible to most villagers.

Narender, on the other hand, had put the blame on Ashwani and his family. Most of all, Narender had accused Ashwani of not being able to take charge of his household. Men are regularly evaluated as strong (*mazboot*) or weak (*kamzor*) by their patrilineal relatives on the basis of their performance as

heads (*mukhiya*) of their families (Moore 1998). In Lakhanpura, Ashwani was widely viewed by other men as weak. According to many, he had fallen prey to family politics (*ghar ki rajneeti*) jointly orchestrated by Rajender, his elder brother, and Jagwanti Devi, his mother. Rajender was often described as someone who did not want Ashwani, his younger brother, to have a successful marriage, so that his own 11-year-old son (and not Ashwani's 4-year-old son) would later inherit their entire ancestral property, including their farms. By driving a wedge between Ashwani and Anjali, Rajender was seen as having cleverly kept Ashwani's wife and children away from Lakhanpura. Ashwani, on the other hand, was believed to be too much under Rajender's influence and thus unable to come into his own as a patriarch.

Concepts of *izzat* and *dharma* were playing a critical role in the moral framing of this dialogue between Narender and Ashwani. As discussed previously, *izzat* refers to male honour—a concept that is upheld through reassertions of patriarchal structure of village power. *Dharma*, on the other hand, is more capacious as a concept. Ishwaran (1964:229), for instance, has described it as "rules of morality, conduct and good behavior, religious principles, legal precepts, and all that supports a harmonious functioning of human relationships." Likewise, Kokal (2019:67) has viewed *dharma* as "an abstract form of righteousness that finds its roots in the Hindu way of learning." The two ideas of *izzat* and *dharma* are constantly at play in most family disputes: actions that constitute *adharma* (a breach of religio-ethical duties), and thus bring dishonour (*bezati*), especially to the patriline, are not just discouraged but may also be punished by the family, as well as by caste elders in the panchayat. In this way, these two concepts often function jointly to constitute loose criteria by which social actions are evaluated in ethical terms. One way to earn *izzat*, and to act in harmony with *dharma*, is by upholding the patriarchal order that governs domestic relations in Jat villages.

As the party continued, Ashwani kept on blaming his wife and her family for taking their marriage dispute to state forums. He, however, had done the same when he had approached government courts requesting a legal divorce. Does this imply that the concept of *dharma* is gendered? Are the criteria for evaluating social actions as honourable different for men and women? What adds another layer of complexity to these questions is that the social connotations of the ethical concepts we have been discussing—especially *dharma* and *izzat*— are not immutable and change over time. To seek responses to these questions, I again stray from the events of that night to throw light on aspects of Ashwini and Anjali's marital strife that constituted the backdrop to their dispute.

Patriarchal authority at the local level

With these questions about moral criteria, their gendered dimensions, and their social connotations in mind, I later approached Ashwani's neighbours who had witnessed the disintegration of his marriage over time. In addition to Amarjit, my landlord, and his family, Mahavir and Dayawati, Narender's parents, were also my main interlocuters. I often spent my evenings in Lakhanpura sitting in Mahavir's courtyard where he held all-male neighbourhood baithaks that drew many senior males. While exploring the history of Ashwani's marriage to Anjali in the wider context of family politics, a remarkably different picture of the dispute emerged. In this picture, Anjali was a victim of domestic violence. I learnt that Ashwini, his elder brother, Rajender, and Jagwanti Devi, their mother, used to hit Anjali on the slightest of pretexts. For example, in March 2013, a few days before the Hindu festival of Holi, Rajender beat Anjali badly. Dayawati, one of the witnesses, described the event in these words,

> DAYAWATI: Rajender dragged her down the staircase and kept hitting her. I have rarely
>
> seen a *jeth* [husband's elder brother] treat his *devarani* [younger brother's wife] this way. He
>
> is a *janavar* [animal]. Many people gathered in the lane outside their house to see that
>
> *tamasha* [theater].

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My participation in these neighbourhood conversations, which included separate groups of men and women, enabled me to discern certain mutually agreed upon "facts" about the dispute. Mahavir, and Ashwani's other patrilineal kin, were critical of how Ashwani and his family had mistreated Anjali, especially with regard to the domestic violence that Anjali had been subjected to over the years. In addition, the women of the neighbourhood revealed that such theatrical displays of domestic violence where Anjali was beaten in public had happened on several occasions over her decade-long marriage. Most villagers viewed Rajender as the key instigator of marital abuse and Jagwanti Devi as a co-conspirator. Their roles were scrutinized and evaluated in moral terms. Broadly, both were accused of encouraging and solidifying disagreements between Anjali and Ashwani. According to them, Rajender's scheme entailed keeping Anjali her children, especially her son, away from Lakhanpura, so that his son would later come to inherit all ancestral property. In this view, Jagwanti Devi aligned herself with Rajender to strengthen her position as the domestic head of the family.[61]

Studies of village disputing in South Asia have noted how disputes are often discussed at great length by villagers (Ishwaran 1964; Srinivas 1987:116-174; Moore 1993, 1998). Kokal (2020:58-72), for instance, noted that disputes gain a theatrical quality through public arguments and fights, physical beatings, or the filing of police complaint. In fact, it is through such village dialogues that a dispute comes to be widely understood—it is analyzed from different perspectives and the behaviour of its participants is weighed against customary norms, values, and practices of gender and domesticity. In neighbourhood evaluations of the conflict between Anjali, Ashwini, and Ashwini's family members, special emphasis was placed on that the fact that conflict was recurring, with the root causes never

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[61] In South Asia, the senior male and senior female are two heads of the household, but they each have their separate yet complementary spheres of responsibility. The man's sphere involves managing the family's economic resources and wealth like land, keeping sons in line, representing the family publicly, and making other major decisions related to marriage and division of household resources among the brothers. In this sense, it is more of an 'outward facing role.' The senior woman's role, by contrast, revolves around domestic tasks, such as, assigning household work, preparing meals, raising children, keeping daughters and daughters-in-law in line, among others (Moore 1998).

adequately addressed. To explain its repetitiveness, the men and women of the neighbourhood made two observations: that certain key issues perpetuating conflict had never been adequately resolved, and that demands were made of Anjali that she could not reasonably fulfil. According to neighbours, the root cause of the dispute had much to do with the unstable structure of patriarchal authority in the house. To describe how it had deviated from the normative ideal, they used colloquial terms like *ulta-pulta* ("upside down"), *tedha-medha* ("zig zag"), *kharab* ("morally defective"), among others.

Though ideally most household decisions should be made through consensus, the eldest male in the house is the locus of patriarchal authority (Lewis 1958; Hershman 1981). Consequently, Attar Singh, the father of Rajender and Ashwini and the highest-ranking patriarch in the house, was often at the target of neighbourly criticism for his inability to maintaining harmonious relations within his home. To mark his distance from the dispute, Attar Singh had publicly castigated both his sons, along with their mother, on more than one occasion for orchestrating domestic conflict with Anjali. However, his sons, together with their mother, did not pay much heed to his instructions. Many were of the view that Attar Singh should have had reined in his recalcitrant wife and sons long ago.

> MAHAVIR: His sons do not obey him. He has no honour in that house…In old age, every [Jat] man is hungry for honour and care. As his body starts to disintegrate, he loses masculine power [*mardangi*] and his sons become powerful…From the start, Attar Singh should have established a firm control over his wife and sons. If they do not learn to respect you early on, why would they do so later in their lives? It is the responsibility of a man to give such moral instruction [*shiksha*] to his wife and children. Otherwise, like Attar Singh, he will suffer in old age.

A neighbourhood group of Jat elders in an indoors baithak.

Most men concurred with Mahavir's views on Attar Singh's sad situation. For my purposes, his words provide critical insights into patriarchal authority and practices of masculine behaviour. Mahavir had called attention to how obedience to patriarchal authority was intertwined with the idea of male honour: Attar Singh did not receive male honour precisely because his instructions were disobeyed by both his wife and sons. Also, as Mahavir explained, the status of a man changes radically in old age as his bodily and sexual decline is accompanied by a waning of his domestic clout. From being a provider, he is gradually transformed into a recipient of care. According to Mahavir, a man must lay the foundations, as it were, for living with dignity in old age much earlier by establishing strict control over his wife and children. That he had used the term *shiksha* (moral instruction) to frame this comment suggested that male control over the family must be established not solely through the

application of force and coercion, but also through instruction and example. That many in the neighbourhood expressed sympathy for Attar Singh, the aging patriarch, highlights how 'private' family disputes in Jat households are subjected to rigorous scrutiny by senior males in the community who collectively constitute the panchayat.

A final consideration worth noting related to the unstable character of patriarchal authority in their house is the extent of Rajender's involvement in Ashwani's married life. As the eldest son, Rajender embodied patriarchal seniority. But this status did not give him the right to intrude in Ashwini's married life. This was all the more so because Rajender, his wife, and his children no longer lived in the ancestral house but had set-up a new household in the nearby town of Gohana. As discussed earlier, brothers commonly establish their separate households, along with their wives and children, after some years of marriage.[62] While this move is initially resisted since patrilineal unity is socially valued, sons recognize that establishing their own houses reduces the chance of conflict between brothers, their wives, and other family members. The first step in establishing a new household is setting up a separate kitchen, which signals economic severance from the ancestral home (Hershman 1981). This marks the beginning of a long process whereby all forms of moveable and immovable property get divided among the brothers. Usually this happens prior to the death of the father. After separation, the eldest brother continues to command seniority, but his patrilineal jurisdiction is limited to his own household. Hereafter, he may interfere in the domestic affairs of his brothers' families only at their invitation. Further, the elder brother is meant to maintain a distance from his younger brothers' wives, who should wear a veil in his presence. For these reasons, when Rajender inserted himself into Ashwani's marriage, it had raised eyebrows in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, these events

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[62] The household remains unpartitioned in case there is a single male descendant.

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also reflected poorly on Ashwani, who came across as being controlled by his brother and incapable of leading his own household.

A failed suicide attempt, state law, and natal kin support

Ethnographies of rural north India have explored how the initial years of marriage are particularly difficult for young brides who leave their natal home (*pihar*) and natal family (*piharwale*) to live with their husband and in-laws in a marital or affinal home (*sasural*) (Chaudhry 2021; Chowdhry 2007; Jeffery, Jeffery & Lyons 1989; Moore 1998; Palriwala & Uberoi 2008; Raheja 1995; Wadley 1994).[63] During this period, the newly wed daughter-in-law (*bahu*) struggles to adapt to the everyday domestic rhythms of her affinal home under the careful supervision of her mother-in-law (*saas*). As the domestic head of the household, the mother-in-law not only assigns household work to her daughter(s)-in-law, but also regulates the sexual life of the newly married couple, at least for an initial period (Moore 1998). Physical beatings and other forms of violence are commonly deployed by both the husband and the mother-in-law to establish their control over young brides (Jeffery, Jeffery & Lyons 1989; Moore 1993; Wadley 1994). Married young women often find it extremely difficult to publicly articulate their suffering. Situated at the bottom of domestic hierarchies, young brides can be overworked, undernourished, confined to the house, and veiled.[64]

A few days after being beaten by Rajender, Anjali attempted suicide by drinking phenyl from a bottle. She was admitted to a hospital in Rohtak city where she remained in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for a week. She did not die but suffered considerable internal damage. According to the women of their neighbourhood in Lakhanpura, this was a desperate cry for help.

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[63] For this reason, girls are regarded as 'guests' or *paraya dhan* ("someone else's property") in their natal families after getting married (Moore 1998; Chaudhry 2021).
[64] For these reasons, Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyons (1989:223) described marriage as an "outmigration" of female labour.

DAYAWATI: What else would a suppressed woman [*thaki-hari lugai*] do? This time there was not enough phenyl in the bottle to kill her. The next time, she will plan it carefully. Both [Ashwani and Rajender] daughter-fuckers [*betichod*] will go to jail.

Suicides/attempted suicides by married women are not all that rare in villages in northern India.[65] Among villagers, it is common knowledge that such an action would invariably result in the direct involvement of the police and government courts in the dispute. Indeed, attempting suicide by a married woman must be viewed in part as an urgent plea to the state to extricate them from violent marriages. Since married women cannot plead their case in male-dominated panchayat meetings, this is one of the few ways in which they can draw significant attention to their suffering. In addition, many women fall sick, get possessed by spirits, establish extra-marital affairs, and even run away from their affinal homes with lovers (Moore 1998, Chowdhry 2007). In addition to means of escape, these transgressions are acts of rebellion against a male ideology of control. In her ethnography of Nara, a Meo-dominated village in Alwar, Rajasthan, Moore termed this modality of gendered resistance as the "somatization of conflict" to highlight ways in which women's bodies become the site where multiple forms of martial conflict get sedimented over time (Moore 1998:158-172).

As Anjali lay in the hospital ICU fighting for her life, her father and her brothers proceeded to file a police complaint of domestic violence and abetment to suicide against Ashwini and other men of the house. Following the registration of the complaint, Ashwini, Rajender, and their father, Attar Singh, were arrested by local police. Their arrests radically altered the relations of power in the dispute. As both brothers stared at possible time in jail, it exposed them to considerable economic insecurity and social opprobrium. Expectedly, their arrests triggered several rounds of fresh panchayat deliberations between extended patrilineal kin of the two sides. Many of these panchayat meetings did not take

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[65] See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59634393; accessed on July 23, 2022.

place in the village but at the police station in Gohana, where the complaint had been filed. Attempted suicide by Anjali, followed by the arrest of her affinal patriarchs, highlight not only the capacity of the state to intervene in violent marriages, but also its power to shape non-state dispute settlement forums like the khap panchayat (Kokal 2020; Solanki 2011; Basu 2015).

During various visits I made to local police stations, mostly in the towns of Gohana and Kharkhoda, but also elsewhere, I invariably spotted various groups of senior males representing different disputing parties huddled together in a corner negotiating with each other. On several occasions, I too was part of these panchayat groups tracking family disputes of various kinds. In these negotiations, besides contesting each other's versions of the dispute, one of the main objectives of the senior males—invariably wearing a white turban symbolizing male authority—was to convince the complaining party to leave the police station and to return to the village to hold the panchayat in its natural habitat. The policemen—the constables and the inspectors—are not necessarily outsiders to these negotiations. Like Jat panch, they too may try to convince the complaining party to settle the dispute outside the bounds of state law, for instance, in the khap panchayat. In support of their advice, which the complaining party may not pay heed to, they often described state law, its procedures, and its wider legal apparatus as slow, inefficient, and ill-suited to resolving domestic disputes. In this way, state actors like the police end up serving as extensions, as it were, of patriarchy. By willfully withdrawing their jurisdiction, they make way for the kin-based panchayat, thereby reinforcing norms that produced patriarchal violence in the first place (Chowdhry 2007; Srinivasan 2020). In this way, women's sexuality and bodies are subjected to the double bind of patriarchy: not only the patriarchy of caste, but also the patriarchy of the state through its agents.

Through male-dominated panchayat dialogues, two broad images outlining the relationship between the state and non-state (the panchayat) judicial arenas emerge. The first accentuates the separation

between the two. From this perspective, state law is an outsider—an ensemble of legal rules and statutes, physical sites (police stations and courts), and state agents (policemen and judges) that are external to the community. Accordingly, the law is seen as dilatory, inefficient, costly, and underpinned by jural postulates only poorly understood by an average villager. As part of this image, the figure of the lawyer—a legal professional acting as an intermediary between the courts and those who approach them—emerges as a corruptible one, offering bad advice in order to get clients paying. The second image contends that the panchayat must evolve in order to work productively alongside state law. Indeed, I was often told that the modern legal system has penetrated so deep into the countryside—through a diffusion of legal consciousness and greater access to the law—that it is now widely treated as a viable mechanism for settling disputes. Senior males often drew on the emancipatory rhetoric of state law, especially its power to free (*azad karna*) or retrieve (*lana*) victims of gender violence from a husband's house, to place a bride in the custody of her natal patriarchs. At the panchayat meetings, Jat men made strategic uses of each of these images as it suited their argument.

These two images of the relationship between the state and non-state judicial forums resonate with what Solanki (2011) has called the centralization and decentralization of law. I hold that the first image, in which the panchayat and state law are seen as separate and competing entities, exemplifies the decentralization of law, which Solanki's defines as a socio-legal situation wherein "societal legal organizations and actors resist state law by withdrawing from state courts...sanctioning and normalizing noncompliance with state law and legal procedures" (Solanki 2011:65). The second image is an example of the centralization of state law – "the tendency of the state law to serve as a tool to shape societal institutions and domestic affairs of citizen" (Solanki 2011:64). This points to the landscape of legal pluralism – multiple overlapping legal orders that are "mixed in our minds as much as in our actions" (Santos 1987:298).

That Anjali's natal kin—her father, her father's elder brother, and their sons—had approached the police to act against Ashwani and other men of the house reveals the availability of both state and non-state dispute-processing forums to villagers. Access to these forums, however, is shaped by gendered relations of power (Moore 1998; Chowdhry 2007; Srinivasan 2020). As noted earlier, even though many topics related to women are discussed in the male-dominated panchayat, women are not invited to attend them. Likewise, women's access to state forums is also seldom direct, but is mediated through their male natal kin. For instance, it took a step as radical as attempted suicide by Anjali to made her natal kin to approach state law and its agents to mediate in the dispute. It is critical to note that while performing this desperate call for help, Anjali had acted less as an autonomous individual and more as a married woman socially nested in networks of natal kin support (Chaudhry 2019).

At this juncture, it is important to reflect on the nature and the limits of kin support extended to married women by their natal families. In many ways, a married woman's access to natal kin is controlled by her husband and the mother-in-law. She can only visit her natal village after getting their 'permission,' which is not readily forthcoming. For both the husband and the mother-in-law, frequent visits to the natal village are perceived as threatening their control over her reproductive and productive labour. These marital restrictions notwithstanding, brief visits to the natal home are critical in softening the sudden dislocation from the natal village a woman experiences in her early years of marriage (Vatuk 1971; Palriwala 1991; Chaudhry 2021). In the natal village, a married woman experiences a remarkable shift in her social status. It is a place where she can rest and also move around with freedom to mingle with her patrilineal relatives without a veil (Chowdhry 1994). While visiting her natal family, she reconnects with her relations, especially her father and brothers whom she often calls upon to serve as "reliable allies" in moments of marital crisis (Chaudhry 2019:1614). For these reasons, she spares no effort to maintain her ties with the natal family as they give her

bargaining power vis-à-vis her husband and his family. Married women, for example, commonly waive landownership rights in favour of brothers so as to not alienate them.

Yet these ongoing connections to a natal family notwithstanding, ideologies of male honour and shame dictate that the rightful place for a married woman is in her husband's house. When a natal family allows a married woman to visit them for a longer-than-normal period, both men and women of the neighbourhood pose questions about the status of her marriage that are meant to instill shame and embarrassment. Though she can lay claim on her parents for support, her brothers and their wives may indirectly resist her stay via "veiled speech" and "an aesthetics of gesture" (Das 2007:65). Lastly, patriarchal concerns about caste purity and paternity demand strict surveillance of the sexuality of 'unattached' women, i.e., women who are either unmarried, divorced/separated, or widowed, as they may establish 'inappropriate' sexual relations (Dube 1986; Chaudhry 2021). It is precisely for these reasons that an overwhelming majority of married women with children like Anjali refuse to legally divorce their husbands despite suffering from repetitive domestic violence. Not only do they find it difficult to stay with their natal family for long periods, but they also want to retain the possibility of returning to their husband's village so that their children, their sons in particular, remain eligible to inherit land and other forms of property in the father's village.[66]

Legal pluralism

Even though it contradicted the moral code advanced by the khap panchayat, that men in Anjali's natal family had approached state law to shield her from recurring domestic violence was perceived as the right step by many in Ashwani's neighbourhood, especially by the women. For them, appealing to the law was the last resort available. In fact, many claimed they would have had done the same if

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[66] Chaudhry (2019), for example, discusses the case of Sarla, a Jat women, who returned to live in her affinal village with her 17-year-old son after being separated from her husband for 16 years.

their own daughter or sister was subject to such physical abuse. This suggested that limited patriarchal violence was perceived as an acceptable way of asserting male dominance, but its repetition over multiple years, and marked by that level of severity, constituted a problem.

Local attitudes towards state law, however, were not so straightforward. A husband and other perpetrators of domestic violence face criminal prosecution mostly under Sections 498A (domestic torture) and 306 (abetment of suicide) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Domestic Violence Act 2005 (Chaudhry 2021; Basu 2015). Jat men and women widely describe these laws through labels that betray much cynicism, such as *pati ko jail mein pheinkne wale kanoon* ("laws used to imprison the husband"). Likewise, in her ethnography of family court in Kolkata, Srimati Basu (2015) has noted that legal provisions against domestic violence and divorce, especially Section 498A, are received with much skepticism. She noted that while for some these state laws were "a powerful measure to help women negotiate physical violence and economic well-being; to others, [they were] a way to torture husbands by manipulating law" (Basu 2015:177). In Haryana's countryside, I too discerned ambiguity towards these laws. On one hand, they lend the woman (represented by her natal patriarchs) strategic leverage in negotiating her rights through the threat to her abusers of criminal prosecution. On the other, they seldom put an end to violence. The way in which state law and traditional legal order intersect suggest that state law does not merely constitute the backdrop to the panchayat negotiations, especially concerning family disputes pertaining to suicide/attempted suicide, gender violence and divorce, but it is also a powerful agent capable of shaping non-state legal orders in multiple ways.

Scholars have studied how the state and both caste- and religion-based social groups have contested each other's claims to govern the domain of the family (Agnes 1999; Basu 2015; Chatterjee 1989; Chaudhry 2007; Lemons 2019; Solanki 2011; Srinivasan 2020). In fact, most postcolonial states are characterized by such cultural-legal negotiations unfolding between the state and social groups over

the content of state laws outlining the degree of community control over the family (Loos 2006; Woods 2004; Yuval-Davis 1997). Two interrelated points immediately become clear when approaching this question from the perspective of village-based disputing in northern India. First, since family disputes are nested in layers of patrilineal kinship and the attendant site of the panchayat, disputing parties approach state law mostly as a last resort, for instance, to either seek a legal divorce or to extricate a victim of domestic violence like Anjali from the husband's house. Of course, an inadvertent consequence of approaching state law is gaining more bargaining power in an on-going dispute (Moore 1998; Kokal 2020). Second, though interaction between state and non-state legal systems have increased in urban centres like Delhi (Mody 2008), Kolkata (Basu 2015), and Mumbai (Solanki 2011), this is less common outside of cities. In rural India, the popularity of state laws are intricately connected with how they are received by male community heads (Chowdhry 2007; Srinivasan 2020). In fact, pursuing of certain legal cases, especially those that go against the norms of structural kinship, may even compel individuals to severe their ties from their families. This, for instance, may lead to what Mody (2008) has termed a 'non-community'—a prolonged duration of social liminality occupied by romantic couples deploying state laws to 'transgress' caste- and community-based marriage codes.

Returning to the topic of the marriage dispute, that Attar Singh was also arrested with his two sons drew a large number of patrilineal kin from the village in his support. He was widely adjudged as an upright man who had publicly castigated both his sons and his wife on many occasions for inflicting physical violence on Anjali. To his extended patrilineal kin, filing a police complaint and getting Ashwini and Rajender arrested was viewed as justifiable, but to drag their ailing father to the police lockup was dishonourable. Many seasoned Jat panch from Lakhanpura and neighbouring villages rallied at the police station to protest Attar Singh's arrest. Under pressure, Anjali's father withdrew his complaint against Attar Singh and he was released. However, dramatic scenes unfolded after that.

When Attar Singh met Anjali's father in a panchayat meeting at the police station, he placed his white turban at his feet—a symbolic gesture of supplication made to request him to withdraw the police complaint against his sons, and thus to adopt a different route to resolve the conflict. A jail term for both his sons, he and others argued, would be a heavy setback for the patriline. Anjali's father and her brothers resisted this entreaty. By making the two brothers spend some days in custody, they extracted a semblance of revenge. They also hoped it would deter Ashwini and others from hitting Anjali in future.

In many ways, Anjali's father and brothers had approached state law as a means to continue an old dispute in a new legal arena, so as to obtain what previous rounds of panchayat mediation could not deliver.[67] Over the course of the ten-year marriage, similar panchayat meetings had taken place on multiple occasions to resolve the dispute between the two families. In 2010, for instance, Ashwini and his mother started harassing and beating Anjali when she refused to relay a demand to her father that he pays her groom's family 7 lakh rupees (USD 8,411). Ashwani was demanding such a substantial sum to purchase a car. At that point, a panchayat had assembled but could not exercise much influence. Unwillingly, Anjali's father gave 4 lakh rupees (USD 4,806) to Ashwini. Under the patriarchal-cum-patrilocal structure of domesticity, the husband's family often seeks to extort money from the wife's father and brothers. In such scenarios, the wife is often subjected to verbal harassment and physical violence until these demands are met either partially or in full (Vatuk 1975; Chaudhry 2021).

It was against the backdrop of such recurring instances of domestic violence and abuse that Anjali's father and brothers had approached the police to register a complaint against Ashwini and Rajender,

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[67] Cohn (1965), Mendelsohn (1981), and Spencer (2007), among others, have discussed how filing of legal suits, especially in the context of village land disputes, is frequently deployed as a strategy to pursue the dispute in a different arena.

and Attar Singh. By approaching state law, they showed how its deployment could put them in an advantageous position vis-à-vis Ashwani and his family. Further, to put pressure on Ashwini and his family, Anjali's father had insisted on including their lawyer in those initial panchayat meetings held in the Gohana police station. Lawyers are looked at with skepticism by senior males, who perceive them as the antithesis of the panchayat's process of resolving a dispute. Lawyers' insistence on pushing disputants to a court of law often gets described as something that aggravates disputes instead of diffusing them. In contrast, the panchayat tries to reach a compromise through a delicate process of consensus-building over successive rounds of deliberations (Bailey 1965).

Punishment

As Anjali started to recover from her injuries, her father withdrew the police complaint against Ashwani and Rajender. Soon after, they were released from police custody and returned to Lakhanpura, their ancestral village. Mahavir, Narender's father, had played a critical role in panchayat deliberations that had unfolded inside the Gohana police station. While briefly outlining what had transpired in those rounds of deliberation, Mahavir added that most Jat elders like himself did not want to represent Ashwani and Rajender at the police station.

> MAHAVIR: Can I tell you the truth? We did not want to be there for those two. They should have rotted in jail. Such obstinate men do not understand anything but *danda ki bhasha* [the language of the stick].

Ranajit Guha (1997:29) has described *danda* as "an ensemble of power, authority and punishment." In literal terms, danda refers to a wooden stick that is customarily wielded by those in a position of authority to discipline subordinates. In this context, Mahavir had used the term metaphorically to refer to the coercive arm of the modern legal system.

VINEET: Then why did you go to the police station?

MAHAVIR: It was out of compulsion [*mazburi*]. We had to go to retrieve Attar Singh, our brother. His arrest was without any grounds [*bebuniyad*]. We wanted to leave upon his release, but he asked us not to. His sons were in the police lock-up. He could have died had we abandoned him. It was a moment of moral dilemma [*dharma-sankat*]. We are all descendants of a common male ancestor [*ek dada ki aulad*].

VINEET: You feared he would attempt suicide like Anjali?

MAHAVIR: A man in pain can do anything…He can jump in the canal or consume insecticides. But this is not the real point. A man abandoned by his caste [*biradari*] is as good as dead. He suffers internally, and then dies. Attar Singh underwent a lot of humiliation [*bezati*]. In desperation, he placed his turban [*pagdi*] at Anjali's father's feet. We all felt very humiliated. All the virtues he cultivated in his life suddenly amounted to nothing. He has been a hardworking farmer. He has never broken social laws [*samajik kanoon*]. His sons are rotten. How could we have left him when he needed us the most?

With these words, Mahavir unpacked the nature of kinship obligations that bind Jat descent groups together. Mahavir told me that the critical significance of patrilineal ties is the duty it confers on kinsmen to help one another in moments of social crisis. Abandonment by the extended patriline may lead to death not solely conceived in biological terms, but also in social terms. Further, in this complex architecture of Jat patrilineality, loss of masculine honour does not remain confined to an individual, or a family, but spills over and spreads to other patrilineal relatives along pathways established by kinship. Attar Singh's dishonour, therefore, was tantamount to the dishonour of the entire extended patriline representing his sons in the panchayat.

When Ashwani and Rajender returned to the village, Mahavir and others told me, they were so ashamed of what had transpired at the police station, especially the humiliation suffered by their father, that they did not come out of their house for the next 3-4 days. When they eventually tried to normalize neighbourly relations by mingling with other men of the neighbourhood, they were not only rebuked strongly but were also held responsible for their father's, and by extension, their patriline's humiliation. Likewise, several women of the neighbourhood chastised Jagwanti Devi for neglecting her husband's wellbeing. In addition, both Ashwani and Rajender were told in no uncertain terms that nobody from the village would come forward to help them if they did not change their ways. In other words, both brothers were threatened with social ostracization from the patriline. Again, many senior males wanted the panchayat to punish them Mahavir was instrumental in conveying this decision to the two brothers.

> MAHAVIR: They should have been punished by the panchayat. I told them in no uncertain terms if they continued behaving in the same way, the village will ostracize [*hukka pani band*] them. That would constitute justice (*nyaya*). But state laws have tied our hands. We cannot punish the culprit anymore. Today's panchayat has been crippled.

Mahavir explained that prior to the arrests, the marriage dispute had been a private affair—i.e., it was confined to a single household. But when the extended Jat patriline rallied to resist Attar Singh's arrest, the dispute acquired a wider significance. It opened pathways for patrilineal relatives to insert themselves in the dispute. In this sense, the dispute had become public as its consequences were no longer limited to an individual family. Ishwaran (1964:238-239), in his study of village disputing in caste panchayat in Karnataka, had noted a similar distinction between what he called public and private delicts and how differently the two were adjudicated in the village.

Mahavir Singh.

In the old days, I was told, the brothers' conduct would have invited punishment executed by the panchayat. The two brothers could have been either publicly beaten or socially ostracized much earlier for not paying heed to the panchayat's advice. Villagers offered different explanations as to why today's panchayat is unable to give and execute punishments. Some argued that caste elders no longer inspired fear among disputing parties. If disputants do not fear disobeying those figures of customary authority who led the panchayat, I was told, then village justice suffers. On the other hand, others pointed out that the panchayat can still inflict punishments, but mostly on the poor and not so much on powerful figures in the village. Furthermore, senior males also hesitated from pronouncing punishments in the panchayat because they feared that those being punished may later file a criminal complaint against them in the police station. In 2016, for example, the state of Maharashtra passed a legislation, namely, Maharashtra Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2016, banning social boycotts, especially against Dalits and women, ordered by

caste panchayats. Participating in such customary forms of punishment are now punishable by up to seven years in prison plus a fine of 500,000 rupees (USD 7,500).[68]

Anthropologists studying practices of village disputing have noted how patriarchal authority represented by elders, and the fear of punishment it evokes among villagers, is critical in shaping the trajectory of panchayat deliberations (Srinivas 1987: 160-174). Older studies on village disputing have noted how the panchayat often expressed their authority in a juridical fashion, i.e., by giving and executing punishments. Gough (1955), for instance, noted how Brahmans of the village Kumbapettai, Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu, lynched a non-Brahmin cowherder to punish him for having an affair with a married Brahman woman. Reporting from Kurukshetra, Haryana, Freed (1971) studied the legal process surrounding an honour killing wherein a Brahman, together with his close agnates, killed his young married daughter to punish her for having an extra-marital affair. Likewise, Moore (1998:149-151) has discussed how physical beatings, and even killing, are often deployed as punishment for breaking caste codes of marriage and domesticity. However, despite emphasizing the panchayat discourse of justice and neutrality, along with an overlayering of religious rhetoric ("god is in elders"), the powerful often escape the panchayat's punishments (Moore 1998; Chowdhry 2007).

The politics of domesticity

My discussions with Ashwani's neighbours about the breakdown of his marriage were intermixed with similar stories from other households. These stories recounted not only violent husbands, and their 'bad habits' related to unemployment, alcoholism, or gambling, but also discussed 'problem women' and how their 'wayward' ways undermined norms and practices of Jat domesticity. State law and its agents also figured in most of these stories, though more prominently in some than in others. Further,

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[68] See Maharashtra bans "social boycotts" that often shun women, lower castes | Reuters; accessed on November 5, 2022.

these stories were not confined to Lakhanpura as many had travelled orally from other villages both in the vicinity and faraway. In this way, my neighbourhood discussions were always discursively embedded in a wider, albeit predominantly male, dialogues about Jat domesticity and the expanding 'encroachment' of state law in adjudication of disputes in the khap panchayat.

Many times, these discussions gravitated towards what I call 'theatrics of domestic conflict.' By this, I refer to those instances of domestic conflict that do not remain enclosed within the physical bounds of the house but spill over onto the public domain where they are witnessed by other kith and kin living in the neighbourhood. As mentioned earlier, in these moments, household conflict acquires a dramatic quality and is aptly known as *tamasha* (theater). Such theatrics of domestic conflict are common in the villages, and they receive immediate publicity to become the grist for the gossip mill. Neighbourhood scrutiny of these events bring out many features of the conflict, e.g., who was fighting with whom and over what issue(s). Such collective evaluations, however, also suffer from certain limitations as they are not only given to exaggerations but are often cast into caste and gender stereotypes. For instance, most neighbourhood assessments either framed Anjali as a victim of patriarchal violence or as a homewrecker who could not adjust to arduous demands of married life in the village. My skepticism of such bipolar judgements prompted me to delve into the politics of domesticity (*ghar ki rajneeti*), which unfolded inside rather than outside the house.

By the politics of domesticity, I bring into ethnographic focus how gendered relations of power internal to the household give rise to various configurations of domestic conflict. Broadly, this realm of politics is based on the fact that structural kinship has accorded unequal social statuses to men and women in the household. However, the politics of domesticity is not entirely reducible to dictates of structural kinship. For instance, the affinal triad between the husband, the mother-in-law, and the daughter-in-law, which constitutes one of the most critical axes along which household conflicts

unfold, reveals much about the powerful status of the mother-in-law in the family. Among other things, it throws light on the cyclical character of women's power in the household—a pattern through which married women come to inherit domestic authority from their mothers-in-law but at a stage much later in their married lives (Moore 1998; Wadley 1994). A close examination of the politics of domesticity also reveals that women are not "unquestioningly accepting" of patriarchal dominance, and its practices of violence, but they resist male power structures through expressive traditions, domestic subversions, public protest and by having recourse to state law (Raheja & Gold 1994:4). To these features of the politics of domesticity, I will add another, namely, the recurring topic of migration from the ancestral village to the city in search of a better future, and its implications for family disputes.

Ashwani's marriage with Anjali was initially perceived in a positive light by his extended patrilineal kin. In fact, the English word 'honeymoon' was often used to describe the first few months of their marriage. This label was derived from the fact that Ashwani had taken Anjali on a one-day long honeymoon to see the Taj Mahal in Agra city, which is approximately 300 kilometers from Lakhanpura.[69] As I was told, in that initial period, Ashwani used to return early from work to 'spend time' (*apas mein samay bitana*) with Anjali, a euphemism for establishing conjugal sexual relations. This arrangement was set-up by Jagwanti Devi, the mother-in-law, who was only too eager to extend the patriline. The early honeymoon period had much to do with Anjali's natal family's superior economic status. As outlined earlier, in the context of Jat class hierarchies, Anjali had married downwards, whereas Ashwani had married upwards. Anjali's father's properties, e.g., he owned a big residential plot in Rohtak city, as well as other sources of family wealth, served as attractions for Ashwani and

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[69] In cultural terms, the idea of 'honeymoon' is largely foreign to most villagers of Haryana, especially so for the elders. Through its recent propagation via popular Hindi cinema, i.e., Bollywood, it has gained popularity among the urban middle-class. However, it is rarely practiced by the rural youth, so when Ashwani went to Agra city with Anjali in an expensive taxi and stayed overnight in a hotel, it immediately became part of village gossip. The village rumor had it that all expenses were borne by Anjali's father.

his family.[70] Ashwani's family, on the other hand, paled in comparison. Attar Singh, Ashwani's father, had worked as a farmer throughout his lifetime.[71] In fact, his elder brother, Rajender, was the first in their family to have the much-coveted government job as a primary school teacher. Against this backdrop, timely extension of Ashwani's patriline through Anjali also functioned as a strategy to cement marriage ties with Anjali and her natal family. In this intra-caste competition for class status, Ashwani, and his family, only stood to gain from their association with Anjali's much richer natal family.

Soon, however, cracks began to emerge in this early period of blissful conjugality. At the crux, it was a clash of expectations. Having lived in urban centers of Haryana all her life, Anjali was not well-versed with the physically strenuous everyday routine of domestic labour performed by women from farming families in the villages.[72] As a result, she did not participate in as many household activities as Jagwanti Devi expected her to. This was a constant source of friction in their house.

Though the father-in-law is the formal head of the household (*mukhiya*), most decisions related to the everyday running of the household are taken by the mother-in-law, the domestic head of the family (Moore 1998). It is only after several years of marriage that the sons, together with their wives, start to dominate the elders in their old age. In early years, since the young bride gets to spend only a limited amount of time with the husband, her relationship with women relatives, especially with the mother-in-law, takes precedence. The mother-in-law establishes an authoritative and tutelary relationship with the daughter-in-law who learns many aspects of domestic work under her direction. After marriage,

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[70] In addition, Anjali had come to live in her affinal home (*sasural*) with a large amount of *stree-dhan*, i.e., property of women received during her lifetime, especially at the time of her marriage. Furthermore, her father had also gifted a motorbike, among other things, to Ashwani as part of dowry (*dahej*).

[71] As mentioned earlier, the fact that Ashwani lacked economic and educational capital to migrate from his ancestral house in Lakhanpura village to the city indexed his and his family's inferior class status vis-à-vis Anjali's family.

[72] Women perform a number of domestic activities, including daily cleaning of the house, cooking often twice a day, raising children, among other things. In addition, they also perform outdoors work like fetching water from the village water-well, cutting green fodder for the cattle, and working on family farms, during the harvest season in particular (Chowdhry 1994).

the daughter-in-law is expected to shoulder large amount of household work as the mother-in-law takes a backseat to assume a supervisory role at home. She is also the guardian of family honor and ensures the purity of the patriline by policing the sexuality of the daughter-in-law, especially to foreclose any possibility of the latter establishing an extra-marital affair with another man in the village (Moore 1998). Expectedly, the inter-personal relationship between the two is especially fraught with tension and constitutes the topic of many folk stories and songs (Chowdhry 1994; Raheja & Gold 1994).

It did not take the neighbours, especially the women, long to note that Jagwanti Devi's domestic workload did not particularly lessen after Anjali's arrival. Specifically, it soon became known to all that Anjali refused to do any cattle work. The neighbours were perceptive enough to observe how Anjali's urban background refrained her from, as it were, getting her hands dirty. Initially, Jagwanti Devi and Ashwani made half-baked attempts at concealing from the critical eyes of their neighbours how Anjali was defying domestic hierarchies by refusing to participate in laborious household work. Soon, Jagwanti Devi became the target of taunts from women of the neighbourhood. Her rivals ridiculed her for having little control over her daughter-in-law. This stream of neighbourhood derision exacerbated pre-existing tensions at home. When Anjali gave birth to a girl child after the first year of marriage, Jagwanti Devi unleashed her pent-up anger and frustration.

Various ethnographies of rural northern India have reported that the birth of a girl child is not an occasion to celebrate (Chowdhry 1994; Jeffery, Jeffery & Lyons 1989; Wadley 1994). As alluded to earlier, girls are treated as *paraya dhan* ("someone else's property") or 'guests' in their natal families as marriage norms of residence and exogamy dictate territorial dislocation of young brides from their natal to affinal home (Moore 1998; Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Chaudhry 2021). For these reasons, young girls also suffer from differential access to nutrition, health care, education, parental affection,

among other things (Wadley 1994). Also, the domestic status of a married woman is enhanced once she gives birth to male offspring. Thus, after the birth of the first girl child, Jagwanti Devi's behaviour towards Anjali changed remarkably as she deployed various tactics ranging from verbal reprimands to physical beatings to coerce Anjali to contribute more to household work.

Women from the neighbourhood gathered to talk before cooking dinner.

Domestic strife between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is common, especially when the married women is not subservient to the husband and mother-in-law. It manifests in different forms ranging from tactics of stonewalling to shouting matches that could easily escalate into physical beatings. While some resistance to the mother-in-law's domestic authority is expected, especially in the initial period of marriage, it generates considerable domestic tension if allowed to fester. Soon, Anjali started rebelling against instances of domestic violence by outrightly challenging her mother-in-law's authority. For instance, women from the neighbourhood told me Anjali used to 'answer back' (*ulta bolna*) to both Jagwanti Devi and Ashwani. Such vocal acts of 'domestic impertinence' (*batameezi*)

by the daughter-in-law not only subvert domestic hierarchies but are also taken note of by elders both at home and outside in the neighbourhood. After having given birth to their first child, Anjali, and her natal family, tried to convince Ashwani to migrate to Rohtak city, a place they believed would provide better opportunities for the education of their children. When Jagwanti Devi came to hear of it, she blamed Anjali for acting as a homewrecker who was not only shirking from domestic work but also wanted to divide the family. As both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law compete for the loyalty of the same man, Jagwanti Devi accused Anjali of trying to influence Ashwani by deploying her sexual powers (*shakti*) and black magic (*kala-jadu*).

Meanwhile, a new power center had also emerged in the house. From the start, Rajender did not support Ashwani's marriage with Anjali. He, however, had to give his assent to the marriage once Attar Singh, the most senior patriarch of the house, had formally accepted Anjali as the daughter-in-law. As Jagwanti Devi's relationship with Anjali deteriorated, she grew closer to Rajender, who started visiting his ancestral house Lakhanpura rather frequently.[73] During those visits, Rajender, and Jagwanti Devi used to talk to each other for hours at a stretch discussing a range of domestic disagreements at home and how to tackle them. Dayawati told me that Jagwanti Devi used to cry *bina ruke* ("ceaselessly") in front of Rajender and often gave out loud wails of pain audible to the neighbours. For some in the neighbourhood, Jagwanti Devi became a subject of pity but there were others like Dayawati who called her an attention-seeking phony.

> DAYAWATI: Every mother-in-law and daughter-in-law [*saas-bahu*] relationship is fraught with tension. Take, for example, my equation with my daughters-in-law. Both my sons decided to migrate to Sonipat city along with their wives and children. I wanted at least one of them to stay back with us here in Lakhanpura. A hardworking daughter-in-law

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[73] As mentioned earlier, Rajinder used to live with his wife and children in the nearby town of Gohana.

goes a long way to soften the pains and aches of old age. But they chose to leave for the city. I had to make many changes after they left. I sold off the cattle, hired a domestic help, and started to cook only once in a day. I was so unhappy [*dukhi*] that I did not talk with neither of my sons nor their wives for two-three months. Then I began falling sick. My body felt cold and lost its strength. When my sons found out about my sickness, they returned to live with us for a week. They took me to the doctor who told me that my blood pressure had fallen. At that point, I realized that my sorrow [*dukh*] was eating me up from the inside. I told myself that I did not want to live this way any longer and adjusted to the situation. Jagwanti never let go of her sorrows but kept them close to her chest by creating *tamasha* [theater] at home every now and then. What good came out of it?

In these words, Dayawati explained the fragility of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law bond. Not only the newly arrived daughter-in-law struggles to find her feet in the affinal home, but the mother-in-law too finds it difficult to cope with the post-martial reorganization of the domestic sphere. A common thread running through both Jagwanti Devi's and Dayawati's experiences as mothers-in-law was the unfulfillment of customary expectations they have had of their respective daughters-in-law. In Jagwanti Devi's case, domestic conflict arose because she, the domestic head of the family, could not grant Anjali, the daughter-in-law, some degree of autonomy to run the house differently. On the other hand, domestic tension in Dayawati's home emerged precisely because she, together with her husband, had granted too much autonomy to her sons and their wives. Jagwanti Devi felt deeply dissatisfied as her domestic authority was not entirely accepted by her daughter-in-law, whereas Dayawati sensed abandonment, albeit temporarily, because she, along with her husband, were left behind by her two sons and their wives who had migrated from the village in search of a better future.

Satender, Dayawati's younger son, in his newly built house in Sonipat city.

The growing closeness between Jagwanti Devi and Rajender had its repercussions. Anjali suspected that a scheme was being plotted against her. To her friends in the village, she confided that she may be killed soon. In response, she started transgressing more boundaries. For instance, she questioned the method of distribution of household resources, such as, grains, flour, butter, among other things, between the two bothers. She insisted that Ashwani, her husband, receive the greater of the two shares because Rajender, the elder brother, did not live in the village, and thus did not contribute towards its production. Splitting of household resources among two or more brothers customarily falls within the domain of male authority. Elderly women of the house may participate in it but any interference by a newly arrived daughter-in-law is immediately pulverized. This served as an occasion for Rajender to involve himself directly in the conflict. On one occasion, both Jagwanti Devi and Rajender beat up

Anjali badly after which she left her affinal home and went to live with her parents in Rohtak city. After living separately for six months, Anjali returned to Lakhanpura to give her marriage another chance.

At that point, Narender and Amarjit, Ashwani's his close patrilineal brothers, advised him to move to Rohtak city with Anjali and their children. Since the conflict at home persisted, it was an option that could have saved his marriage.

> AMARJIT: Once deep-rooted mistrust develops between various members of a household, it is hard to move forward. Old issues keep resurfacing, and the same old cassette is played again and again. It becomes hard to have peace and stability in the house. In such cases, it is best to start living apart.

However, living separately from the parents by migrating from the village to an urban center was not devoid of difficulties. For starters, the inner guilt produced by the prospect of leaving the parents in old age when they need their son the most carry considerable emotional weight for men. Many in rural Haryana desire to migrate to urban centers so that their children could get better education. Amarjit told me that Ashwani did not leave his ancestral home despite having the support of his father-in-law. This was because his elder brother, Rajender, and their mother, Jagwanti Devi, had turned down the idea from the start. According to villagers, Ashwani was too much under Rajender's influence and was thus incapable of thinking independently about his and his family's wellbeing.

Off to Rohtak city

The story of the party on the night of December 24, 2016, had a surprising ending. In midst of the heated discussion about Ashwani's situation, Narender suggested that all present (including Ashwani) leave for Rohtak city to retrieve Anjali from her father's house. That way, Narender noted, the drawn-

out process of reconciliation—a long process involving both state and non-state judicial arenas—would finally conclude. Narender's proposal drew on a topic often discussed in panchayat meetings: resistance to the fracturing of the Jat family, as well as perpetuation of larger descent units like lineage and clan.

> NARENDER: Since you are too embarrassed to go pick her up alone, we will all come
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> together with you. In fact, we can leave for Rohtak city right now. It is not too late in
>
> the night.

Narender's suggestion invited loud cheers of approval. By this time, all whiskey had been consumed, and there was no reason to remain in the schoolroom. In the next five minutes, two cars full of Jat brothers left Lakhanpura for Rohtak city. Seated in one of the cars, Ashwani looked disgruntled. Though he resisted leaving, he could not fight off the others who forcibly carried and threw him inside a car. The two cars darted along the network of single-lane roads that meandered through different villages before hitting the state highway to Rohtak city. Soon enough, the cars reached Anjali's father's house. When Narender rang the doorbell, Anjali's father opened the door. Everybody greeted him with a polite 'namaskar ji.'

> NARENDER: You must have guessed why we are here tonight.

Ashwani's father-in-law nodded in affirmation and welcomed everyone inside. Suddenly, the house that was preparing to sleep for the night was abuzz with activity. Ashwani was their daughter's husband (*bateu*) and was thus entitled to special treatment, despite all that had transpired. His father-in-law went outside to prepare two hookahs and his mother-in-law went to the kitchen to make chai. Meanwhile, Ashwani's younger daughter and son who lived with their mother could not hide their excitement. They ran around the house shouting *papa humko lene aye hain* ("Father has come to take us back").

Soon we were all set to leave for Lakhanpura. Anjali came out with her children wearing a red sari like a new bride. Her father followed carrying her bags in his hands. Bunty, the most junior agnate, grabbed the bags and put them in the trunk of the car. Narender, the eldest brother, sat in the front; Ashwani, Anjali and their two children, sat at the back. The rest of us piled over each other into the other car.

We reached Lakhanpura at 11:15 pm. It was well past most villagers' bedtime. Nobody was to be seen in village lanes except the dogs who started chasing the two cars till they stopped outside Ashwani's house. Ashwani knocked hard at the door. His mother and Rajender opened it. It took them a few seconds to grasp the consequences of what had happened.

NARENDER: We have got your daughter-in-law back.

Ashwani, Anjali and their children quickly made their way through the door. Ashwani ushered them upstairs to his room.

JAGWANTI DEVI: You have done good work, Narender. You have brought Ashwani and his family together. Their separation has lasted for far too long. I am happy to see everyone back.

NARENDER: We all wanted to see Ashwani reunite with his family. Now both you and Anjali live peacefully. You have been through a lot in the past. You have dealt with the police and then the court. Nobody gained anything out of it. It is now your duty to run the house amicably.

JAGWANTI DEVI: I will try my best, Narender. There should be someone to feed Ashwani after I die.

The conversation died down quickly at this point. Everyone was tired and in need of sleep. Soon everyone left Ashwani's house and the group of Jat brothers dispersed.

Conclusion

To reflect on the gendered character of Jat power, I have examined how the khap panchayat governs the sphere of family and domesticity by adjudicating disputes both in and beyond a single village. More specifically, by weaving together intimate details of a series of marriage disputes within an extended Jat family, along with local understandings of kinship, marriage, family, gender, property, and law, this chapter has studied how senior men wield the power to define what is behaviourally right or wrong. While balancing these various levels of analysis, I remained centering around the dramatic story of Ashwani, his wife, Anjali, and their extended patrilineal kin, who were embroiled in conflict with each other in their strivings for honour, power, wealth, and security. Ethnographic descriptions of panchayat deliberations, together with negotiations and verbal sparrings unfolding in both domestic and public arenas, have thrown into sharp relief how such patriarchal systems of adjudication silence and control rural women. Moreover, women who resist and defy these systems face severe consequences. For instance, by showing resistance to domestic hierarchies, Anjali was not only subjected to physical violence but also risked cutting herself off from social and economic ties she had cultivated to survive in a milieu where women depend on their male kin for support. Through these various threads of narrative, I have pieced together not only how men perceive, justify, and function within the ambit of their justice systems, but also how senior women like Anjali's mother-in-law are themselves invested in patriarchal ideologies of family honour and female control.

In today's Haryana, village disputes, particularly those concerning marriage and women's sexuality, also travel to state judicial arenas, i.e., the police stations and government courts. This draws attention to an expanding landscape of legal pluralism in rural India constituted by multiple intersections of state legal system with village institutions like the panchayat. However, since state legal institutions, and their agents, uphold patriarchal values like ideas of family honour, they invariably subject women

to an additional layer of patriarchy—what Moore (1998) has called "law's patriarchy." In addition, as Anjali's story has revealed, access to state legal institutions is also fraught with difficulties in the first place as rural women encounter various impediments in approaching them. Lastly, the experiences of various individuals, as well as their extended patrilineal kin, who shuttle between both state and non-state judicial arenas, show how the two legal orders are mutually constitutive. From this vantage point, the legal field stands considerably broadened as the police and government courts, and the panchayat, are experienced not so much as autonomous domains but rather as parts of a continuum of options available to the villagers.

Chapter 3

Local Politics, State Power, and Jat Dominance

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the domain of local politics to reflect on various newly-evolved strategies deployed by Jat patrilineages—localized descent groups that constitute village units of the khap panchayat—to reproduce their caste power and privilege in Haryana's countryside. Amidst the gradual decline during the postcolonial period of historical configurations of Jat power, like land-based patronage, along with recent political assertions by landless lower castes, especially the Dalits, landowning Jat patrilineages have evolved a repertoire of political strategies to reinscribe their dominant status in local politics. This chapter studies what those political strategies are, what historical conditions of caste domination they emerge from, and how Jat patrilineages put them into practice, often through village units of the khap panchayat.

At the center of my ethnographic inquiries is the democratically-elected Gram Panchayat, a species of village council introduced in post-Independence India as part of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), a three-tiered institutional structure of rural local self-government. As such, the Gram Panchayat manifests a devolution of institutionalized state power (Lieten & Srivastava 1999; Mathew 1994). At the village level, it constitutes the final link in the institutional chain that connects higher levels of state government to the grassroots (Krishna 2002, 2018). Ideologically, the Gram Panchayat has held a prominent position in the nationalist imagination of India (Jaffe 2015). The brainchild of Mahatma Gandhi, it has long been celebrated as the bedrock of democracy—the state-supported arm of village government that tutors rural masses in democratic values and practices (Dumont 1966; Tinker 1959). In addition, the Gram Panchayat is also entrusted with providing a range of public services to villagers. Specifically, all state-funded development programs and welfare schemes are implemented in villages

of India through their Gram Panchayats (Gupta 1998; Witsoe 2013). In this sense, it also functions as gatekeeper and disperser of large-scale grants and expenditures by higher levels of government. Not surprisingly, the Gram Panchayat is commonly regarded as an extension of the postcolonial state, including its laws and legal system, in the village.

Despite these political transformations and the introduction of village democracy through the Gram Panchayat, the Jats still exercise significant local political power (Jeffrey 2010:37-71). Represented by their village leaders, Jat patrilineages strive to control Gram Panchayats to reproduce their traditionally dominant standing in village politics. They do so through three broad strategies: first, by winning the quinquennial Gram Panchayat elections and occupying the influential post of the Sarpanch (the village headman); second, by cultivating networks of political influence with urban state officials (a majority of whom already belong to dominant sections of rural society); and third, by controlling access to state resources and patronage, thereby simultaneously restricting opportunities for lower castes groups, especially the Dalits. By controlling the inner workings of Gram Panchayat in these ways, Jat patrilineages are not only able to channel state resources towards their ends, but also reinforce caste and gender hierarchies in the village and its environs. Through examining these dimensions of local politics, I am able to bring into bold relief how state institutions get integrated with localized forms of caste power and dominance in Haryana's countryside. More specifically, I analyze ways in which Jat patrilineages, whose leaders mostly work in tandem with village units of the khap panchayat, recalibrate and adapt to Gram Panchayat. Inversely, I ask how has the advent of Gram Panchayat, and its concomitant logics of electoral democracy, shaped village units of the khap panchayat? How do village realities of deep-rooted inequality and balances of power mediate people's experience of political democracy? And what role does the institution of khap panchayat play in this process?

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first gives a brief historical account of the evolution of statutory Gram Panchayats from the colonial to postcolonial period, providing historical context for the following ethnographic sections. The second section explores a sequence of events that occurred during my fieldwork (what I call 'a scene of Jat dominance') that unfolded across multiple sites of local power—namely, agricultural farms, the local police station, and an ad-hoc Jat panchayat—in village Peepalvas. Since the dramatis personae included a range of state and non-state actors like urban bureaucrats, local politicians, and village leaders from both dominant and non-dominant groups, these events enabled me to parse how relations between them shape local politics. In particular, the section studies how Jat village leaders, together with their patrilineages, extend their political influence over Gram Panchayat and its resources by nurturing what Jeffrey (2010:53) has called "channels of trust, obligation and mutual appreciation" with state officials and local politicians. As I show, networks of caste and kinship extending much beyond the village are critical in forging such political relations across multiple sites of state and non-state power (Jodhka & Manor 2018; Witsoe 2013). The final section studies micro-processes of local politics occasioned by a Gram Panchayat election in village Lakhanpura, Rohtak. More specifically, it examines how a village election for the position of Sarpanch (the village headman) turned into a contest between two main patrilineages of the landowning Gathwala Jats. By delving into the historical underpinnings of such intra-Jat village rivalries, together with the role played by dominant Jat leaders in their evaluation and partial resolution in the khap panchayat, I show how village elections constitute a crescendo in the political life of Lakhanpura, i.e., a moment when the tradition of khap panchayat and an array of other customary practices were reinvigorated to adapt to the electoral logic of village democracy. Foregrounding the traffic between village units of the khap panchayat and Gram Panchayat throws into relief a field of local politics that is a far cry from the democratic ideals and institutional norms enshrined in laws governing Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

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In terms of theory, this chapter draws on what Spencer (2007:17) has called the "unboundedness" of the political, i.e., "its capacity to spill out of the safe institutional boundaries in which it is supposedly contained by modern states." In many ways, my ethnography of local politics structured around Gram Panchayat and its institutional linkages with the local state echoes Spencer's plea to study the unbounded character of the political. Studying political activities of villagers from both dominant and non-dominant groups has enabled me to reflect on how the local power of formal state institutions is often indistinguishable from the political power of landed castes (Fuller & Harriss 2000; Jeffrey 2010; Witsoe 2013). Lastly, though the bulk of ethnography in this chapter comes from the villages of Peepalvas and Lakhanpura, its analysis foregrounds how local politics is nested in an intricate web of political relationships tying together villagers, statutory village panchayats, the local state and its officials, politicians, economic interests, and pressures of electoral democracy. By framing local politics within this wider context, I eschew the structural-functionalist orientation of early village ethnographies where the village was studied as a bounded system—a marooned island where power was endogenous to structures of caste and where the state was viewed as an externality.

A Brief History of Statutory Village Panchayats

The first attempt to constitute statutory village panchayats was made during the colonial period. This was partly inspired by a long tradition of local self-government in Britain and partly by previous British attempts to incorporate the panchayat in colonial village governance in South Asia (Tinker 1954; Jaffe 2015). In British Punjab, it took the form of the Punjab Village Panchayat Act of 1912, which was later amended in 1922 and again in 1939 (Chowdhry 2007; Singh 1977).[74] However, as noted by Malcolm Darling (1934), a British administrator who served in colonial Punjab, on one of his horseback tours through Punjab's countryside, the British panchayats had failed to take off even years

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[74] Up until November 1966, the territory we now call Haryana was part of the province of Punjab.

after their establishment. In 1943, Salisbury, the Commissioner of Ambala Division, had made a similar observation. He wrote, "The statutory panchayats are numerous but shallow. The real business in Jat villages at any rate is done by the Zamindar (caste) panchayat, a quasi-political organization" (cited in Chowdhry 2007:37). Indeed, despite legislative attempts at introducing statutory panchayats, village units of the khap panchayat continued to regulate all village affairs during British rule.

In post-Independence India, the advent of Gram Panchayat was a radical attempt to reconfigure the structures of village authority. Its emergence was, in fact, underpinned by the anticolonial nationalism of Gandhi (Baxi and Galanter 1978). Drawing on writings of colonial administrators, Gandhi imagined the history of India as composed of ancient 'village republics' wherein the village was conceived as a timeless, self-sufficient, functional totality with a democratic panchayat (Dumont 1966; Jaffe 2015; Jodhka 2002). Kaviraj (2010:181) has rightly noted that colonial frameworks of knowledge had enabled Gandhi and other nationalists to first assemble and then disseminate an image of "eternal India" as part of the anticolonial struggle. Though Gandhi drew on colonial writings, he also held the British government responsible for the alleged destruction of village panchayats in India. Thus, the revival of these so-called ancient democratic village bodies was high on Gandhi's post-Independence agenda. In this way, the village panchayat grew into "a watchword of Indian patriotism"—a symbol of nationalists' assertion to self-rule (*swaraj*)[75] (Dumont 1966:67).

The proposal to constitute democratic village panchayats was included in the Indian Constitution by its framers under the section titled 'Directive Principles for State Policy' (Tinker 1959). Individual

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[75] Gandhi's position on the Indian village and its panchayat was fiercely contested by Ambedkar, a lifelong champion for civil rights of the so-called untouchable Dalit castes. Ambedkar viewed the Indian village and its panchayat in radically different terms. He wrote, "What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?" (cited in Lieten 1996: 2700). As this chapter shows, the contrasting views of Gandhi and Ambedkar remain relevant in today's India. On one hand, the state rhetoric of democratic and development ideals of Gram Panchayat draws on Gandhi's views, and on the other hand, the actual practices of postcolonial village government attest to the validity of Ambedkar's assessment.

states of India either passed new legislation or amended the laws from the era of the British Raj to constitute democratic panchayats along the lines delineated by Gandhi (Retzlaff 1962). For instance, the state government of Punjab introduced the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act in 1952 that provided for the constitution of Gram Panchayat, defined as a village council of five to nine elected representatives headed by a Sarpanch, i.e., the village headman. In addition, provisions were made to form Gram Sabha, a body made up of all adult villagers irrespective of caste, class, and gender considerations, that would collectively administer development works of the village. Further, in 1961, a three-tiered structure of local self-government called Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) was adopted by the government of Punjab with the enactment of the Punjab Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads Act (Singh 1977). In this framework, the Gram Panchayat and Sabha became the most localized state structure in a village, the Panchayat Samiti operated at the block level, and the Zila Parishad operated at the district level. Together these bodies constituted the Panchayati Raj System.

At a conceptual level, political rationalities underpinning the democratic village panchayat and the khap panchayat are strikingly dissimilar. Stated plainly, the khap panchayat has historically crystallized and functioned as an instrument of what Srinivas (1987:114) termed "decisive dominance", i.e., the ability to reproduce power and privilege across interconnected spheres in mutually reinforcing ways. In this historical configuration of village authority, the landless lower castes were excluded by the dominant Jats from village governance. In contrast, Gram Panchayats were conceived of as a way to include all caste groups in the political life of the village and its administration. To achieve these democratic aims, the principle of universal suffrage was adopted, giving all adults the legal right to elect members to Gram Panchayats irrespective of caste and gender. This constituted a profound change, as positions of village leadership in the past were occupied solely by Jat headmen. As this chapter goes on to illustrate, the political co-existence of these two species of village-level panchayat—

the Gram Panchayat and the khap panchayat—continues to be central to village politics in Haryana's countryside.

Scholarship on Gram Panchayat, however, has drawn attention to the wide gap between the actual practices of village government on one hand and state rhetoric, democratic ideals, and laws on the other. While examining the early years of their functioning, scholars like Thorner (1954), Tinker (1959), and Hale (1978) described them as falling short of achieving their democratic, development, and welfare potentials. Similarly, village-based ethnographies from the 1950s and 1960s reported how the devolution of state power and funds via Gram Panchayat was appropriated by powerful landowning groups to reproduce their influence through what is known as 'elite capture' of local government (Hitchcock 1959; Retzlaff 1962; Singh 1969). In 1993, in light of such criticism, the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution was made to strengthen Gram Panchayat, yet its results have been mixed. In some parts of India, the phenomenon of elite capture is on the wane, which represents a strengthening of disadvantaged caste groups (Pai 2001; Nagarajan et al. 2012; Krishna 2018). But elsewhere, including in Haryana, Punjab, and western Uttar Pradesh, the Jats continue to control statutory bodies of village governance. As the ethnographic stories I examine in this chapter show, more than half a century since their inception, Gram Panchayats are still characterized by institutional malfunction, the politics of patronage and clientelism, rampant corruption, caste violence, and factionalism (Bardhan & Mookherjee 2012; Dreze & Gazdar 2000; Dutta 2012; Gupta 1998; Lieten & Srivastava 1999; Witsoe 2011). Broadly, these political developments convey that Gram Panchayat has, in fact, become a local site for reproducing Jat power.

A Scene of Jat Dominance

The following events took place on November 3, 2016, towards the end of the *kharif* harvesting season, in village Peepalvas, Sonipat.[76] In the wee hours of the night, Bijender and Satender, two Jat brothers, were taken in by an inspection team comprising six local state officials—the Tehsildar (a revenue officer), two officials from the Haryana Pollution Control Board, one from the Agriculture Department, a police constable, and the Sarpanch of Peepalvas—for burning post-harvest rice straw in their farms. Over the past 10 to 15 years, dangerous levels of air pollution produced by the widespread burning of crop residue has become a major environmental issue in northern India (Singh 2018). In response, punitive action such as charging fines, filing cases, and even arrests are often taken against farmers by state governments to curb this practice.[77] On the evening in question, the team of state officials was out in the countryside surveilling various villages in Gohana and Kharkhoda Tehsil, Sonipat. To villagers, the state and its arms often appear distant – "a sovereign entity set apart from society" (Fuller & Harriss 2000:23). That is because state apparatuses are concentrated in urban centres, and are thus often hard to access (Gupta 2012; Krishna 2018). Upon seeing state officials, Bijender and Satender first tried to flee from their farm. But after a brief scuffle, they were overpowered. When asked to pay a fine of 5,000 rupees (USD 60), the brothers started threatening the inspection team, especially Bishan Ranga, the Dalit Sarpanch of Peepalvas. As a result, Bijender and Satender were pushed inside the police jeep and taken to the local police station. The brothers were told they had committed two crimes: adding to air pollution by burning post-harvest rice residue, and physically attacking state officials.

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[76] Northern India has two agricultural seasons, *rabi* (December-April) and *kharif* (July-November).
[77] See https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/penalty-imposed-in-1406-cases-of-stubble-burning-in-haryana-3738664/; accessed on November 5, 2022.

Soon enough, their father, Satbir Singh, arrived at the police station, along with a number of patrilineal relatives from the village. The police asked for a hefty bribe of 20,000 rupees (USD 240) to release the two brothers. Otherwise, the inspector threatened, a formal complaint would be registered that would draw Bijender and Satender into a long battle with the state's costly and dilatory legal system. Upon hearing that, Satbir Singh and his relatives tried to haggle with the police over the amount of the bribe, however, the inspector did not budge. Satbir Singh then briefly stepped outside the police station to consult with Yashpal Singh, a Jat village leader from Peepalvas. Since both Satbir and Yashpal belonged to the same patriline, they were related to each other as brothers. What unfolded next gave me a good insight into the inner workings of local politics in Haryana's countryside. In particular, it enabled me to reflect on two questions: who is a local leader, and how does he (local village politics is a male domain) cultivate power and influence?

In addition to being Satbir Singh's caste brother, Yashpal Singh was also the former Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat of Peepalvas. He was a rich Jat farmer who had cultivated local power through establishing political influence with urban officials, politicians, and entrepreneurs active in the regional economy. As noted by Jeffrey (2010) and Witsoe (2013, 2018) in the context of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar respectively, networks of caste and kinship extending beyond the village play a critical role in forming relations of political influence across multiple sites of power. In particular, Yashpal Singh had very close ties with an influential Jat politician. Their relationship was initially established through kinship, as the politician's wife was Yashpal's wife's aunt. To nurture this relationship, Yashpal often deployed customary caste and kinship practices like gift-giving and extending invitations to local village weddings to the politician (Jeffrey 2010:37-71).

A Jat politician addressing a multi-village gathering near elections.

In addition to their familial connection, their relationship had another dimension that was built explicitly around local politics. Scholars have noted how political parties and local politicians often enter into mutually-beneficial transactional relationships with village strongmen—mostly men from the landowning dominant castes—capable of rounding up votes during elections (Jeffrey 2010; Jodhka & Manor 2018; Krishna 2018; Witsoe 2013). Besides providing a rural base for politicians to tap into, village leaders can also help with election canvassing as they invite politicians to their village to hold rallies. In return, village leaders gain privileged access to state officials and development and welfare grants that trickle in through Gram Panchayat. Moreover, links with local politicians also enable village leaders to put pressure on local police (Brass 1997; Jeffrey & Lerch 2001; Jeffrey 2010; Witsoe 2013). Since politicians regulate promotions and transfers of police officers, they are often contacted by

village leaders to influence appointments. So, when Satbir sought Yashpal's help to get his sons out of the police station, Yashpal got in touch with the Jat politician who managed to get Bijender and Satender released without the payment of any bribe.

The Jat politician with an ordinary Jat farmer after an election rally in Rohtak's countryside.

What do these events tell us about local village leadership? Anthropological literature on South Asia has examined village leadership through the figure of the 'broker', an intermediary functioning as a

bridge between the local state and the village (Bailey 1963; Fuller & Harriss 2000; Gupta 1998, 2012; Jeffrey 2010; Piliavsky 2014; Witsoe 2013). Rural social groups largely negotiate access to local state through village leaders who are, in turn, able to deliver state resources to their supporters by establishing links with urban-based bureaucrats and politicians. Locally, these men are known through different titles like *neta* (leader), *thikadar* (contractor), and *dalal* (middleman). Anthropologists have noted that village leaders from dominant castes have a privileged access to state bureaucracies, which enables them to perform a critical role in reproducing local dominance, for instance, by controlling state-sponsored Green Revolution subsidies (Gupta 1998) or by creaming off development funds through Gram Panchayat (Jeffrey 2010; Witsoe 2013). Such state-society interactions are not limited to South Asia but also exist in other parts of the global South. In the context of Indonesia, for instance, Tsing (1993:72) has described local leadership in these terms: "These are the men I call leaders because they are ambitious enough to tell the government that they represent the community and their neighbours that they represent the state." To this, I want to add that local leaders must not only nurture informal ties with local politicians and urban officials, but they must also gain acceptability among caste and kinship groups they claim to represent. As the rest of the story of Satbir and his sons revealed to me, leaders gain legitimacy among their supporters not only through sharing their private gains, but also by acting on their supporters' demands to extract private vengeance.

By themselves, Satbir Singh, Bijender, and Satender did not have the economic or social capital needed to establish ties with local politicians and urban officials. They were marginal farmers with an extremely small landholding—a meager 1 acre 4 bigah of ancestral farms. To make ends meet, they earned seasonal incomes by taking off-farm, insecure jobs like working as waiters at local wedding parties. Their precarious economic status was far removed from the historical image of strength and power cultivated by the Jats who until recently lorded their status over weaker caste groups. In the present-day context where the class divide between rich and poor Jat farmers is on the rise (Jaffrelot

& Kalaiyarasan 2020; Jeffrey 2010), Satbir and his sons could wield power only through their association with Yashpal Singh, the leader of their patriline. For instance, during his tenure as the Sarpanch of Peepalvas, Yashpal enabled Satbir and his family to get free food grains, a housing loan, and subsidies on their purchase of agricultural machines. Moreover, marginal farmers like Bijender and Satender exemplified what Chowdhry (2005) has termed as a 'crisis of masculinity'—an expanding social condition of economic emasculation constituted by the rise in unemployed unmarried men from locally dominant groups. Their status as marginal farmers had made it difficult for their father, Satbir Singh, to find local Jat brides for the two brothers. Such waning of Jat power and dominance has resulted in a greater incidence of gender and anti-Dalit caste violence in the countryside, often with the support of local units of the khap panchayat (Chowdhry 2005; Jeffrey 2010; Srinivasan 2020). This is the story to which I now turn.

On their way back to the village, Bijender and Satender narrated an exaggerated version of events. They put the entire blame on Bishan Ranga, the Dalit Sarpanch of Peepalvas. They aggressively argued that Bishan had intentionally guided the inspection team to their farms to retaliate in the context of a seven-month-old dispute (*ladai-jhagda*).[78] Chowdhry (2005, 2009) and Jeffrey (2010) have noted how Jat farmers often spin hyperbolic stories about Dalits, especially about their political and economic rise. Underpinning these exaggerated narratives is a deep-rooted social anxiety vis-à-vis the 'rising' Dalits, which often serves as a justification to reinforce forms of caste subjugation, including inflicting violence on them. Soon, a plan was hatched to beat up the Dalit Sarpanch so as to refamiliarize (*yaad dilana*) him with his inferior caste status (*haisiyat*).

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[78] In March 2016, Akshay, Bishan Ranga's nephew, was held captive by Arjun Singh, Yashpal Singh's son, for two nights and one day for allegedly 'misbehaving' (a commonly used euphemism for sexual harassment) with his wife. Akshay was detained in a cowshed situated on the fringes of the residential site of Peepalvas, where he was forcibly fed cheap whiskey and was beaten and tortured by Bijender and Satender, among others.

Satbir Singh, a marginal Jat farmer.

Bishan Ranga had become the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat of Peepalvas in January 2016. Prior to elections, I was told, he was not even in the fray for the influential post. For that particular term (2016-2022), the position of Peepalvas's Sarpanch was 'reserved' for a candidate from the Scheduled Castes (SCs), a governmental category designating Dalit caste groups. In 1993, as part of the 73rd Amendment Act, 33 percent of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) seats were reserved for women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Dutta 2012; Jeffrey 2010). Manor (2012:14) has argued that such central pieces of legislation have produced "a democracy with deep roots" in rural India, which, among other things, has led to a decline in caste hierarchies. To me, however, what followed next suggested that political change in inter-caste relations is best understood not so much in terms of a unidirectional trajectory towards the declining salience of caste hierarchies, but more in

terms of ebbs and flows of caste dominance. Despite the arrival of village democracy, together with subsequent constitutional amendments to make Gram Panchayat more inclusive for women and Dalit castes, male Jat leaders and their patrilineages still exercise political clout not only over the composition of Gram Panchayat, such as who gets elected as the Sarpanch, but also over its formal procedures through which state development and welfare policies get implemented in the village (Gupta 1998; Jeffrey, Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2001; Lieten 1996; Lieten & Srivastava 1999).

During village elections held in January 2016, Bishan Ranga was backed by a powerful Jat faction, which was headed by Yashpal Singh and included other members of the patrilineage like Satbir and his sons. For this reason, Bishan 'owed' his position as Sarpanch to the Jats. Dalbir Kumar, the other Dalit candidate and Bishan Ranga's rival, was supported by the opposing Jat faction.[79] Reporting from the neighbouring Jat-dominated region of western Uttar Pradesh, Pai (2001:649) has noted that despite recent political assertions on part of the Dalits, their candidates contesting for the post of Sarpanch are mostly "approved and supported" by dominant landholding castes.

On the same evening, Yashpal Singh called Bishan Ranga to his courtyard where he held a large baithak with other senior Jat men of his patrilineage. When Bishan arrived, he was attacked by Bijender from behind. He was pushed to the ground, dragged, and hit in the face. Taken aback and fearing more violence, Bishan Ranga started pleading and apologizing. He was at pains to explain how state officials had woken him up early in the morning to join them for a round of inspections.

> Bishan Singh: I did not want to go with them, but the police jeep was standing
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> outside my house. At first, my wife informed them I was not at home. But then
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> they told her I could be arrested if I did not come with them. Tell me, who will

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[79] It should be noted that caste hierarchies also exist among the Dalit castes. In northern India, the Chamar caste is not only numerically the largest, but is also regarded as the most powerful Dalit caste. Many present-day Dalit politicians like Kanshi Ram, and his successor, Mayawati, are from the Chamar caste.

take care of my family if I were to get arrested tomorrow? How could I have refused to go along with these powerful state officials [*shakti-shali afsaar*]? What is my status [*haisiyat*]? I am a poor Chamar man. And then you beat me up. I am stuck in the middle. Please beat me up [*maro mane*] and make me pay for my sins [*paap*].

Bijender: I will break your leg, you sister-fucker [*bahanchod*]!

At this point, Yashpal Singh, who had been sitting afar with other senior Jat males of his patriline, intervened. Adopting the role of a benevolent master, he ordered Bijender to release Bishan Ranga and then offered a chair to the Sarpanch. Importantly, the chair was deliberately positioned outside the circle of Jat men sharing the hookah. This served as a sharp reminder that even though state law has criminalized the centuries-old practice of caste untouchability, and that a Dalit now occupies the formal seat of village headmanship, customary rules of caste deference persisted, albeit in a milder form. Through a purposeful positioning of Jat-owned furniture—the chairs and cots—in Yashpal Singh's courtyard, Bishan Ranga was spatially excluded from Jat male sociality. To soften the blow, some warm chai was offered to him in a cup.[80]

Shaken by what had transpired, Bishan continued to issue more explanations that were interspersed with profuse apologies. Notably, he was not addressing any person in particular but the entire assembly of senior Jat males. In accordance with customary codes of caste deference, he repeatedly rose from his chair to apologize to everyone present. His bodily gestures, more specifically his folded hands, a sign of subservience, as well as his speech, threw into bold relief his intuitive understanding of the 'offence' (*gunah*) he was accused of having committed. His participation (willful or coerced) in that

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[80] The cup was later hurriedly rinsed and placed outside the bounds of Yashpal Singh's domestic space. This gesture spoke volumes about how untouchability—the fear of ritual pollution— continues to be practiced in a multitude of veiled ways in present-day India (Waghmore 2018).

day's inspection was perceived as an affront to the entire Jat patriline assembled in Yashpal Singh's courtyard as an ad-hoc Jat panchayat. This brings into bold relief one of the central contradictions of village democracy in India: though the postcolonial state has empowered Dalit village leaders, they often get beaten for performing their official functions. Similar instances of caste violence against Dalit village leaders are reported by Jeffrey (2010) and Gupta (1998) from the neighbouring Jat-dominated region of western Uttar Pradesh. Fearful of impending violence and shamed by the treatment he was receiving at the hands of those who had directly helped him get elected as Sarpanch, Bishan Ranga finished the cup of chai quickly. He then got up and requested to take his leave.

Scholarship on rural India has emphasized challenges to local power wielded by landowning groups, which some researchers see as evidence of a de-linking of landownership from local dominance (Frankel 1989; Jodhka & Manor 2018; Manor 2012; Mendelsohn 1993). Manor (2012), for instance, has argued that caste hierarchies have weakened because of factors that are both external, e.g., the spread of education, off-farms job opportunities, electoral democracy, policy interventions, and internal, e.g., the decline of land-based patronage. Likewise, Jodhka & Manor (2018:24) have suggested that the decades-long experience with village democracy has "enhanced disadvantaged castes' political capacity – their political awareness, confidence, skills, and connections." Krishna (2018:89) too has posited that the rise of *naya neta* (new leaders) from lower castes has enabled more widespread access to state resources and patronage. To me, the events I witnessed in village Peepalvas suggested that the argument positing a reduction of local power exercised by landowning groups in rural India is not uniformly accurate. Harriss (2012), Jeffrey (2010), Witsoe (2013), among others, have broadly pointed out two things. First, the decline in land-based caste power might have been overstated; and second, newer forms of caste control and dominance have been evolved by landowning castes like the Jats. For instance, as the ethnographic vignette above illustrates, the application of state law via the Gram Panchayat continues to be embedded in everyday forms of caste domination.

How and why did Bishan Ranga come under the political influence of the landowning Jat patrilineage? Till recently, Bishan Ranga and his wife had worked as labourers in Yashpal Singh's farms. Bishan's father, Moti, as well as his forefathers before him, were attached (*jude hua*) to Yashpal Singh's patriline as part of the now much disintegrated land-based system of patronage. In addition, Bishan regularly borrowed money from Yashpal Singh, including a hefty loan for his daughter's marriage two years ago. He also needed money on a regular basis to finance his son's college education. Outwardly, Bishan had acquired a few social attributes that signaled his independence from his former masters; for example, he had recently opened a tea shop in the village, his son pursued a college education, and, most importantly, he was a Sarpanch. But despite these indicators of status, Bishan and his family remained economically dependent on the line of credit extended by Yashpal Singh. In addition, as the above sequence of events has shown, the dominance exercised by Yashpal Singh and his patriline over Bishan was also characterized by the ever-lingering threat of violence—what Dalit castes call 'Jat's tyranny' (*Jat ka zulum*). Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent that Yashpal Singh had helped Bishan Ranga get elected as Sarpanch in order to extent his own control over village politics. It then does not come as a surprise to hear Dalit village leaders like Bishan Ranga complain about how development and welfare grants do not get released by state officials like Block Development Officers (BDO), Panchayat Secretaries, and local bank managers until they are first recommended by powerful Jat leaders like Yashpal Singh. This pervasive influence over the functioning of the state by Jats is precisely why Dalits continue to be reluctant to take their complaints to local police (Jeffrey 2010).

A Gram Panchayat Election

My interest in local politics was first triggered by a sequence of events that determined my arrival in village Lakhanpura, Rohtak. Originally, my plan was to start fieldwork in village Peepalvas in district Sonipat. However, on November 1, 2015, a week prior to my departure for Peepalvas, Dalbir, my

landlord, asked me to delay my plans. He suggested I go to Peepalvas once Gram Panchayat elections had taken place. In the build-up to village elections, he told me, the social milieu (*samajik mahoul*) of Peepalvas had started to rot (*sadna*) as old political faultlines had reopened, increasing the possibility of neighbourhood quarrels, physical fights, and more widespread violence. Since I would be new to the village and thus unaware of its political divisions, Dalbir feared I may get embroiled in its 'dirty politics' (*gandi rajniti*). This led me to look for another village to start my fieldwork. Following a friend's suggestion, I reached Amarjit's house in village Lakhanpura. Amarjit rented me the room on top of the main dwelling (*chaubara*). With other details working out smoothly, I shifted the focus of my fieldwork to Lakhanpura on November 15, 2015.

My encounter with Dalbir—his initial willingness and later reluctance to have me live in his ancestral house during village elections—had piqued my interest in the micro-processes of village politics. As much as I wanted to grasp the election-time politicking that took place in Peepalvas, I was equally inquisitive about how politics more broadly was cast in moral terms. From Dalbir I learnt that village electoral politics was transformative in nature, but my fieldwork in Lakhanpura revealed to me it was not transformative in the same way for all. On one hand, for many villagers like Dalbir, village electoral politics was 'debased' (*giri hui*) because it divided the village even more than it already was (Govindarajan 2018). On the other hand, for dominant personalities of the village, Gram Panchayat elections were events they had being preparing for years. Being elected Sarpanch, for instance, would not only increase their social prestige, but would also enable them to earn wealth via practices of corruption and patronage (Dutta 2012; Gupta 1998; Jeffrey, Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2001; Lieten 1996). These village leaders prepared by mobilizing various resources like money and manpower to increase their political clout in various ways. In addition, they also kept an ear close to the ground to stymie similar moves made by potential rivals.

Amarjit, my landlord, with his elder brother, Harjit.

Political anthropologists have shared stories from different parts of rural South Asia about how politics is subjected to rigorous moral evaluations by villagers. From villages in West Bengal, India, Arild Ruud (2001:116) reported that local configurations of electoral politics were widely perceived as "dirty." In a Sri Lankan village, Spencer (1990, 2007) noted that election-time politics was criticized because it aggravated pre-existing social divisions. Likewise, while studying a Gram Panchayat election in village Pokhri, Uttarakhand, India, Govindarajan (2018:131) observed "the inevitability of mendacity in [village] politics." Others like Witsoe (2011) and Dutta (2012) have pointed out that village electoral politics not only increased the possibility of violence among rival candidates, but also constituted the moment when village leaders were openly seen as engaging in a brazen pursuit of self-interest, for instance, by distributing alcohol and money to get votes. Villagers may adopt a critical

stance towards such politicking, but they cannot afford to distance themselves too much from local political processes. As I explained earlier in the chapter, it is by maintaining close associations with leaders that ordinary villagers are able to access various resources and services disbursed by the state (Gupta 1998; Jeffrey & Lerche 2000; Manor 2000). Broadly, these works throw light on how villagers are at once drawn to and repelled by the domain of the political—a theme that also informs my study of local politics in Lakhanpura.

In Lakhanpura, village leaders and their activities were apprehended with much moral ambiguity and cynicism. These men (all men) were called dishonest, corrupt, and unprincipled. As political rivals, village leaders engaged in melodramatic agonistic exchanges that gave Lakhanpura's politics a theatre-like (*tamasha*) quality. Many of these theatrical displays took place in village units of the khap panchayat. In the face of reopening of old rivalries and disputes in the election season, ideologies of caste and kinship, which valorized the sentiment of unity among males of an extended patrilineage, often supplied the vocabulary in which moral censure of electoral politics was framed.

Baithaks as masculine sites of village politics

My entry into the village politics of Lakhanpura was very direct. Amarjit, my landlord, was unemployed (*berozgar*), and thus had plenty of time on his hands. He mostly spent his day participating in all-male neighbourhood baithaks, especially in mornings and evenings. By accompanying him to these sites of male sociality, I began to grasp the central role they played in the functioning of village politics.

Baithak are critical sites of masculine sociality in Jat villages. Lewis (1958:52) has described Jat baithaks as "men's quarters" where "the men meet to chat and smoke the hookah." In simple terms, this is where Jat men (both the elderly and middle-aged) gather to discuss a wide spectrum of routine issues ranging from crops destroyed by untimely rainfall to the education of their children to the entry of big corporations like Reliance in the agricultural sector. Local, regional, and national politics are also oft-

discussed, especially in morning baithak when the men read newspapers. In village Alipur, western Uttar Pradesh, Gupta (1995, 1998) sat through similar male neighbourhood discussions and noted how the dialogues played a critical role in producing what he called "discursive constructions of the state" (Gupta 1995:377). For instance, since these discussions often focused on the bureaucratic practices of local state officials, participation in them provided villagers practical tips and strategies on how to negotiate difficulties in approaching officials. When not focused on politics, discussions in Jat baithaks are animated and opinions are expressed freely. Men do not hesitate to pull each other's legs or crack a joke at someone's expense. Such joviality is permitted, provided it is performed within the ambit of acceptable behaviour prescribed by norms of kinship and caste. Of course, some transgressions do occur, but transgressors are rebuked. Men gather again the next day to do more of the same, i.e. to read newspapers, talk, gossip, argue, discuss, play cards, and smoke hookah.

Initially I visited Khajan Singh's baithak with Amarjit. Khajan and Amarjit were part of the same patriline, being descendants of one Boddu—their great grandfather (*dada*) who lived five generations ago. Upon visiting Khajan's baithak, I learnt that hosting a baithak requires certain preparations in advance. For instance, early in the morning, Ravi, Khajan's domestic servant, swept Khajan's courtyard where the baithak was held, laid out chairs and cots, and placed 2-3 daily newspapers. Since three hookahs did the rounds of the baithak, a heap of dunk-cakes—used for burning tobacco in the bowl (*chilam*) of the hookah—was carefully placed in a corner. Chai, along with biscuits, was served about 3-4 times a day. At night, whiskey was available for those who wanted to drink. These attractions lured not only men from Khajan's immediate neighbourhood but also from other parts of the village. Apart from Jats, the baithak was also open to men from artisanal castes like the Nais (barbers), Khatis

(carpenters), and Chippis (tailors).[81] Brahmins were welcomed but they rarely came so as to preserve their high-ritual status.[82] Dalits were disallowed from participation in Jat baithaks.

A Jat baithak.

The hospitality (*mehman-nawazi*) displayed by Khajan—the steady supply of hookah, chai, snacks, and whiskey—was perceived by all against the backdrop of the approaching Gram Panchayat elections. In this context, they were election time goodies that Khajan offered once every five years. Inner dynamics prevailing in the baithak soon became clear. To be a consumer of Khajan's election-time benevolence was not an innocuous act but constituted a silent political transaction. The number of men gathered

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[81] As these groups have never been subjected to practices of untouchability, the Jats share their hookah with them.
[82] The Brahmins held their separate caste baithak and preferred not to share hookah with men from other castes.

in Khajan's baithak served as a metric to calculate his political standing in the village. It communicated to his rivals that these men, as well as their families, would support Khajan in the approaching village elections. It also helped assure Khajan that the men he had been cultivating as supporters would live up to their promises of voting for him. Yet since I arrived at the start of the election season, there was still opportunity for villagers to change sides.

Jat men playing cards in the baithak.

Soon enough, my participation in the political life of Lakhanpura expanded. The host-tenant relationship with Amarjit functioned like a passport: it gave me an identity in the village, certified me as a trustworthy man, and granted me the privilege to approach people to discuss local politics. I interacted with these men in their homes, as well as in other neighbourhood baithaks. In addition, I visited their farms, accompanied them to the nearby towns and cities, and, among other things, added

them on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. With village elections approaching, many conversations revolved around village politics and its history. They included anecdotal accounts of previous elections, personal histories of former village Sarpanch, the number of development works, e.g. building of roads, completed by them, and, lastly, the extent of corruption during their tenure. These scattered discussions were disorderly and eclectic. They sometimes delved into the long arc of Lakhanpura's political history and, at other times, recalled seemingly trifling issues and events. By carefully piecing together different threads of these dialogues, I was able to sketch out a historical backdrop to the moral drama that was to soon dominate Lakhanpura's politics. This is the story that I now turn towards.

The moral drama of elections

Wouters (2015:129) has rightly noted that political anthropologists have predominantly studied elections as "a short, spasmodic event…unsuitable for the prolonged inquiry characteristic of anthropology." Similarly, Govindarajan (2018) has argued that elections have been mostly viewed as one-time events that are largely cut-off from what precedes and follows them. She notes a more complex and nuanced understanding of local politics becomes available when election is studied in a wider temporal framework that extends not only in the past but also in future. Simply put, when elections are studied as "temporary affairs," as Banerjee (2011:82) has viewed them to be, occurring, say, only once every five years, many features of local politics escape critical scrutiny. Building on this thread, in this section I situate Lakhanpura's Gram Panchayat election in an ethnohistorical "longue durée" to show not only how each village election is embedded in a serial history of previous elections, but also how centuries-old patterns continue to shape political faultlines around which village elections get contested (Wouters 2015:126).

Lakhanpura was originally settled by the locally dominant Gathwala Jats. In context of the village, the Gathwala clan was split into two separate patrilineages: Bharte and Chatre. As outlined in the last chapter, these localized descent units also constitute separate village neighbourhoods called pana. Underneath the level of the pana, both patrilineages were further sub-divided into thola and kunba. In the previous chapter, I examined how these kin-based Jat neighbourhoods functioned as jural units processing village disputes. This chapter considers an additional dimension to them: namely, how they work as political units that influence electoral politics often by coalescing into village units of the khap panchayat. The historical split of Gathwala Jats into two patrilineages has profoundly shaped the trajectory of its electoral politics. What is the origin story behind the two patrilineages of Lakhanpura? And how did it play out in the context of village elections?

In the past, many disputes, especially pertaining to land, occurred between the two Gathwala patrilineages. Bharte, also known as *purana*, i.e., the older neighbourhood, is numerically larger than Chatre, which is known as *naya*, i.e. the newer neighbourhood. Consequently, as a political unit, the Bharte patrilineage has more votes than the Chatre. Most previous Sarpanchs of Lakhanpura have belonged to the Bharte and were elected unanimously (*nishpaksh*) through collective deliberations that took place in joint khap panchayats involving the two Jat neighbourhoods. This highlights not only how political power in the village has been historically concentrated among the Jats, but also how village units of the khap panchayat have played an important role in postcolonial village democracy. Electoral politics in Lakhanpura, as well as in other villages of India, has transitioned over the past three decades, especially with the passing of the 73rd amendment Act 1993, which led to allocation of more development funds to these government village bodies (Jodhka and Manor 2018). This and similar national political developments have increased the amount of money that can be siphoned off by village leaders via corruption. As a result, the position of the Sarpanch has become a much coveted one – a fact reflected in the steep increase in the expenses borne by various candidates to contest

village elections.[83] In Lakhanpura, this has also ended the customary practice of choosing the Sarpanch of the village unanimously. Consequently, village elections have become keenly contested political events between the Bharte and Chatre spawning an electoral rivalry between the two Jat patrilineages of the village.

At the heart of this political rivalry is the history of the settlement of Lakhanpura. The village was settled by ancestors of the Bharte, who had migrated from the parent village of Buana Lakhu. According to historical accounts narrated by Jat elders, decades after the settlement of Lakhanpura, a few wandering Gathwala Jat families arrived in Lakhanpura requesting habitation. In a khap panchayat, it was decided to settle the itinerant Jat families who later constituted the new Chatre pana of Lakhanpura. These families were given land to live on and to cultivate. Their inclusion, however, was predicated on a condition. The newly arrived Gathwala families, and their future generations, were obligated to recognize patrilineal seniority, as well as the privileges that came with it, of the Bharte patrilineage, the original settlers of Lakhanpura. In colloquial terms, as a patrilineal group, members of the Chatre were to cohabitate in the village as the Bharte's younger brothers (*chota bhai*). Ever since, the Bharte has had an upper hand over the Chatre in village politics.[84] Yet the development of village democracy over the past number of decades, more specifically the quinquennial Gram Panchayat elections, have served as an opportunity for the Chatre patrilineage to challenge the centuries-old unequal distribution of power. The previous two elections in Lakhanpura were won by Vishal Singh, a powerful candidate from the Chatre patrilineage. The inability of the Bharte to field a unanimously-supported candidate resulted in a dispersion of its votes, whereas the Chatre's votes were

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[83] Both Jat leaders of Lakhanpura contesting the Gram Panchayat election of 2016 were said to have spent 1 crore rupees (USD 120,158) each on canvassing.

[84] For instance, the headmanship of the chau-gama panchayat, i.e., the joint panchayat of four neighbouring villages that Lakhanpura is part of, was always retained by leaders of Bharte patrilineage.

concentrated.[85] Attention to these details reveal to me how each village election is embedded in the serial history of previous Gram Panchayat elections.

Khajan Singh, and his persistence to contest a series of pervious Gram Panchayat elections, was the primary reason why votes from the Bharte patrilineage had gone in multiple directions. Khajan was a contentious figure and thus faced considerable opposition from other Jats. Prior to retirement, Khajan worked as a mid-level state bureaucrat, a fact that barred him from contesting elections.[86] Instead, he contested them indirectly by putting up his family members as proxy candidates. In Lakhanpura, Khajan is viewed to have fought village elections thrice: once by putting up his wife, Geeta Devi, and twice by putting his younger son, Baldheera, as candidates. While Geeta Devi had won the panchayat election in 1994, Baldheera had lost in both 2005 and 2010.[87] Discord over the candidature of Khajan's son had been sharp, splitting the Bharte votes and leading to the victory of Vishal Singh from the Chatre patrilineage. These losses in 2005 and 2010 had hurt Khajan personally, as well as undermined patrilineal seniority within the Bharte patrilineage. Yet despite losing twice in a row, Khajan was planning to contest the election again in 2016. Since the position of Sarpanch in the upcoming village election was reserved for a woman candidate, Khajan was planning to contest the election by putting Laxmi, his daughter-in-law, as his proxy candidate, even though he recognized that winning was unlikely.

The political opposition faced by Khajan in the village was a puzzle that I struggled to decipher. After all, Khajan had cultivated most attributes of village leadership; he was an affluent man, had links with urban officials and politicians outside the village, and had the ability to advance the interests of his

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[85] Three candidates from the Bharte patrilineage had contested for the post of Sarpanch in the previous election.

[86] Government employees cannot contest local panchayat elections.

[87] When Geeta Devi became the Sarpanch of Lakhanpura between 1994 and 2000, Khajan controlled and managed all official responsibilities: his wife merely acted as the signatory authority. This is not a rare practice in village politics in India. See Yazgi (2010) and Govindarajan (2018).

constituency. To grasp the disagreement over Khajan's candidature, I delved deeper into his biography to tease out how his economic ascendancy had been perceived by some to have birthed traits like deceit, mendacity, and arrogance, which made several men from his patrilineage distrustful of Khajan.

The making of a village leader

The story of Khajan Singh's ascendancy to power can be described along two distinct yet overlapping axes: how he cultivated power outside the village, and how he cultivated power inside the village. A dominant personality, Khajan was embedded in a web of economic and political relations that extended much beyond Lakhanpura. Anthropologists have noted how wider networks of caste and kinship have become critical pathways through which landowning groups like the Jats are able to redeploy their agricultural capital towards white-collar government employment or entrepreneurial activity (Chari 2004; Gidwani 2008; Harriss 2012; Jeffrey 2010; Witsoe 2018). Khajan exemplified such recent trends, making his personal history a useful site to reflect on how dominant castes are able to expand the basis of their power by acquiring newer spheres of influence. As a mid-ranking bureaucrat in the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the state agency entrusted with Delhi's urban planning, Khajan dealt directly with the public and also participated in widespread practices of corruption, such as accepting bribes (*uparli kamai*), that state agencies in India have gained much notoriety for (Jeffrey and Lerche 2000; Gupta 1995, 2005). Through his formal employment, Khajan was part of larger politico-bureaucratic nexuses made up of state bureaucrats from various government agencies, local politicians, businessmen and traders, and strong men (*badmash*) used for intimidation. In Bihar, Witsoe (2018:43) has explored the functioning of similarly structured localized nexuses of sand and cooperative mafia, among others, comprising "local landowning elites, politicians, bureaucrats and contractors." He astutely observed that caste and kinship networks spread over a region "facilitated" such nexuses as a majority of its participants come from higher rungs of caste society. In addition to

his government role, in Rohtak, Khajan operated 2 brick-kiln units, 3 freight trucks, 2 wine shops, a petrol pump, and a furniture showroom. Most of these businesses were run in collaboration with other affluent Jat men, including a politician from the neighbouring district of Jind.

A young village Sarpanch.

Within the village, Khajan Singh had crafted his political and economic rise carefully. Along with his two sons, Khajan had acquired most attributes of rural power, including land, money, muscle power, and links with state officials and politicians. His younger son, Baldheera, was a rich farmer, cultivating about 30-40 acres of land each agricultural season. To work on such large landholding, Baldheera owned two tractors, a combine harvester, trollies, a dumper, a harrow, and rotavator among other pieces of equipment. In addition, throughout the year, he employed a small group of agricultural labourers drawn from the Dalit castes of Lakhanpura to work on his farms. In local parlance, he was known as a *thada zamindar* ("a big landowner"). To me, Baldheera's economic influence in the village suggested that some recent calls made by anthropologists of caste to study local authority as "de-linked" from landownership may misjudge the extent to which land continues to be a source of power and privilege, especially in deeper parts of the countryside (Manor 2012; Mendelsohn 1993). Khajan's elder son, Balwan, was also well-known locally as a professional wrestler (*pahalwan*) who, in the later years of his career, had joined Haryana Police as a sub-inspector. Through his elder son, Khajan not only built informal links with other police officers, but was also able to cultivate the personality of a village strongman. For instance, 2-3 able-bodied muscular 'junior' wrestlers always accompanied Khajan as his 'bodyguards' wherever he travelled. This not only enabled Khajan to project an optic of masculine power, but it also empowered him to exercise force and violence (or the threat thereof) on others. In her political ethnography of the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, Michelutti (2010:47) studied the significance of what she calls "muscle politics" at both local and regional levels. More specifically, she notes how village leaders and politicians draw on a masculine idiom of power—a "political style" constituted by local practices of force and violence—to protect their material and symbolic interests (Michelutti 2010:63). To this, I will add that local ideas of masculine power are also caste inflected, in that they are closely tied to the kshatriya identity historically claimed by dominant landowning castes like the Jats.

Khajan had the local reputation of being the biggest moneylender in Lakhanpura and its nearby villages. I often spotted farmers from neighbouring villages in his house who had come to borrow money from him. Chowdhry (1984:61-99) has noted how moneylending networks, especially those constituted by men from landowning groups who could also wield violence, have historically been an important source of social power in Haryana's countryside. In particular, she studied how many Jats had turned to moneylending upon retirement from the British army with a fixed pension. Based on historical research, Chowdhry had argued that the economic clout supplied by moneylending not only enabled Jats to invest in local political economies (for instance, by setting up sugar-mills and brick-kilns), but it also enhanced their political standing in the village. In today's Haryana, the practice of moneylending continues to be intimately linked to local power. In fact, during fieldwork, I observed that most village leaders also functioned as moneylenders, as this put them a strategic position to exert political influence over their debtors. Since institutional sources of credit require certain conditions be met before loans are given, the 'shadow' economy of local moneylending flourishes in the countryside (Jodhka 1995; Singh 2022). Moneylending, however, has a deeply exploitative side. Since moneylenders charge exorbitant rates of interest, this form of non-institutional debt is difficult to break. In fact, it engenders relations of economic dependence where the debtor starts borrowing money not only for farming and allied activities but also for household expenses, like children's education or marriage (Gill 2004; Jakhar, Kait & Kumar 2022). During election periods, village leaders like Khajan seek to convert monetary indebtedness into political allegiance. Put simply, they influence electoral choices of their debtors by not only threatening to cut off lines of credit, but also by deploying muscle power and hinting at the threat of violence.

The socio-political weight of debt was easily perceptible in Khajan's baithak where his supporters called him 'Khajan sahab,' a title of honor and deference. Public conferral of such titles was not merely voluntary but was also extracted. In the build-up to village elections, Khajan aimed to convert his

debtors into political supporters. Those who resisted Khajan's electoral strategies risked public humiliation. Tales of Khajan's blistering temper had taken on a mythical character in local gossip circuits. Villagers recounted multiple instances wherein Khajan and his sons had physically beaten debtors for defaulting on a loan. Other than controlling villagers through intimidation, Khajan also projected himself as a benevolent patriarch, especially among his close-knit patrilineal kinsmen. Scholars have noted how caste and kinship networks extending from the village to local and regional centres enable villagers to gain access to bank loans, migrate to towns and cities, and find jobs, among other things (Jodhka & Manor 2018; Deshpande & Newman 2007; Munshi & Rosenzweig 2009). Indeed, Khajan's close patrilineal relatives, especially young men, tried to attach themselves to him as he often helped them find jobs in the informal economy concentrated in urban centers.

The story of Khajan's economic dominance, however, sat uneasily with his failed ambitions in village politics. On one hand, he flourished in the wider orbits of the rural political economy, but on the other, he faced stiff competition from his detractors inside the village. Why was this the case? Khajan believed his steep rise had attracted his kinsmen's jealously, which led them to circulate a wrong impression of him as a *ghaplebaaz* and *do number ka vyapari*.[88] Others in the village, however, held a different opinion. Their responses were not straightforward but were referenced in a series of events marked by village disputes and rivalries between Khajan and other Jat men from the Bharte patrilineage. A consideration of these rivalries reveals why many in the village viewed Khajan, and his sons, as deceitful, arrogant, and uncooperative—qualities that render a person unfit for local leadership.

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[88] Both terms are ethically charged and refer to practitioners of corruption.

Stories of Khajan's wrongdoings started circulating in Lakhanpura once he had grown in stature as a moneylender in the late 1990s. For many, Khajan's greed and arrogance had crossed a line when he swindled his own brother, Zille Singh, in a land sale deal in 2005. Earlier in 2001, Kanta Devi, Zille Singh's wife, had inherited 2.5 acres of agricultural farms as ancestral property after her father's death. Since she did not have a brother, Kanta Devi transferred her property to her husband.[89] In 2004, Zille decided to sell off the land to help his son, Teju, set up a shop in the nearby town of Gohana. Daunted by all the bureaucratic and legal paperwork involved, Zille asked his elder brother to sell the land on his behalf. Though Khajan sold the land for 44 lakh rupees (USD 52,870), he told Zille the deal was struck at 40 lakhs. A month later, a fight broke out between the two brothers when Zille found out the real sum. Furthermore, when Zille Singh called a panchayat of the patrilineage to adjudicate the dispute between the two brothers, Khajan insulted the nucleus of Jat elders (*panch*) by arriving to the panchayat in an inebriated state and challenging them to do whatever they could in their powers to get the money from him. Such behaviour was, of course, not received well by the leading patriarchs of the Bharte patrilineage. A few months later, they punished Khajan indirectly by voting against his son, Baldheera, in the 2005 Gram Panchayat election.

In another case, Khajan got embroiled in a long-drawn dispute with Arvind, a rich Jat farmer. In April 2005, at the end of the yearly agricultural cycle, when Arvind ended a crop-sharing (*batai*) agreement with Baldheera, an argument broke out between the two. It later escalated into a physical fight involving patrilineal relatives from both sides. At its root was Arvind's growing suspicion that Baldheera was planning to execute what's commonly known as *kabza*, an illegal occupation of

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[89] Women in India have the legal right to inherit both moveable and immovable ancestral property. However, this legal provision—introduced under the Hindu Succession Act 2005—struggles to receive social acceptability as many women continue to waive their inheritance right so that land ownership remains concentrated with the males of the patrilineage.

agricultural farms through force and violence, along with the forging of the title deed with the connivance of local revenue authorities. To assert his claim on a section of Arvind's farms, Baldheera had built a small room (*kothra*) and added some other infrastructure on the land without seeking Arvind's prior permission. A few months later, Arvind's marriage was called off just a couple of days before the wedding, resulting in a loss of male honour (*bezati*) of Arvind's patriline. Arvind's father, Dharampal, discovered that both Khajan and his wife, Geeta Devi, had paid a visit to Arvind's future father-in-law to 'inform' him of Arvind's alleged pre-marital affair with a Jat widow in the nearby town of Gohana. In 2006, when Khajan tried to play the same trick to break off Arvind's wedding for the second time, he was confronted directly by Arvind and his patrilineal relatives, leading to more argument and even physical fighting. Since then, Arvind and his patriline comprising six Jat families have opposed Khajan in all village elections.

In 2012, Khajan and his sons clashed with Satish, a marginal Jat farmer. Satish had paid 7 lakhs rupees (USD 8,411) to Khajan to get his son selected as an Assistant Professor in a government-run college in Haryana. Besides being a businessman and a moneylender, on the side Khajan used to function as a 'broker' (*dalal*) in public sector recruitment drives. Scholars have noted that caste and kinship networks enable members of landholding castes to tap into "an informal market in government posts" (Jeffrey & Lerch 2000:865). Large bribes are paid to high-level bureaucrats or local politicians through a 'broker' to either obtain an examination paper in advance or to receive an unfair advantage in a job interview (Jeffrey 2010). Farming groups like the Jats are, of course, better placed than landless castes to participate in these markets. As a 'broker,' Khajan was regularly approached by many not just from Lakhanpura but also from nearby villages to provide their relatives with assistance to securing public offices. On most occasions, Khajan delivered on his promises. But with Satish he could not. A rule of thumb in such situations where a recruitment does not go through is that the money paid is returned in full. So, when Khajan decided to retain 2 lakh rupees (USD 2,403) as his brokerage fee, Satish and

his patriline fought back. The two families came to blows on this issue in Khajan's baithak. During the fight, Khajan's son, Balwan, threatened Satish by firing his police revolver in the air. The following day, Satish filed a complaint against Balwan at the nearest police station, which led to Balwan's suspension. Soon after, the two families reconciled in a neighbourhood Jat panchayat wherein Khajan returned Satish's money and Satish withdrew his police complaint against Balwan. The members of the two families now do not speak with each other.

As a consequence of these petty local disputes and rivalries, Khajan and his sons lost a lot of electoral clout. In fact, in the lead-up to the 2015 Gram Panchayat elections, Satish and Arvind had issued directives to their patrilineal relatives to not visit Khajan's baithak. An atmosphere of full-blown rivalry prevailed in Lakhanpura; according to some, bloodshed was imminent, as the opposing sides had secretly acquired weapons. Such intra-caste village rivalries characterize the political life of many villages in Haryana. They often get reignited close to village elections when leaders are scrambling for votes.[90] When Khajan made his plan to contest the forthcoming village election public, both Arvind and Satish made it into a contest where Lakhanpura's dominant caste men were keen to settle old scores with each other.

Reconciliation in the Jat panchayat

On December 15, 2015, polling dates for the Panchayati Raj Institutions of Haryana were announced. In Lakhanpura, the Gram Panchayat election was scheduled to be held on January 10, 2016.[91] The announcement of polling dates generated an immediate buzz in the village, especially so in Khajan's

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[90] See https://indianexpress.com/article/india/haryana-family-fued-bhainswal-kalan-village-murder-5795066/

[91] Previously, on September 9, 2015, the Election Commission of Haryana had announced Panchayati Raj elections for October 4, 11, and 18. However, on September 22, the Election Commission postponed the elections following a Public Interest Litigation filed in the Supreme Court of India challenging a set of amendments made by the Haryana government to the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act 1994—the set of laws that governed formal election procedures and the routine functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions. On December 10, 2015, the Supreme Court upheld the amendments made to the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act by the state government.

baithak, the epicenter of electoral politicking in the Bharte patrilineage.[92] Banerjee (2007, 2011) has argued that elections in India, especially in smaller constituencies like the village, have a 'sacrosanct' character. For rural masses, she holds, polling of votes in the elections constitute a unique moment that transcends the quotidian murky practices of village politics. As political events, she adds, the polling day is marked by procedural fairness, rule of law, efficiency, and citizenship. Thus, the election day also bring to the fore a starkly different character of the otherwise corrupt postcolonial state.

In addition to serving a political function, elections also have a social life. For instance, as numerous village ethnographies have noted, election seasons are marked by a series of informal village meetings that generate endless discussions about whom to support or oppose. Further, election-time hoardings, banners, posters, and pamphlets contribute to making elections in India "rambunctious" events (Banerjee 2014:7). Lastly, in the lead-up to elections, various political rivals and their supporters strive to outperform each other through a public show of electoral strength (*shakti-pradarshan*). These traits lend a theater-like (*tamasha*) quality to village elections. In Lakhanpura, women, who are otherwise peripheral to village politics, showed particular excitement as they learnt that the office of Sarpanch for that particular term was reserved for a woman candidate. Like men, they too speculated on questions like who will contest and who will win. A palpable boisterousness—"the election's festive aspect and collective effervescence"—surrounded the village election and the tight contest it had spawned (Banerjee 2007:1560).

Among the Bharte patrilineage, news was afoot that three men were keen on contesting. Out of them, only Khajan had made his plans public. The other two, Arvind and Satish, were testing waters. They received regular feedback on their popularity in the village from their friends and allies who sat in various neighbourhood baithaks. Khajan, on the other hand, was more proactive. But he knew that a

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[92] Since Amarjit, my landlord, lived in the Bharte neighbourhood, most Jat baithaks I had access to were held in that neighbourhood.

third defeat was imminent if he failed to build a consensus on his daughter-in-law's candidature among other Jat men of his patrilineage. He approached Mahavir, his childhood friend, to call a Jat panchayat to broker peace with Arvind and Satish. Mahavir, a Jat elder who also figured in the last chapter, was the most respected male figure in the Bharte patrilineage and was thus well-positioned to build a consensus among its patriarchs.

Filing of election nomination papers with state officials.

When Khajan came to meet Mahavir, Dayawati, Mahavir's wife, rebuked Khajan for being self-centred and wanting to reconcile with others only to win a village election. "This is not just my opinion, but that of the entire Bharte patrilineage," she said. At that point, I was sitting in Mahavir's house with his two sons. The ensuing discussion between Khajan and Mahavir was candid. After a lot of convincing, Mahavir agreed to mediate on Khajan's behalf, but advised him to be prepared to receive some hard-hitting questions from others. Mahavir also asked Khajan to get in touch with both Arvind and Satish

to apologize and seek their support for the election. Within a couple of days, Mahavir was successful in assembling a panchayat. Anticipating people's opposition to Khajan, he had put a neutral spin on the panchayat's agenda. The panchayat, he said, was called to build a wider consensus among all the Jats of the Bharte patrilineage to support a single candidate in the upcoming village election.

On December 19, 2015, the panchayat of the Bharte patrilineage gathered in its *chaupal* (the village rest-house). A dusty, red-colored carpet was laid out in the courtyard. Women are not invited to participate in Jat panchayats unless invited. That day, however, I saw a small group of women huddled together in a corner. Each of them wore the customary veil called the *pardah*. Since the seat of Sarpanch was reserved for a woman candidate, Mahavir believed that women's participation on the voting day would be critical. Chai was distributed in small cups and three hookahs were placed in different parts of the panchayat. Around 50-60 Jats had gathered when Mahavir started to speak. Right at the start, he framed the problem systematically.

> MAHAVIR: Our weakness is our opponent's strength. The Chatre patrilineage is able
> to win because we have failed to unite. We will lose again this time, if we do not build
> a consensus today on one candidate.

Since election-time village politics is widely perceived as perpetuating social division and corruption, Mahavir avoided mentioning these things in his panchayat speech. Instead, he emphasized how disintegration (*toot-na*) of the Bharte patrilineage into different factions had weakened it. To shape the panchayat discourse in this fashion, Mahavir had done some groundwork. A day prior to the panchayat, he had called 5-6 elders from various branches of the patrilineage to his baithak where the dispersion of the votes of the Bharte neighbourhood was discussed candidly. In fact, these men were successfully able to arrive at a broad consensus over Khajan's candidature. They had agreed to support him only on the condition that nobody from Khajan's family would contest another Gram Panchayat

election. They insisted that Khajan must make this promise publicly in the panchayat of the patrilineage. Hayden (1999:82-109) has called such male consultations among caste elders prior to the panchayat meeting a "pre-panchayat." He rightly noted that pre-panchayat group discussions are essential to create a broad-based consensus as they enable an exchange of differing viewpoints on an issue. Once Mahavir had finished talking, other senior males representing different patrilines of the Bharte patrilineage spoke. Like Mahavir, they too emphasized the need to restore unity. That way, the panchayat discourse was framed not explicitly around the upcoming village elections but around the cultural binary of 'unity' vs 'division.'

A Jat village chaupal, the most common site for holding the panchayat.

As mentioned earlier, Arvind and Satish had been floating their names as potential candidates. At the Jat panchayat that Mahavir called, they were asked directly whether they wanted to contest the election. Both refused to contest but their direct participation in the panchayat quickly changed its character. From articulating lofty ideals of patrilineal unity, the panchayat discourse suddenly descended into angry shouting and overlapping speech. Both men and women from the patrilineage started voicing their objections to Khajan and his family. The women in particular targeted Khajan's wife, Geeta Devi. Each one of them briefly recounted the trouble they and their families had been put through by 'dirty' (*gandi*) schemes plotted by Khajan. There was a sudden outpouring of grief among the women, a couple of whom started crying, wailing, and shouting. This temporarily broke elders' control over the panchayat meeting. Such free-for-all exchanges are seen as unacceptable in the Jat panchayat which is marked by "a distinctive style of speaking" termed "panchayat speech" by Hayden (1999:87). Among the Jats, the panchayat speech is constituted by an authoritative (i.e. louder than conversational) voice and a respectful style. Moreover, a speaker must always align himself with the larger objective of the panchayat to reinforce both appropriate modes of behaviour and to caste- and kin-based solidarity.

Following the series of outbursts, Mahavir re-established control by attempting to quell the collective resentment (*gussa*) against Khajan and directing it towards the larger objective of healing the patrilineage. He equated venting of collective anger against Khajan in the panchayat ('a larger family' as Mahavir had called it) with purging of *mawad* (pus) from a *phunsi* (abscess).

> MAHAVIR: Healing cannot begin till the time *mawad* leaves the *phunsi*.

Once Mahavir had calmed participants and persuaded them to be receptive to his proposal, Khajan Singh sought permission to speak. Building on the confessional tenor the panchayat had acquired, Khajan admitted to his wrongdoings and asked for everybody's forgiveness (*mafi*).

KHAJAN: Everybody commits mistakes. My family and I have committed some big ones. The two election losses I suffered from are not mine alone, they are also losses suffered by all of us. They are products of my bad deeds [*bure karam*]. I was misguided. I was arrogant and selfish. I thought myself to be bigger than the patrilineage and its panchayat. Today I have realized that I am nothing without your support and cooperation.

At this point, Khajan took off his *pagdi* (a turban symbolizing male honor). He bent down and put it on the floor as a gesture of submission to the moral authority of the panchayat. Khajan's apology took everyone by surprise. Clad in an impeccably neat white shirt and sarong (*dhoti-kurta*), Khajan stood meekly in the middle of the panchayat with his hands folded in supplication. As many saw it, the panchayat had cut Khajan down to size. But to others, he was let off scot-free. Indeed, the moral drama that had transpired worked in Khajan's favor: towards its end, the panchayat agreed to support Khajan in the upcoming election.

Scholars have noted how elections serve as new arenas where old socio-political divisions get worked out in various ways; they are a moment to renegotiate existing faultlines. Spencer (2007: 84-85), for instance, viewed elections as supplying "a new idiom" that is appropriated by villagers to "express the kinds of division that had long existed." Likewise, Wouters (2015) has explored how historically formed configurations of local power constitute the moral and political frameworks through which electoral democracy is experienced. Witsoe (2013:170), in particular, has studied the implications of old intra-caste divisions—what he termed "internal heterogeneity" or "multiplicity" among the dominant Yadav caste—on local politics in village Rajnagar, Bihar. Something similar was happening in Lakhanpura. Village politics occasioned by the Gram Panchayat election had acquired a moral character as old disputes and rivalries came to be collectively evaluated in the Jat panchayat. This

shows how local disputes and their adjudication often shape villagers' electoral choices in South Asia (Spencer 2007). More broadly, the approaching village election had also thrown into bold relief the political topography of the village: Lakhanpura was segregated into inter-caste neighbourhoods that, in turn, further branched into intra-caste settlements. This foregrounded a complex tapestry of spatially grounded networks of intra- and inter-caste relations that go into the functioning of village politics, a topic I explore further in the next section.

Up to this point, my exposure to local village politics was confined to intra-Jat contestations for power. Once Khajan become the undisputed representative from Bharte patrilineage, he was able to focus on the other feature of village politics: how to target votes of non-dominant caste groups.

Preparing for the village election

Previous sections examined how caste and kinship ideologies, especially when finding expression through the customary Jat panchayat, enabled moral denunciation of powerful and well-connected village leaders. That said, local village politics also has other sides to it, many of which unfold outside moral frameworks constituted by religion or caste. Here, I am drawing attention to village politics as constituted by what Spencer (2007:86) has called "egoistic displays of naked self-interest", i.e. politics as a domain of calculated instrumentality and profit-making. In Lakhanpura, the election season was also characterized by how rival Jat leaders, backed by their respective patrilineages, competed against each other to win the highest number of votes. Their electoral strategies were underpinned by a brazen pursuit of political power through crafty and cunning conduct, including the distribution of money and whiskey (Spencer 2007; Witsoe 2013). To win elections, Jat leaders tapped into inter-caste relations of patronage and clientelism—relations through which villagers, especially members of poor lower castes, gained access to state resources like bank loans, electricity and water connections, and wage employment, among other perks. As mentioned earlier, since local state institutions like Gram

Panchayat are weak, villagers also rely on their leaders to access state resources through development programs and welfare grants (Gupta 1998; Krishna 2018; Manor 2000).[93]

Recent ethnographies of rural India have noted that multi-caste electoral coalitions, which are mostly controlled by dominant personalities of the village, have become a regular feature of village democracy (Dutta 2012; Govindarajan 2018; Gupta 1998; Witsoe 2013). In Lakhanpura, both Khajan Singh and his rival from the Chatre lineage, Vishal Singh, stitched together multi-caste coalitions. What did these ad-hoc electoral coalitions rest on? In addition to the position of Sarpanch, Lakhanpura's villagers were also voting to elect its 9 Panchayat Members, each of whom represented different 'wards' that the village was divided into. This mechanism of political representation enabled villagers from different caste-based neighbourhoods to send their representatives to the council of Gram Panchayat. Formally, the power of Gram Panchayat rested with this council and not with the Sarpanch alone. Recent studies, however, have described that in practice Panchayat Members enjoy little powers. As a result, a Sarpanch from the dominant caste is often able to establish hegemony over Gram Panchayat, and the state grants received by it, mostly in connivance with urban state officials (Gupta 1998:107-153; Lieten 1996; Lieten & Srivastava 1999; Witsoe 2013:140-167). In this fashion, the Gram Panchayat has emerged as one of the contemporary sites of the reproduction of Jat dominance in postcolonial Haryana.

During village elections, the position of Panchayat Member is significant only as it relates to the wider strategy to win the post of Sarpanch. A day after the Jat panchayat, Khajan organized an election meeting in his baithak, which was attended not only by senior Jat males representing various branches of the Bharte patrilineage, but also by male leaders from the much smaller artisanal castes like the Nais (barber), Khatis (carpenter), and Kumhars (potter), and from Dalit castes of Lakhanpura. In the

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[93] At a broader level, similar forms of patronage and clientelism have shaped democracy in India across different scales, from the rural to urban and from the local to national (Björkman 2016, 2021; Piliavsky 2014; Price and Ruud 2011).

meeting, Khajan and his team of advisers laid out a strategy. First, to solidify his renewed friendship with Arvind and Satish, Khajan recommended that both be unanimously elected as Panchayat Members from the two wards in the Bharte neighbourhood. In addition, Khajan also announced names of leaders (*neta*) from lower castes who would contest the election to become Panchayat Members representing the poorer neighbourhoods of Lakhanpura. Importantly, most of these leaders representing weaker castes were, in fact, already under Khajan's influence. In the past, these caste leaders had delivered state resources to their caste-brethren through Khajan and his network. In addition, Khajan had also extended a line of credit to many lower caste leaders. In this sense, they were Khajan's longtime political clients. This was part of an oft-deployed electoral strategy wherein a candidate standing for the position of Sarpanch collaborates with others contesting to represent various wards. Such coalitions facilitate an easy transfer of votes: Khajan's supporters would vote to elect those men as Panchayat Members, and likewise, their supporters would vote for Khajan.

A village panchayat election poster.

From that day onwards, Khajan's baithak also acquired an inter-caste character as male leaders from other caste groups started attending. Dalit leaders, however, seldom came to the baithak. Whenever

they did, a physical distance from others was maintained. The increase in the number of male bodies congregating in Khajan's baithak was sharp. Previously, the baithak attracted no more than 13-15 men, whereas after the Jat panchayat there were no less than 35-40 men each day. A majority of these men arrived in the morning and left early in the evening. At night, of course, the baithak acquired what many called a 'disreputable' (*bekar*) character as cheap whiskey bottles were distributed among supporters, often leading to minor arguments and quarrels. If any of the regulars failed to show up for more than a couple of days, Khajan made sure to either visit their homes personally or to send someone on his behalf to invite them back. To me, this showed how closely the electoral allegiances of villagers were monitored by village leaders and their teams. Marking attendance in the baithak, as it were, was perceived as a sure sign of whom a villager would vote for. For these reasons, Khajan's baithak came to be known by a new nickname—Election Office.

Participation of lower castes and their leaders

Like all villages in India, Lakhanpura has witnessed myriad political, social, and economic transformations in the postcolonial period. Broadly speaking, these transformations can be attributed primarily to three factors: state legislation meant to end historical forms of caste subjugation; the introduction of state-sponsored development schemes and welfare programs; and the decline of land-based patronage (Gupta 1998; Jodhka & Manor 2018; Witsoe 2013). In addition, the advent of representative democracy at various levels ranging from the village to the national has reordered the relationship between politics and caste in India (Chatterjee 2011:208-234; Khilnani 1997; Kothari 1970). How have these broad structural transformations manifested at the level of the village? More specifically, how have they transformed local village politics?

Village ethnographies from the early post-Independence decades reported stories of elite capture of Gram Panchayat from various parts of northern India, including Delhi (Lewis 1958), Haryana (Yadava

1968), and Uttar Pradesh (Hitchcock 1959; Retzlaff 1962; Singh 1969). These works highlighted how historical logics of land-based patronage shaped the functioning of village democracy as members of lower castes were coerced directly or indirectly to vote for their landowning patrons. Through various strategies of caste oppression ranging from social boycotts to physical violence, all attempts to adopt an independent stance by lower castes were rebuffed by their masters. Local village politics has changed profoundly since those early decades of village democracy. In simple terms, the reshaping of inter-caste relations by postcolonial transformations has altered the terms on which lower caste groups now participate in village politics (Govindarajan 2018; Gupta 1998; Singh 2016). For instance, Witsoe (2013) examined how 'backward' castes like the Yadavs have risen by asserting themselves politically against the Rajputs, the former landlords, both in village and supra-village politics in Bihar. Krishna (2018:89) has noted the rise of *naya neta* (new leaders) from lower caste groups. Likewise, Pai (2001) has explored how the emergence of the Dalit-dominated Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh supported a new crop of Dalit leaders at the village level. Along the same line, Nagarajan *et al.* (2012) have argued that the political phenomenon of elite capture is on the wane. From western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, however, Lieten and Srivastava (1999), Jeffrey (2010), and Kumar (2016) give a different account conveying continued Jat dominance over Gram Panchayats and local state apparatuses.

In Lakhanpura, as well as in other villages of the region, leaders from the locally dominant caste require votes of the members of lower castes to win Gram Panchayat elections. In fact, the fashion in which Khajan Singh and his rival, Vishal Singh, competed amongst each other to get non-Jat votes serves as an important vantage point to reflect on the changing nature of village politics. To get a bird's-eye view of the voting arithmetic that shaped the electoral landscape of Lakhanpura, a demographic distribution of various castes in the village is helpful.

TABLE 1. Caste and Household Structure, Lakhanpura 2015-2016

Name of the caste	Number of households	Number of people	Percentage of population
Brahmin	13	54	6
Jat	113	462	54
Bania	1	5	1
Khati (carpenter)	7	26	3
Lohar (blacksmith)	5	19	2
Kumhar (potter)	8	37	4
Nai (barber)	5	17	2
Teli (oilpresser)	2	9	1
Chippi (tailor)	2	7	1
Dhanak (weaver)	11	48	6
Chamar (tanner)	23	102	12
Valmiki (sweeper)	16	70	8
Total	206	856	100

Lakhanpura's caste distribution reveals the numerical preponderance of the Jats vis-à-vis other castes inhabiting the village.[94] Among other groups, the Brahmins have 54 votes, an appreciable number given how closely Gram Panchayat elections are fought. Among the landless lower castes, the cluster of artisanal groups like the Khatis (carpenter), Kumhars (potter), and Nais (barber) do not have many

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[94] Remarkably, numerical preponderance of the Jats is a demographic feature of all Jat-dominated villages in this region. In fact, the share of Jat votes in several villages is as high as 65-68 percent.

households in the village. In contrast, the Dalit groups, the Dhanaks, Chamars, and Valmikis, who have historically comprised the bulk of the agrarian labour force, are present in sizeable numbers. Those vying for positions of village leadership like Khajan Singh were, of course, deeply familiar with these village demographics. Since the Jats are internally split into different local descent groups, like the Bharte and Chatre patrilineages, their leaders invariably approach other caste groups to win elections. In these transactions, each caste-based neighbourhood is represented by a leader (*neta*) who articulates their group's interests. These leaders have the ability to mobilize their caste members and thus largely control their votes. Dominant caste leaders promise lower caste leaders development and welfare benefits from state-sponsored schemes implemented through Gram Panchayat. In return, lower caste leaders promise to deliver the votes of their caste members.

In the village, the Sarpanch is the central pivot on whom hinges all development and welfare programs in the village; he decides what works are to be pursued and how state funds will be deployed. Invariably, the Sarpanch siphons off a large chunk of development and welfare funds for his own use. Such corruption or 'leakage' in Gram Panchayat are rampant and are the primary source of wealth for village leaders. They are part of an arrangement among the Sarpanch and urban state officials like the Panchayat Secretary, Block Development Officer (BDO), and local bank managers, each one of whom receives a 'commission' from development and welfare grants provided to the village (Lieten 1996; Lieten & Srivastava 1999; Jeffrey & Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2001). To avoid scrutiny, the Sarpanch seldom holds Gram Panchayat meetings. Also, most development works are pork-barrel projects initiated by the Sarpanch to keep his support-base intact. In this way, they cultivate clients by promising expedient delivery of benefits from state-sponsored programs. For Gupta, this is indicative of a transformation from "*patronage* to *brokerage*"—what he calls "one of the most fundamental shifts in the political function of local-level leaders," yet a shift that has nonetheless facilitated the reproduction of relations of dominance through formal structures of Gram Panchayat (Gupta 1998:145-46).

In Lakhanpura, both Khajan and his rival, Vishal, approached caste leaders of lower caste groups through this relatively new paradigm of village politics. In his ten-year long tenure as the Sarpanch of Lakhanpura, Vishal had developed a firm hold over the votes of two Dalit castes, the Dhanaks and Chamars, as many members of them were 'beneficiaries' (*labharthi*) of a government housing scheme. The Valmikis Dalits, on the other hand, had turned against Vishal Singh, as none of them received housing benefits. Such selective delivery of development had taken place because the Valmikis did not vote for Vishal in the previous Gram Panchayat election. To teach them a lesson (*sabak sikhana*), Vishal did not approve a single Valmiki application. To woo Valmiki votes, Khajan promised them residential plots—a proposition Valmiki leaders publicly agreed to in a village meeting. The votes of Brahmins were evenly split between Khajan and Vishal. Among the artisanal groups, Vishal had an advantage, as their neighbourhoods had received free water connections under Vishal's tenure. Also, Vishal had installed streetlights in their neighbourhoods a couple of years ago. Khajan and his men tried hard to make inroads among the artisanal and service castes, yet only four Teli (oil-presser) and Chippi (tailor) families publicly promised to deliver their votes to him. These families opposed Vishal because the water-pipes to their houses had started to leak four months after their installation—a problem that Vishal had done nothing to fix.

To keep a track of electoral developments, Khajan maintained a small notebook listing names of men from different neighbourhoods whom he believed would vote for him. In addition, he scribbled a numeral, such as 4 or 5, in front of each name, indicating the number of adult family members whose votes were also promised by these men. This shows how voting choices of a family closely follow those made by the senior patriarch of the household. This list was never stable, for new names were added and old ones were scratched out not infrequently. Khajan's list was produced by means of collective deliberations among those who sat in his baithak. This provoked a lot of verbal exchange as men debated vociferously as they gave their reasons for the inclusion or exclusion of names. In this

way, Khajan *ki* list (Khajan's list) had acquired a discursive life of its own. Always undergoing revisions, the list had become a topic of conversation not only among those updating it but also among those who saw the humourous side of this nearly obsessive process. Different metaphors were used to foreground the centrality that the list had gained during campaigning, such as Khajan's arms and weapons (*Khajan ka asla aur hathiyar*). The list gave Khajan and his team a semblance of control of what could at times be an unwieldy electoral process.

The polling day and its post-mortem

The polling day, January 10, 2016, marked the culmination of Lakhanpura's electoral politics. The voting was scheduled to run from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. The result was to be announced later, after all the votes were counted. This Gram Panchayat election was anything but a one-sided contest. To gain psychological advantage (*hawa banana*), both sides were predicting victory by a huge margin. Such election-time fervor was most palpable in Jat village neighbourhoods, less so in lower caste neighbourhoods. On the polling day, many voters from weaker groups expressed indifference towards the election. Since the village election had turned into a contest between two Jat candidates, both of whom were supported by their respective patrilineages, they did not see much point in getting too involved in what was called *jatton ka election*, an election controlled by the Jats of the village. These lower caste men belonged to the category of rural voters Krishna (2018:89) called "despondent democrats" who may "participate in electing their governments but are unable to have a say in what governments do on an everyday basis."

The polling process foregrounded the visibility of the state, its infrastructures, and its personnel in the village. A team of election officials, accompanied by a few constables from the local police station, had arrived in Lakhanpura's government-run school in two state vehicles to conduct the election. Along with the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), they carried bundles of official election-related

documents, such as electoral rolls. The government-run school, together with the state-sponsored advertisements of 'National Literacy Mission' painted boldly on its walls, functioned as public signs that stamped the presence of the state at the polling site. While following a panchayat election in rural Uttarakhand, India, Yazgi (2010) has noted how such entanglements between village politics and postcolonial statecraft are critical to the construction of official democratic procedures and their public representations.

On the morning of January 10, the two opposing sides were busy erecting their separate 'election camps' outside the government-run school. Each side had set up desks to give basic information to voters, especially the election symbols assigned to both candidates and how they would display on the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). Xerox copies of official electoral rolls of Lakhanpura were also kept on these desks. In village panchayat elections, votes are typically cast in the thousands or hundreds, and those contesting the election have at minimum a second-hand knowledge of all voters in the village. Since margins of victory are often very small, village leaders and their teams were busy throughout the day pushing their supporters to poll their votes. A few hours before the end of polling, both sides were desperately looking for villagers who had not shown up to vote as they could swing the election either way.

The election result came out in the evening. Around 200 men from the two opposing Jat patrilineages had assembled outside the school. Khajan's daughter-in-law, Laxmi, lost to Vishal's wife, Savita Devi, by ten votes. The response from the two opposing groups was strikingly contrasting. Loud cries of victory were given out by the winning camp, whereas Khajan's side looked gutted. As the victorious side celebrated by firing guns and fireworks in the air, the losing side trudged back to the village with dropped shoulders. As I sat with Amarjit and his patrilineal brothers later in the evening, I sensed that this cycle of electoral politics in Lakhanpura may have ended with the conclusion of panchayat

election, but it had surely given birth to another issue. According to estimates, Khajan was set to win by at least 50-100 votes. It was evident that some families from the Bharte patrilineage had not voted for Laxmi but for Vishal's wife instead. For the next couple of weeks, speculation about who all could have betrayed Khajan were rife, giving rise to what Govindarajan (2018:130) has called the "the complicated afterlife of elections."[95]

An 'election camp' set up outside the site of polling.

Conclusion

Classical anthropological scholarship regarded the state as an externality to India's social and moral order (Fuller & Harriss 2001:5). Dumont (1980), for example, perceived caste as a religious phenomenon wherein the purity and pre-eminence of the Brahman subordinated the secular power

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[95] Though voting in village elections is done via secret ballot, it is still hard to conceal whom a person voted for in close-knit Jat neighbourhoods.

of the king and the dominant caste. Such anthropological theorizations were challenged by Dirks (2001), Appadurai (1986), Raheja (1988b), among others, whose works highlighted how caste, in fact, has been profoundly shaped by the state in its precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial avatars. In many ways, the central question examined in this chapter—i.e., how state institutions get integrated with logics of caste power and dominance—contributes to this strand of scholarship. More specifically, in this chapter, I have focused on Gram Panchayat, state bodies that constitute the final link in the institutional chain connecting higher levels of government to the grassroots, and how its routine functioning throws into relief a field of politics that is a far cry from the democratic ideals and institutional norms enshrined in India's Constitution.

I have argued that in the face of the decline of various historical arrangements of caste power and privilege, Jat patrilineages, and their village leaders, have implemented newer strategies to reinscribe old caste and gender hierarchies in the village and its environs. These strategies include winning the quinquennial panchayat elections to regulate Gram Panchayat's everyday functioning (what Witsoe (2011) has called 'territorial democracy'), cultivating networks of political influence with urban state officials to control access to state resources and patronage, and simultaneously limiting political opportunities for lower caste groups, thereby subverting progressive legislations, such as, the 73rd Amendment Act, which reserved 33 per cent seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for SCs, STs, and women. The first section of the chapter—a brief outline of the historical evolution of Gram Panchayat from the colonial to postcolonial periods—has sketched out how these statutory village bodies have been susceptible to local structures of power based on caste, landownership, numerical strength, and exercise of violence, and the next two ethnographic sections have illustrated how these determinants of local power are put into practice by Jat village leaders, and their patrilineages.

Chapter 4

Jat Demand for Reservations

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2017, Jats in Haryana organized large-scale mobilizations, which culminated in two separate statewide protests in the winters of 2016 and 2017, to demand access to the Indian government's reservations system, a form of affirmative action whereby fixed quotas of seats in higher education, government jobs, and state assemblies and Parliament are reserved for members of disadvantaged castes. In February 2016, the first Jat protest turned violent, resulting in widespread destruction and looting of government property, and private shops and markets, in several cities and towns in Haryana. Jat protestors also blocked national and state highways and railway lines, cut off the water supply to Delhi by damaging the Munak canal at various points, and burnt down several police posts and railway and bus stations. Violent clashes were reported with rival caste groups who opposed Jats inclusion in the reservations system. According to various reports, about 30 people died, 200 were injured, 567 were arrested, and 2110 police reports were registered.

In February and March 2017, the second round of Jat protest adopted a non-violent character. Specifically, it entailed large-scale *dharnas*, Gandhian-style peaceful sit-ins, at various sites across Haryana's Jat-dominated countryside. Here, in addition to demanding reservations, Jat leaders articulated an array of smaller demands, such as the conferral of martyr (*shaheed*) status on all Jat protestors killed last year, monetary compensation and government jobs for their families, and the release of arrested protestors and withdrawal of police cases against them. In posing these demands, Jat leaders portrayed themselves as victims of state oppression rather than perpetrators of violence. In March 2017, Jats issued an ultimatum to the Haryana government: if steps were not taken to include

them in the reservations system by March 20, Jats would march *en masse* to Delhi, blocking all national and state highways on their way. This public threat refreshed memories of Jat mob violence from the previous February. Throughout early March, talks between Jat leaders and the Haryana government kept breaking down. Then, on March 19, in a joint press conference with M.L. Khattar, Haryana's chief minister, Jat leaders called off the march to Delhi. To many Jat activists, this appeared a complete U-turn by their leaders, leading to murmurs calling into question their integrity.

These events in Haryana triggered a vibrant public debate about caste, politics, and reservations, drawing in a wide spectrum of actors like reporters and journalists, researchers and academics, retired bureaucrats and politicians, business leaders, and ordinary citizens. The acrimony of this debate speaks to how contentious the reservations policy is in India. Broadly, people reflected on a range of questions, including whether the Jats' reservations demand has any merit, whether the agitational (often violent) methods deployed by the Jats are legitimate in a democratic polity, and, more broadly, whether the reservations policy has any future in India. The protesting Jats had confirmed the fears of many political observers that the reservations system was so far gone that members of a dominant caste were destroying government infrastructure, torching shops and markets, and killing and dying for a small proportion of quotas. These points were made not solely with reference to the Jats in Haryana, but commentators also had in mind similar large-scale protests by other farming groups like the Patidars in Gujarat, Marathas in Maharashtra, and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh.

Coverage of the Jat protests and reservations controversy is revealing. Articles with titles like 'The Absurdity of Jat Reservation,' 'The Unreasonable Jats,' and 'Stooping to Conquer' drew attention to various features of Jat dominance, such as their clout in local and regional politics, their history as landowning farmers who have dominated weaker groups, and their already high representation in state

bureaucracy.[96] Through their protests, Jats were accused of subverting the logic of the reservations policy, introduced in India's Constitution to redress caste discrimination and inequality by granting disadvantaged castes a larger share of government jobs. For many, Jat reservations demands, and the accompanying protests, were a symptom of a much deeper malaise, namely India's caste(ist) politics. They argued that such controversies impede the 'new' India's post-liberalization forward march, fuelled by the entry of global and national avatars of private capital. Others, however, regarded economic liberalization in India, and the concomitant forms of state disinvestment (including the marked decline in state employment), as partially responsible for triggering demands for reservations by dominant farming groups.

While I explore different strands of this public debate in this chapter, my perspective on Jat reservations politics in Haryana is predominantly informed by an in-depth historically situated ethnographic approach. The chapter is divided into five sections. In the first section, I delve into the complex relationship between caste, politics, and reservations in India in both historical and contemporary contexts. Specifically, I analyze the historical emergence of three broad categories of reservations and explore how they have influenced the landscape of caste politics in India. Among them I pay special attention to the Other Backward Classes (OBC)s—the category through which the Jats have sought entry in the reservations system. The second section explores what Shah and Shneiderman (2013:4) have called "the social field of affirmative action." Specifically, I look at a wide spectrum of actors who have participated in the making of Jat reservations politics. This includes Jat farmers demanding reservations, village networks of the khap panchayat mobilizing them in its support, stiff opposition shown against it by rival caste groups, the state-appointed commissions who

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[96] See https://thewire.in/politics/the-absurdity-of-jat-reservation; accessed on April 10, 2023; https://openthemagazine.com/features/politics-features/the-unreasonable-jats/; accessed on April 17, 2023 https://www.epw.in/journal/2016/16/commentary/stooping-conquer.html; accessed on April 20, 2023.

evaluate reservations demands, and elected representatives (politicians) who introduce legislations to add groups to the reservations structure.

The third section focuses on Pradeep, an educated Jat man in late twenties from a poor farming family with marginal landholdings, to explore his struggles to find a government job. Pradeep's life story brings into bold relief the economic predicament of the class of marginal Jat farmers. On one hand, they are being squeezed out of agriculture, and on the other hand, they find it difficult to find non-farm employment matching their caste status. My argument is that Jat reservations movement received a groundswell of support from the class of marginal Jat farmers precisely because Jat leaders of the khap panchayat could tap into this pool of dissatisfactions and managed to coalesce them into a unitary framework of reservations. The final two sections focus on the khap panchayat and how they mobilized the class of marginal Jat farmers to produce two Jat protests in winters of 2016 and 2017. While the khap panchayat's role in adjudication of domestic disputes and formal village politics has shrunken in the postcolonial period, they have reincarnated themselves in the domain of political action. They have successfully mobilized Jat farmers and organized public protests around issues that directly impinge on the question of Jat power in Haryana, and in neighbouring regions of northern India. These issues include agricultural policies of the state, acquisition of agricultural lands to create Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and middle-class residential complexes, instances of anti-Dalit violence, and most recently, the topic of Jat reservations.

Caste, Politics, and Reservations

This section provides a comprehensive account of the relationship between caste and politics in both historical and contemporary contexts. Anthropologists like Appadurai (1988), Dirks (2001), and Rao (2009) have noted that it was not until the influence of Orientalist knowledge on the anthropology of South Asia had waned that the discipline's focus started to shift towards studying how myriad forms

of interaction between caste and politics have evolved through the colonial and postcolonial periods. Following this line of inquiry, in this section, I first explore the relationship between caste and politics under colonialism, and how it was shaped by factors such as the enumerative practices of the colonial state and the emergence of caste associations or *sabhas*. I then examine how this relationship evolved in the postcolonial period, especially against the backdrop of the spread of electoral democracy, the introduction of reservations policy, and the attendant rise of 'backward' castes. As part of this discussion, I outline various categories of reservations in India, how they came into being, and how profoundly they transformed the landscape of caste politics. Finally, I focus on how these country-wide trends have manifested in what is now the state of Haryana. By tacking back and forth between the national and regional context, this section provides background for the subsequent sections of this chapter where I give an ethnographic account of Jat reservations politics in Haryana.

In British conceptions of Indian society, largely derived from Brahmanical textual traditions like Manusmriti, caste was a closed system of stratification, an institution of Hindu social life organized around a religious hierarchy with the Brahman at the top (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001; Raheja 1988). By the late colonial and early post-Independence period, this perspective had become so dominant that it "deeply influenced the interpretation of 'ethnographic reality' of caste" (Srinivas 1991:28). For instance, Dirks (2001), Fuller (1996), Raheja (1988), among others, have noted that Dumont's theory, which framed caste in terms of a structural opposition between Hindu notions of purity and pollution, was, in fact, an artifact of colonial power. From the 1980s onwards, however, anthropologist have been occupied with "rescuing caste from religion to reveal its political entailments" (Rao 2009:7). An outcome of this intellectual labour has been wide acceptance of the idea that caste cannot be straitjacketed within the framework of Brahmanical hierarchy (Cort 2004; Gupta 2005; Vaid 2014). In fact, instead of an ideological acquiescence to Brahmanical superiority, caste in India has been characterized by contesting notions of hierarchy wherein status is often determined by non-religious

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considerations like access to land, wealth, political power, and state resources. For instance, in Pahansu, a north Indian village in western Uttar Pradesh, Raheja (1988a) found the Gujars, a peasant caste, to be dominant not merely in terms of landownership, but also with regard to ritualized practices of prestation (gift giving and receiving). Other ethnographic studies have also drawn attention to how the experience of caste has been marked not by one but by multiple ranked orders where "each caste regards itself as the equal of castes superior to it while simultaneously denying similar claims from those inferior to it" (Srinivas 1987:10).

The emphasis placed on Brahmanical ideas in earlier studies of caste long overshadowed other strands of inquiry, for instance, how caste was profoundly shaped by competition and struggle between various groups. This, according to Gupta (2005), has resulted in much confusion about the relationship between caste and politics in India. For instance, an assumption widely shared by scholars of caste is that interaction between caste and politics only emerged in the postcolonial period against the backdrop of electoral democracy. Taking a different view, Gupta (2005:414) has rightly observed that "Caste and politics were always related, but the relationship was manifested differently at different periods of time." Indeed, as I showed in Chapter one, caste and kinship were profoundly enmeshed within precolonial state systems. Thereafter, in the colonial period, newer forms of interaction between caste and politics emerged. For instance, with the introduction of the Morley-Minto reforms in 1909 and the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in 1919, separate electorates were reserved for non-Brahman caste groups, who then started organizing themselves as "Depressed Classes" to obtain representation in state legislatures (Fuller 2016; Srinivas 2003). Also, since the start of the decennial colonial census in 1872, the inclusion of caste to classify India's population gradually transformed colonial government's enumerative practices into a breeding ground for political contestation (Dirks 2001). O'Malley (1932:63), for example, reported that many caste groups had petitioned the colonial state to recognize their claims to a higher caste rank than what was reported in the census of 1911.

The proliferation of caste associations or *sabhas* was also closely tied to such emerging interactions between caste and politics. Leaders of caste associations realized the social, political, and economic benefits of constituting geographically expansive caste alliances that superseded localized sub-castes identities, which enabled them to make caste-based political claims for representation in state legislatures (Srinivas 1962; Washbrook 1975). Among the peasant castes, for instance, the Kurmi Caste Association was constituted in 1890, the All-India Jat Mahasabha in 1905 (Dutta 1999), and the Ahir-Yadav Mahasabha in 1919 (Gupta 2005).

How did such interactions between caste and politics play out in the south-east region of British Punjab (present-day Haryana)? Following the introduction of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms in 1919, which ensured Indian representation in India's colonial government, Chhotu Ram, a popular Jat leader, was elected to the Punjab Legislative Council first in 1924 and then in 1927, 1931, and 1937 (Chowdhry 1979:41-69). Chowdhry has studied the political rise of Chhotu Ram, and how it was facilitated by his identity as a Jat, the most dominant caste in the region. She noted electoral practices introduced by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms broadly favoured the Jat peasantry as voting rights were given on the basis of landownership and service in the British army.[97] Though the Jats were dominant in the countryside, their leaders like Chhotu Ram claimed that as peasants they suffered from much social backwardness, especially in comparison to traditional elite castes like the Brahmans and Banias, who dominated urban institutions of formal education and government employment. To politically consolidate the Jats of Haryana, Chhotu Ram used the platform of the newly-formed caste associations like the Jat Mahasabha, as well as the traditional village-based khap panchayat. In addition, he helped open several Jat educational institutions, and ran an Urdu weekly called 'Jat Gazette.' From

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[97] As noted in chapter one, the Jats of south-east Punjab were heavily recruited in the British army.

such sites of influence, Chhotu Ram demanded separate seats for Jats in government service and Punjab's Legislative Assembly.[98]

Datta (1999, 2009) has studied an alternative yet overlapping historical trend, exploring how religious considerations also played a critical role in shaping the relationship between caste and politics among Jats in the late colonial era. She argued that the Jats evolved from a diverse amalgam of patrilineal clans to become an integrated caste group not merely in response to colonial policies, but also through cultural and religious processes linked with the Jats' adoption of Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement. The historical canvas of Jat social and religious life sketched by Datta shows how the popularity of Arya Samaj rested on social, religious, and educational reforms, which, among other things, enabled Jats to claim a higher ritual status within local caste hierarchies. She also notes that Jat leaders heading the khap panchayat played a key role in propagating and implementing Arya Samaj reforms in the countryside.[99] By the end of colonial rule, the spread of Arya Samaj had enabled Jat leaders to produce a strongly defined modern caste identity. Along with other factors, it created the conditions for integrating the political interests of Jat clans in various regions of northern India (Jaffrelot 2002). At a broad level, these fragments of Jat history also show how competition and struggle for state patronage and resources, which often unfolded through caste- and religion-based movements, has been a key historical feature of caste: it is not new to the postcolonial era.

Forms of interaction between caste and politics evolved further in the post-Independence period. Specifically, the creation of trans-regional political solidarities and alliances between various localized sub-castes sharing similar statuses and lifestyles received an impetus under conditions of electoral

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[98] Also, under Chhotu Ram's leadership, political consolidation of the Jats unfolded through solidification of old caste rivalries, especially vis-à-vis the subjugated Dalit castes, and the Hindu trading castes of Bania and Mahajan moneylenders, who had earned much notoriety in British Punjab as exploiters of Jat peasantry (Chowdhry 1979:70-126).

[99] Datta (2009:12) particularly discusses the role played by Dada Ghasi, the chaudhari (headman) of Gathwala or Malik Jats, in creating a "new public order constituted by the clan, the panchayat and the Gurukul."

democracy and legal equality between castes guaranteed by the Indian Constitution (Kothari 1970). Srinivas (2003:459) viewed these developments in terms of what he called the "horizontal stretch" of caste, which created "congeries of agnate sub-castes which have come together to compete more effectively with other similar formations for better access to…political power, economic opportunities, government jobs and professional education." Dumont (1980:222) termed them "the substantialization of caste," where caste groups moved away from customary forms of economic and ritual interdependence structured around land (the jajmani system) towards a more competitive framework of social interaction.[100] Similarly, Sheth (1999:2504) studied these transformations as instances of what he called "the secularization of caste," i.e. the detachment of caste from ritual hierarchy and its concomitant insertion into competitive democratic politics, which, as he later argued, led to a "horizontalization" of caste (Sheth 2002:212). Among political scientists, Kaviraj (2000:104) argued that the mobilization of various castes in the political arena created a "democracy of castes in place of a 'hierarchy.'" Within this horizontal framework of caste, political alliances constituted by caste groups are seldom durable; they are stitched together when various groups arrive at a shared set of political interests, and come apart when a more beneficial bargain can be struck with other groups. For instance, caste solidarities and alliances like KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, and Muslims) in Gujarat and AJGAR (Ahirs, Jats, Gujars, and Rajputs) in Uttar Pradesh had their heydays in the 1980s, but are now mostly defunct (Brass 1990; Chhibber 2002).

Along with electoral democracy, the reservations policy has played an important role in shaping the relationship between caste and politics in the postcolonial period (Beteille 1992; Fuller 1996; Srinivas 1996). In fact, in the years since independence, the politics of reservations has been one of the most

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[100] For Dumont (1980:222-227), the substantialization of caste entailed "transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence…to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another…in which structure seems to yield to substance, each caste becoming an individual confronting other individuals."

contentious issues in Indian politics, resulting in large-scale mobilizations and even outbreaks of mass violence commonly known as 'caste wars' (Bayly 1999:342-364). In 1950, the Indian Constitution gave reservations to Schedules Castes (the former untouchable castes) and Scheduled Tribes (geographically isolated groups) to combat historical inequalities. Under this policy, about 17% of seats in government jobs, higher education, and democratic assemblies were reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC) and 7% for Scheduled Tribes (ST). As Bayly (1999:266-305) notes, this constitutional promise to correct historical injustices against SCs and STs has led institutions of power in India to function in contradictory ways. Specifically, official recognition of caste and tribal identities as features of Indian social life has often clashed with India's constitutional commitment to equality and individualism. This tension is explored by several Indian sociologists such as Beteille (1992) and Shah (1996). Further, since reservations were initially allocated to members of communities, determining groups in need of uplift fell to the state and its agencies.

In addition to SCs and STs, Other Backward Classes (hereafter OBC) was the third category of reservations identified in India's Constitution. Specifically, the Constitution made provisions to an undefined category of 'socially and educationally backward' classes (whom Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister, termed as 'Other Backward Classes') in the reservations policy. Due to the breadth of the definition of the category, identifying OBCs is complex. Galanter (2014:260) summed up the problem by observing that

> Some would confine this category to the lowly – those 'far below' the mean in welfare
> and resources, or those whose deprivations are comparable to the SCs and STs; others
> use the term backward classes to describe a wide middle stratum of Indian society, who
> require and deserve special help because they are lagging behind the most advanced
> groups.

Likewise, Gupta (2005) has noted that the category of OBCs comprises a medley of peasant and other agrarian castes positioned between the traditionally elite castes and the Scheduled Castes. For Jaffrelot (2002:86), the OBCs form the "bulk of Shudras—the fourth category (*varna*) of the classical Hindu social arrangement." While the question of who constituted the SCs was settled shortly after Independence, the challenge of identifying the OBCs has led to two Backward Classes Commissions, the first in 1953 and the second in 1979. In fact, the ambiguity in relation to the OBCs has long been critical in shaping both national- and state-level politics in India, especially with regard to the middle-ranked peasant castes, including the Jats (Bayly 1999; Gupta 2005; Jayaram 1996).

The 1960s saw a dip in the electoral power of Indian National Congress, a party that ruled for many years after Independence as inheritors of India's freedom movement. This was precipitated by the rise of a number of regional rivals who had successfully mobilized a mix of peasant and other agrarian castes in India's countryside around three broad issues: the extension of reservations to the OBCs, political representation in government bodies hitherto dominated by traditional elite castes, and provisioning agricultural subsidies and higher crop prices (Bayly 1999:266-305). In the 1960s and 70s, an electoral coalition between peasant groups like the Jats, Ahirs, Gujars, Kurmis, had coalesced in northern India under the leadership of Charan Singh, a popular Jat peasant leader (Jeffrey 2010:37-71; Varshney 1995:81-112).[101] Like Chhotu Ram, Charan Singh emphasized his rural origins and presented himself as a campion of peasant issues (Jaffrelot 2002). Rudolph and Rudolph (1987:53) described these newly ascendant peasant groups as "bullock capitalists"—an apposite term considering how their agricultural practices displayed "a mix of capitalist, preindustrial, and non-capitalist features." In

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[101] In south India, the Vanniyars and Thevars become politically assertive in Tamil Nadu, and likewise, in Karnataka, Vokkaligas and Linagayats arose against traditional elites within the Congress party in the 1960s (Brass 1997; Manor 1997).

simple words, these peasant groups comprised independent agricultural producers whose

landholdings ranged between 2.5 to 15 acres and were thus large enough to be cultivated with a pair

of bullocks, along with the then newly-introduced Green Revolution technologies.[102] Importantly,

there existed a strong overlap between the two categories of bullock capitalist and backward classes.

In fact, according to Rudolph and Rudolph (1987:54), "the political coming of age of bullock

capitalists" in northern India was closely tied to the rise of backward classes movement, which was

designed to put pressure on the Indian government to extend reservations to peasant and other

agrarian castes.

By the 1970s, the political coalition representing peasant and agrarian castes had gained considerable

electoral support in the countryside. In 1977, they came together with other parties to form Janta Party

government (1977-80), which established the second Backward Classes Commission (popularly

known as the Mandal Commission) in 1979.[103] Though the Mandal Commission submitted its report

in 1980, its recommendations were only implemented in 1990. These included reserving 27% of

government jobs and spots in educational institutions for members of OBCs.[104] The implementation

of the Mandal report provoked a furor of public protests by the traditional elite castes like the

Brahmans, Banias, Kayasthas, as well as by some middling peasant caste like the Jats, who much to

the chagrin of their political leaders were not included in the list of OBCs (Dirks 2001:284-285;

Jaffrelot 2002; Gupta 2005). The exclusion of the Jats from the reservations system led to widespread

protests in Jat-dominated states of northern India. In fact, one of the long-term outcomes of the OBC

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[102] Scholars have rightly observed that ideological leanings of these peasant castes kept them tied to family and kinship networks—a sociological feature that has lent them tremendous capacity for organizing political mobilization against the state. For instance, drawing on the populist slogan of "urban bias," Charan Singh and other peasant leaders held large-scale farmers' mobilizations around the issues of agricultural subsidies and crop prices (Byres 1988:162; Varshney 1995:6).
[103] The Kalelkar Commission was the first OBC commission set up by the federal government of India in 1955, but it could not come to any satisfactory conclusion about who should be legitimately considered as OBCs.
[104] As noted by Jaffrelot (2002), Charan Singh's role was instrumental in the formation of Mandal Commission, and till his demise in 1987, he insisted on implementing its recommendations.

quota politics of the 1990s was that the Jats started aligning themselves with Hindu nationalist forces headed by the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), a fact much evident from their participation in the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992, and then in the anti-Muslim riots in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh in 2013 (Jaffrelot 2002; Ramakumar 2016).

Though the Jats were excluded from federal government's list of the OBCs prepared by the Mandal Commission, similar state-level commissions arrived at different conclusions.[105] For instance, Haryana's first Backward Classes Commission (1990) recommended Jats be included in Haryana's OBC list. This recommendation was initially accepted by Haryana's government but was later withdrawn when the recommendation was challenged in the Supreme Court of India (Jaffrelot 2002). In 1993, the second Backward Classes Commission was constituted in Haryana, which recommended the inclusion of various peasant groups like the Ahirs, Gujars, Sainis, as well as a number of artisanal groups like the Kumhars (potter), Lohars (blacksmith), Telis (oil-presser), and Khati (carpenters) in the OBC category, but not the Jats. The Jats registered their resentment by destroying state property like government offices and railway and bus stations. Importantly, their claim to be recognized as 'backwards' was not an isolated one, as similar claims were being made by the Jats in other regions of northern India like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi. As Jayaram (1996), Karanth (1996), and other scholas have noted, dominant groups often claim a higher social and religious status while simultaneously portraying themselves as 'backward' economically, in order to be eligible for the reservations policy.

Ultimately, Jat attempts to be classified as 'backwards' were successful in Rajasthan in 1999, and in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in 2000. Datta (1999) and Jaffrelot (2002) have noted that Jat campaigns for

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[105] The State Governments in India are vested with the power to appoint their own Backward Classes Commissions to investigate the conditions of backward classes and to evolve definite criteria to identify the 'backwards' in their states.

reservations were organized by caste organizations like the Jat Mahasabha and the Jat Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti (the Jat Committee for the Reservations Struggle), who worked in tandem with networks of the khap panchayat spanning the countryside. They argue that these campaigns were successful not because the Jats qualified for 'backward' status based on objective criteria, but because they exercised significant state-level political clout. For instance, in Rajasthan, the BJP received unprecedented support from Jat voters in the general election of 1999 because the party was in favour of including the Jats in Rajasthan's OBC category.

In post-liberalization India, the demand for reservations has seen a resurgence, especially among middling farming castes. These include the Jats of Haryana, Patidars of Gujarat, Marathas of Maharashtra, and Kapus of Andhra Pradesh. Over the past decade or so, these farming groups have organized large-scale mobilizations, which have often culminated in violent public protests, to pressure the state into acceding to their demands. According to political observers like Deshpande (2015, 2016), Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan (2019, 2020), Kumar (2009), and Palshikar (2016), this new chapter in the politics of reservations is intimately tied to two broad processes: the liberalization of the Indian economy and changing forms of caste politics. The remainder of this section focuses on these trends.

Taking stock of factors underpinning more recent reservations demands, Palshikar (2016) has explored how middling farming groups today find themselves "disastrously trapped" in unfavourable conditions engendered by economic liberalization. For starters, local dominance stemming from landownership has declined, in part due to the declining average size of landholdings in India, or what Lerch (2011:106) has called "miniaturization of landholding." This process is squeezing men from farming castes out of agriculture, compelling them to search for economic security through non-farm

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employment.[106] Further, there has been a marked reduction in government-funded agricultural subsidies and institutionalized loans to farmers, which have been accompanied by a rise in national and foreign corporations in the agricultural economy (Lerche 2011).[107] These and other factors have made small-scale farming in India highly precarious. Lastly, with the growth of the service and manufacturing economies in the past few decades, agricultural has become rather marginal in the broader economic context. For instance, the contribution of the agricultural sector to India's gross domestic product (GDP) has shrunk from about 31% in 1990–91 to just 14.1% in 2014–15 (Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan 2019:29).[108]

To adapt to such rapidly unfolding transformations in the agricultural economy, farming groups like the Jats are struggling to diversify into small-scale entrepreneurial activity and non-farm avenues of employment. Since only a small minority have adequate capital to initiate business activities, most farmer have chosen to invest, as it were, in higher education, so their children can have a greater access to opportunities afforded by private markets (Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan 2020; Jeffrey 2010; Palshikar 2016). However, despite investing heavily in private education, often by taking hefty loans from banks and village moneylenders, 'returns' from the job market have been disappointing. Not only has the private economy failed to generate an adequate number of jobs, but most jobs available pay little. [109] Further, despite their educational credentials, graduates from rural backgrounds are found wanting in

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[106] Lerche (2011) has noted that more than 70% of landowners fall in the category of 'marginal farmers' owning less than 1 hectare of land. Also, according to Indian government's Agricultural Census, the average size of landholding in 2015-16 has come down to 1.08 hectares from 1.14 hectares in 1995-96. See https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=199780#:~:text=As%20per%20the%20latest%20information,1.08%20hectares%20in%202015%2D16.; accessed on 29th October 2021.

[107] To advance neoliberal restructuring of Indian agricultural economy, the BJP-led Indian government passed three legislations (popularly known as the Farm Bills) in the Parliament in September 2020. This provoked a massive year-long protest that was jointly organized by various farmers' unions and khap panchayats along the borders of Delhi, the national capital (Gill 2022).

[108] According to Lerche (2011), annual agricultural growth rates have fallen to an all-time low of 0.6% per year during 1994/95– 2004/05. In addition, he notes, patterns of usurious moneylending continue to prevail in the countryside, along with a marked increase in farmer suicide.

[109] According to Labour Bureau, in 2011-12, the average daily earnings of the workers in the private sector was Rs. 249 (USD 3.73), and those of the employees at large, Rs. 388 (USD 5.81) (Jaffrelot 2016).

cultural attributes valued in the private sector, such as urban middle-class mannerisms and proficiency in English. Given this context, the clamor for government jobs, which provide better salaries, pensions, and other benefits, has risen consistently.[110] However, as the post-liberalization state in India continues to withdraw from various sectors of the economy, its capacity to absorb new graduates has waned, thereby generating high rates of unemployment across rural India. These recent developments in the rural political economy have contributed to the revival of reservations politics in India.

The other key macro-process impacting the politics of reservations today is the near disintegration of caste as a village-based 'system.' As noted in Chapter one, the decline of land-based patronage (the jajmani system), along with the de-linking of caste from occupation, has produced newer dynamics in the countryside that prevent landowning groups from wielding unchallenged social, economic, and political power (Gupta 2005; Srinivas 2003). Thus, instead of what Srinivas (1959:15) had called "decisive dominance," landholding groups now exercise its much-depleted avatars. As a result, the Dalits and other historically marginalized groups have gained more social and political power through access to reservations and other state-driven social and political reforms. No longer dependent on their former patrons, many members of these groups have migrated to cities in search of better prospects. In Haryana, this trend helps explain the upsurge in violence against Dalits and other historically marginalized groups in recent decades. Not surprisingly, the khap panchayat and its leaders have been at the forefront of such attacks (Chowdhry 2007).

For Jats, these transformations have been particularly challenging since as a group they have not been very successful in transitioning towards business activities or exploiting opportunities opened up by

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[110] In the public sector, the figures for workers and employees were almost three times more, at Rs. 679 (USD 10.18) and Rs. 945 (USD 14.19), respectively (Jaffrelot 2016).

economic liberalisation.[111] As a result, they "perceive those who are above them as advancing at a faster rate, and those who are below them as also advancing, albeit marginally, while the Jats' own position has remained stagnant, or has slightly deteriorated" (Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan 2019:30). In sum, economic liberalization has displaced the Jats from their earlier position of economic dominance, and post-Mandal caste politics has challenged their political power.[112] As the following sections of this chapter will highlight, these factors were indeed critical in the resurgence of Jat reservations politics, especially between 2015 and 2017.

The Social Field of Jat Reservations Demand

A few months prior to formally starting my fieldwork in November 2015, I visited different parts of Haryana, especially Rohtak, Sonipat, and Jhajjar districts.[113] During that period, the demand to include Jats in the reservations system was raised once again by Akhil Bharatiya Jat Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti (All-India Jat Committee for the Reservations Struggle; hereafter ABJASS), an ad-hoc umbrella organization comprising various networks of the khap panchayat and Jat caste associations from different parts of Haryana. On July 1, 2015, for instance, Jat activists affiliated with ABJASS stopped traffic on Rohtak Road connecting Delhi with Rohtak City. On July 27, activists held day-long *dharnas* throughout Haryana. In August, a sarv khap panchayat, a conglomeration of various khap panchayats, issued a public call to mobilize Jat youth across Haryana in support of the demand for reservations.[114]

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[111] This is in contrast to other farming groups like the Kammas and Reddys in Andhra Pradesh and the Gounders in Tamil Nadu (Damodaran 2008).

[112] In popular and academic literature in India, the term 'post-Mandal' is commonly used to refer to the period following the implementation of recommendations of the Mandal Commission's report in 1990.

[113] I arrived in Haryana, India in June 2015. Though I could not formally start my fieldwork until November 2015, I intermittently stayed in Haryana between June and November 2015.

[114] See https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/features/50-youths-join-jat-yuva-sena-in-kaithal-121827; accessed on March 3, 2021.

This initial round of political activity signaled the resumption of overt Jat reservations politics and served as a preamble to the much larger rural mobilizations to come.[115]

In this section, I flesh out features of the resurgence of Jat reservations politics by paying attention to what Shah and Shneiderman (2013:4) have called "the social field of affirmative action." According to these scholars, in the context of affirmative action policies, a social field is

> constituted by diverse actors, including people demanding recognition, rights, and entitlements; politicians and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) advocating on their behalf; state administrators charged with responding to those demands; social scientists employed to evaluate them; a range of people debating these issues in the public sphere; and still others who may not know much about the details of the legal measures in question, but whose lives are profoundly affected by them (Shah and Shneiderman 2013:5).

What did the social field of reservations policy look like in Haryana? Which actors were involved in its making, and what were its implications, especially for the shifting landscape of caste politics? Specifically, my aim in this section is to explore the relationship between what Shah and Shneiderman (2013:4) have called "the *formation* and *effects*" of the reservations policy. By that, they refer to the wider set of factors that influence the making of the reservations policy, such as which groups get included in the reservations system, in which category and on what basis, and how the resulting transformations shape a region's sociality and politics.

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[115] Through the decades of 1980s and 1990s, the khap panchayat of the Jats settled in west Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, as well as Rajasthan, organized large-scale mobilizations against the state's agricultural policies, specifically, demanding higher market rates for their produce, along with subsidies on fertilizers, and electricity and water bills, among other things (Byres 1986; Gupta 1997; Sahay 2015).

Among the Jats, the movement, or what they called the 'righteous struggle' (*andolan*), to demand reservations started with the formation of ABJASS in 2007.[116] From its inception, ABJASS organized vast protests in Haryana's countryside. The first was held in village Mayyad, Hisar, in September 2010. It was followed by one in March 2011, and another in March 2012. The signature style of these Jat protests included stopping traffic by erecting blockades at various points on arterial road and rail routes (*rasta roko*). Each of these blockades was manned by a large group of Jat youth who were supervised by a few elders. These protests often turned violent when the police used force to clear the blockades. For instance, in September 2010 and March 2012, violent confrontations between the police and Jat protestors led to deaths on both sides. In September 2010, when a Jat boy named Sunil Sheoran was shot dead by police, protestors gathered in large numbers to damage government offices and set fire to bus stations and other state infrastructure.[117]

Through periodic organization of such protests, ABJASS and various networks of the khap panchayat coerced Bhupinder Singh Hooda, the then Jat chief minister of Haryana (2009-14) from the Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress), to constitute the third Backward Classes Commission in Haryana, in April 2011. In its report, the Commission recommended the inclusion of the Jats, along with four other farming castes, namely, the Bishnois, Jat Sikhs, Rors, and Tyagis, in a new reservations category called 'Special Backward Classes' (hereafter SBC).[118] Specifically, the Commission advised the government to reserve 10% of quotas for SBCs, which was to be over and above the existing 27% quota for OBCs. These recommendations were accepted by the Haryana government, and on January 24, 2013, the Jats, along with the four other farming castes, were incorporated into Haryana's

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[116] Jat leaders always framed the reservation movement in righteous terms. For instance, the series of Jat rural mobilizations and protests in support of the reservations demand were part of what was popularly known as 'Jat arakshan andolan', i.e., a righteous struggle for reservations.

[117] See https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30182168.ece; accessed on March 23, 2023.

[118] Importantly, these recommendations were based on a survey study conducted by the sociology department of Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak.

reservations system.[119] Similarly, in March 2014, the Congress-led government of India also included the Jats of Haryana in the federal government's OBC list. As these decisions were made in the run-up to national and state elections, in April-May and October 2014 respectively, observers viewed them as a strategy to win Jat votes. In March 2015, however, the Supreme Court of India struck down the inclusion of the Jats of Haryana in the federal government's OBC list. Likewise, in July 2015, the High Court of Punjab and Haryana issued a stay on the incorporation of the Jats in Haryana's SBC list.

In response to these major judicial setbacks, ABJASS and village networks of the khap panchayat vocally took up the cause of Jat reservations once again. To follow this upsurge in Jat political activity, I visited various cities, towns, and villages of Haryana where ABJASS, together with the khap panchayat, were organizing massive caste assemblies, known as panchayat and maha-panchayat depending on their size, to popularize the reservations demand among ordinary Jat farmers. During these visits, I became familiar with several Jat *chaudharies* and *pradhans* (headmen) of the khap panchayat, many of whom used to travel long distances with their entourage of kinsmen to these assemblies. Among these leaders was Jai Bhagwan, the headman of a group of four villages (*chau-gama*) that were part of the wider ancestral territory of the Dahiya clan in Sonipat district. Jai Bhagwan became one of my main interlocuters during fieldwork, as well as helped me to find a vacant house to rent in Peepalvas, his ancestral village.

To rally support to their cause, the khap panchayat's leaders framed the judicial scrapping of Jat quotas as another instance of what they called *sautela vyavahar* ("discriminatory treatment") against the Jats vis-à-vis the reservations policy. Specifically, they circulated a much-simplified narrative arguing that their movement aimed to rectify the Mandal Commission's oversight in omitting the Jats from the

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[119] Including the Jats in Haryana's reservations list had been one of the election-time promises made by Bhupinder Hooda to the Jat community, and it further solidified his stature as the leading Jat politician of Haryana.

OBC list. Since the 1990s, they contended, the governments of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi, among others, have taken steps to correct this mistake by including Jats living in those regions in their reservations system. But in Haryana, they noted, this has not happened. By drawing attention to the legal status of Jats in neighbouring states, Jat leaders from Haryana framed the scrapping of their reservations quotas as an anomaly.

They further questioned the basis on which other middling farming castes of Haryana, such as the Ahirs, Gujars, Meos, Sainis, who have historically shared the same socio-economic status as the Jats in Haryana's agrarian structure, were included in the OBC category in the 1990s. "If these groups were included in the reservations system, then the Jats must also be included," was a commonly heard refrain in Jat maha-panchayats. By highlighting such inconsistencies in the reservations system, Jat leaders portrayed their group as a victim of state discrimination. Lastly, Jat leaders were also able to link their reservations demand with the vernacular idea of Jat pride (*atma-samman*). For instance, they widely publicized how appointment letters given to several Jat boys and girls, who had been selected for government services under the now abolished OBC and SBC quotas, were withdrawn by both federal and state governments.[120] Through such discursive strategies, Jat leaders made clear their desire to be re-admitted into the reservations system. One of their slogans also left no room for ambiguity: *arakshan wapas lekar raheinge* ("we will take back reservations"). In this way, the Jats' reservations demand was framed as a matter of justice rather than a question of policy.

Another intersection between the reservations demand and the theme of Jat pride concerned the shifting landscape of caste rivalries in Haryana. Specifically, the Jats' reservations demand was facing stiff opposition from a coalition of non-Jat caste groups. I first detected the significance of this opposition, and how it in turn motivated Jat agitation, while attending Jat panchayats and maha-

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[120] See https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/features/sc-validates-appointment-of-jat-pos-221415; accessed on March 3, 2021.

panchayats where leaders engaged in vitriolic attacks on non-Jat politicians who publicly opposed their demand. Almost all the politicians targeted belonged to the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party, which had formed the government in Haryana for the first time in 2014. The BJP's opposition to Jat reservations was not surprising given its image as a vessel for the interests of traditionally elite Hindu castes like the Brahmans, Banias, and Punjabis, who have historically opposed the reservations policy (Jaffrelot 2003:453-491). In 2014, after winning state election, the BJP chose Manohar Lal Khattar, a non-Jat politician belonging to the Punjabi community, as the chief minister of Haryana.[121] In doing so, the BJP alienated a large support base of Jat voters, many of whom had voted for the right-wing political party for the first time predominantly out of their attraction for Narendra Modi.[122] The rise of Khattar in Haryana's politics had instilled a sense of betrayal among Jat voters who wanted a Jat chief minister. In other words, a non-Jat chief minister was perceived as a direct challenge to the Jats' political dominance in Haryana. Like Srinivasan (2020:4), during fieldwork, I too heard the Jats say *chief minister hamesha humara hota hai* ("the chief minister is always ours").[123]

Jat leaders and farmers seldom failed to remind me how their suspicion of the Khattar-led BJP government was well founded. After coming to power in Haryana, BJP leaders began implementing a policy commonly known as 'social engineering.' The phrase was coined by K.N. Govindacharya, an ideologue of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to refer to the policy of including low caste members in different levels of the BJP's formal apparatus, which was earlier dominated by leaders from traditionally elite castes. From its inception, the basic political idea underpinning the BJP's policy of social engineering was to win elections by consolidating a broad, multi-caste Hindu identity

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[121] M.L. Khattar has been a life-long activist (*pracharak*) of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's parental body.
[122] Narendra Modi, who had served as the chief minister of Gujarat from 2002 to 2014, became India's prime minister by presenting himself as a pro-business Hindu icon in the general election of 2014. In October 2014, Modi led a high-profile electoral campaign in Haryana, which ultimately enabled the BJP to win the state election.
[123] Since the formation of Haryana as a separate state in November 1966, Jat chief ministers have governed Haryana for thirty-three years.

(Jaffrelot 2003:463). Recent avatars of the BJP's social engineering in various states of India have relied on stitching together a coalition of upper and lower castes by pitting them against the most dominant farming group(s) of the state, such as the Jats in Haryana, Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, and Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka.[124]

In Haryana, the resurgence of the Jat reservations demand provided favourable conditions for implementing the policy of social engineering, as political interests of both upper and lower castes had aligned against the Jats. These groups have long resented Jat political dominance at both local and state levels of government. Further, as noted earlier, in Haryana and neighbouring regions, the Jats have had an antagonistic relationship with upper caste Hindus, especially so with the Bania and Punjabi trading communities whose members have historically controlled local agrarian markets (*anaj mandi*) and served as village moneylenders (*sahukar*).[125] Also, the popularity of Arya Samaj among the Jats of Haryana in early twentieth century had lent a distinctively anti-Brahmanical character to their social identity (Datta 1999). Thus, in 2015, when the BJP leaders started opposing the Jat demand for reservations, the politics of Haryana was getting recast into a 'Jat vs. non-Jat' divide.[126] Repeated vitriolic exchanges between the khap panchayat leaders and non-Jat BJP politicians further solidified the caste divide in the politics of Haryana. In this way, the Jat reservations issue got entangled with regional caste rivalries.

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[124] See https://thewire.in/politics/bjp-haryana-jat-government-jobs-elections-2019; accessed on February 21, 2022. For Uttar Pradesh, see https://www.outlookindia.com/national/dalit-ebc-votes-can-bjp-benefit-from-the-new-social-engineering-in-uttar-pradesh--news-184578; accessed in June 17, 2022.

[125] In the colonial period, the figure of the village bania (*sahukar*) gained notoriety as he was widely accused of usurping farmers' lands and lending money on exorbitant rates of interest (Hardiman 1996; Chowdhry 1984).

[126] In Haryana, this emerging caste divide was known as '35 vs. 36 biradari'. Customarily, the phrase '36 biradari' has referred to unity (*ekta*) and brotherhood (*bhaichara*) among various caste groups where the numeral 36 refers to the figurative number of caste groups in Haryana. To articulate their opposition to the Jats, the BJP leaders publicized the slogan '35 biradari opposing the 36.' See https://theprint.in/politics/the-haryana-leader-whos-uniting-anti-jat-forces-and-could-hurt-bjp-congress/227850/; accessed on March 4, 2022.

The third aspect of Jat mobilizations I highlight concerns their inner logics: the strategies adopted, the concrete programs and activities undertaken, the ideas and discourses used to substantiate the reservations demand, and where the movement draw its support from. Jat leaders of the khap panchayat like Jai Bhagwan prepared to travel extensively with their kinsmen, often covering hundreds of kilometers, to attend Jat panchayats and maha-panchayats, which were mostly organized in easily accessible locations like urban centers and prominent big villages to ensure maximum attendance. These well-attended Jat caste assemblies functioned as sites of collective reflection and publicity where a range of ideas and discourses underpinning Jat reservations demand, such as, the crisis in agriculture, privatization of education, unemployment among Jat youth, inter-caste rivalries, were publicly discussed. Upon returning to their villages after attending panchayats or maha-panchayats, Jat leaders disseminated ideas and discourses from the assemblies through smaller village and multi-village panchayats. They also brought ideas and arguments exchanged locally to the larger regional gatherings they attended. As part of this multi-sited political dialogue, the Jats collectively deliberated on strategies for mobilizing support, factionalism among clan and caste leadership, and aspects of inter-caste rivalries.

Paying close attention to this dialogue helped me understand the apparent paradox of a historically privileged class demanding inclusion in a policy meant to uplift lower castes. For instance, it became clear over time that the Jats were working with a very different idea of reservations than what the creators of the policy intended. Namely, they viewed reservations as a welfare benefit (either as an employment-generating scheme or a poverty-alleviation measure) that the state could grant at its discretion. Deshpande (2015, 2016) and Chhibber and Verma (2018:85-102) have noted that a similar view has also underpinned demands for reservations made recently by other groups, such as the Patidars of Gujarat. This view is in stark contrast with that in the Constitution, which enshrined the reservations system to redress historic discrimination and inequality. Indeed, at the heart of the Jat

argument for reservations was the idea of Jat deprivation, or the ongoing decline of Jat power. Jat leaders pointed out the economic stresses facing Jat farmers, and that most have few viable options to escape the agricultural economy. In this way, a variety of dissatisfactions centred on the rural political economy coalesced into a framework that cast reservations as a panacea for most Jat problems.

Most Jats who attended panchayats and maha-panchayats, including organizers, were from villages (*dehat*), not Haryana's urban centers. While the Jat reservations demand gradually gained traction among the urban middle-class Jat families, their participation was never as vigorous as that of their caste and clan brethren in villages. This is in part because rural-to-urban migration is only possible for affluent Jat families, whose members (mostly men) have either taken up a well-paying, non-farm job or have engaged in entrepreneurship. Upon migrating to cities and towns, these families maintain only tenuous ties with their ancestral villages; over time they either sell their farm land or contract it to tenants, and are therefore less affected by the mounting structural challenges facing small-scale farmers. They are also rarely part of the khap panchayat, the main site in which arguments in favour of reservations for Jats were spread.

Education, Unemployment, and Masculinity

In this section, I explore how young Jat men from farming families with limited landholdings struggle to escape their economic predicament by aspiring to enter non-farm employment. At the center of the story is Pradeep, an educated but unemployed Jat man in his late twenties, whose aspirations to transition into a post-agrarian lifeworld suffered a setback when he failed to get a government job, the most coveted form of employment in rural Haryana. It is critical to reflect on this class of marginal farmers not only because it is expanding in terms of numbers (due to the generational shrinking of landholdings), but also because it is turning increasingly to violent forms of protest to demand

concessions from the state, ranging from agricultural subsidies to reservations. To supplement their meager farming income, many educated young Jat farmers engage seasonal causal jobs, like working as waiters during the local wedding season. As Pradeep's story shows, driven largely by economic anxieties, these men suffer from a profound sense of emasculation. As I argue, many seek to recuperate their male identity by participating in and supporting the khap panchayat. That the khap panchayat's leaders were able to mobilize this class of marginal farmers to agitate for reservations helps explain the potency of the movement.

When I met Pradeep in July 2015, he was a twenty-nine-year-old university student pursuing a second MA from Maharishi Dayanand University (MDU), Rohtak. In August 2016, after having finished this MA, he enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program to become a teacher. However, in May 2017, barely half-way through his B.Ed. degree, Pradeep was contemplating leaving the university altogether. He told me he wanted to quit because he could not get a government job (*sarkari naukri*). "I am thirty now. I am no longer eligible for most government jobs. There is no point in studying any further," he said. Looking embarrassed, Pradeep added that he will start working as a driver. Like many educated but unemployed young men in northern India, Pradeep suffered from a deep sense of ennui, shame, and disillusionment (Jeffrey 2010:72-102). This was, of course, not the first time Pradeep and I had spoken about his education and post-university aspirations. In our earlier conversations, Pradeep had articulated a strong desire to have a government job.

> VINEET: What is so special about government jobs [*sarkari naukri*]? Why does everyone want one?
> PRADEEP: A government job gives economic security [*suraksha dena*] to the entire family. It gives a regular salary with other benefits like pension. In addition, one can also earn *uparli kamai* [illegal bribes]. Farming, on the other hand, is exposed to

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many fluctuations [*utaar-chadav*]. Sometimes it is insects who destroy the crop, on other occasions, it is untimely rainfall or hailstorm. Prices of inputs like fertilizers are increasing each year but market rates at which farmers sell crops are more or less stagnant [*khade hue*]. On top of that, there is agrarian debt [*karza*]. There is no future in farming.

VINEET: So, a government job gives a strong economic foundation to a man and his family.

PRADEEP: Yes. It is also important from a social perspective [*samajik drishtikon*]. It increases a man's status [*izzat*] in the village and fixes his marriage [*shaddi karwa degi*]. If I get a government job today, there will be a line of men outside my house tomorrow, each requesting my father to accept his daughter as my wife. Not just that. Each one of them will be willing to pay a large dowry [*dahej*]. On the other hand, if you are a farmer [*kisan*] with not more than 4-5 acres of land, you will find it difficult to get a local bride.

In these words, Pradeep explained how having a government job not only brings economic security to a patriarchal household (*ghar*), but also enables a man to transition into full adulthood through marriage, in this case to a local Jat bride. Farming, on the other hand, was linked with economic precarity; it exposed a household to cycles of debt. Further, as Pradeep pointed out, educated but unemployed men who fall back on farming either stay unmarried or settle for a lesser match, perhaps even having to purchase a wife (*mol pe lana*) from a low caste household in an eastern Indian state like Bihar, Jharkhand, or Assam (Chaudhry 2019). I was thus not surprised to learn that Pradeep stayed enrolled in the university for several years, one course after another, in part to live in its highly-subsidized accommodation where he could prepare for government job exams.

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Pradeep always dismissed the idea of returning to Peepalvas, his ancestral village, to become a farmer. He not only considered himself to be too educated (*zyada padha-likha*) to farm, but also dreamt of joining Haryana's fledgling urban middle-class. Put simply, he viewed becoming a farmer like his father as constituting downward mobility. Further, their family landholding was extremely small, so neither he nor his younger brother could depend on it entirely. Thus, when Pradeep was leaving university, he was also abandoning long-held aspirations to have a non-agrarian future.

In 2018, I started receiving phone calls from his younger brother, Prashant, and his other patrilineal relatives, who shared that Pradeep had started drinking heavily. After drinking, Pradeep would argue loudly with his parents, and get into fights with other men of the village. To earn extra money, he had also started to work as a driver for a local gang smuggling whiskey from Haryana to Delhi. His family wanted me to counsel him to stop drinking and to leave the life of crime (*apradh ki zindagi*). When I tried getting in touch with Pradeep, my calls went unanswered. In August 2019, I learnt that Pradeep had been in a car accident. He was driving to Peepalvas at night from a friend's house after a bout of drinking. Though he survived the crash, Pradeep's right leg became disabled which prevented him from driving in the future. When we met in February 2020, I noted a distinct limp. He had stopped drinking and lived in a separate house with his new wife from Bihar. He told me he was still indignant about not having a government job, and often thought about the life he could have had if only he had qualified a government job exam.

During the course of my fieldwork in rural Haryana, I met many young unmarried Jat men like Pradeep who had oriented their lives towards non-agrarian futures but had fallen short of attaining them (Jeffrey 2010:72-102). Srinivasan (2020:89) notes that transitioning from an agrarian to non-agrarian lifeworld also entails a conscious remaking of the self. Thus, unsuccessful attempts at upward mobility are deeply painful, often leading to different forms of addiction. The desire among farming groups to

pursue a post-agrarian lifestyle for their next generation is not limited to Haryana and its neighbouring regions, but is also pervasive in other parts of India. For instance, drawing on the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data, Agarwal (2017) notes that about forty percent of farmers in India do not want their children to take up farming. She concluded, "We are facing not just a farmers' crisis today, but also a crisis of farming families, whose children want non-farm jobs" (Agarwal 2017).

I observed that from a young age, children in villages, especially from landowning Jat households, are encouraged to strive for urban employment. More specifically, they are socialized into a culture that values a government job or a well-paying private job. In fact, certain preparations are made early on to make sure that children turn out to be 'intelligent'—a term commonly used in north India to refer to children's capacity to get good grades in school. In this way, education is largely perceived in an instrumental sense, specifically, as a means to transition towards a post-agrarian lifeworld. To pursue this objective, a large number of Jat farming families are now sending their children to English-language private schools.[127] At the end of the school day, many children take private classes, and after finishing school most join 'coaching institutes' to be trained in taking government job exams. Jat farmers often tap into caste and kinship networks to find role models who counsel their children on what courses to take and how to study. These are men and women from urban middle-class Jat families who were able to get paid employment and successfully migrated from the village to an urban center. In addition, Jat farmers also expect their urban relatives to provide material assistance by housing their school and college-going children for some years. Pradeep, for example, lived with his mother's brother for three years in Rohtak city while studying in MDU.

To pay for education, Jat farmers often take loans from banks, and from moneylenders who charge exorbitant rates of interest. As part of these transactions, they frequently put up their farms, farming

[127] Until the 1990s, I was told, most children went to Hindi-language government schools.

machinery, and cattle as collateral. Since education is seen as a vehicle for economic and social mobility, Jat farmers prefer investing their limited farming surplus in their children's education rather than buying more land or replacing outdated machinery. Indeed, the impacts of a commitment to post-agrarian futures is far-reaching; they not only include newer child-rearing practices, but also the realignment of household economic priorities.

Investments in private education, as well as their 'returns', are mediated through norms and practices governing the Jat patriarchal family. While boys are encouraged to enroll in courses to increase chances of entry into government service, girls are largely guided towards courses focused on domestic skills. Further, since daughters are viewed as "guests" in their natal families or *paraya dhan* (someone else's property), the burden of providing financial and social support to parents in old age is borne by the sons (Jeffrey 2010:37-71). Thus, it is commonly hoped that after receiving a college education, sons will find gainful employment, and daughters marriage into an affluent urban household. In this sense, Jeffrey (2010:63) has rightly described investments in higher education as characterized by "deferred economic and social gratification." These investments, however, are riddled with profound uncertainty. While there is much clamor for government jobs, the state's capacity to employ a growing number of educated graduates is on the wane as it increasingly withdraws from various sectors of the economy.

To decode how Jat youth from rural background respond to the aggressive push towards higher education, and how a young man's success or failure in life is often cast as hinging on whether they get a government job or not, I visited Pradeep's hostel in MDU in Rohtak city on several occasions. Typically, an atmosphere of masculine joviality surrounds men's hostels. It is manifested through a wide range of male practices like bodybuilding, playing sports, and riding motorbikes and cars, among other activities. Along with partaking in these activities, Pradeep and his friends spent long hours

chatting aimlessly in tea stalls, cigarette shops, canteens, and other place, thereby engaging in self-fashioning centered around forms of street masculinity. They described themselves as *ghoomakad* ("those who tend to wander") and *thali* ("aimless").

Jeffrey (2010) has grasped the making of such masculine cultures in Indian universities through the frequently-used idiom of 'timepass'—an uninterrupted flow of featureless time or an overabundance of time. He has rightly noted that such cultures of male idleness were perpetuated by infrastructural and educational decay in most Indian public universities, coupled with a profound sense of uncertainty regarding their future engendered by high rates of unemployment. Most young men I met in MDU, and in other colleges and universities in Haryana, had oriented their student lives around the annual calendar of government job exams: they were either preparing for an approaching exam or awaiting results. The rate of success in these exams was dismal, and most students failed to make the cut despite having spent years preparing for them. As a result, these men suffered from a profound sense of being left behind (*peeche rahna*). Like Pradeep, many responded to failure to enter government service by continuing at university for another chance in the future. To me, many of them also complained how the official process of conducting government job exams has fallen prey to a shadow economy built on corruption and bribes operating through informal networks of local politicians, government bureaucrats, and brokers (*dalal*). Importantly, most university students perceived uncertain outcomes of heavy investments in higher education made by their parents through the prism of caste. For instance, Pradeep and his friends, most of who belonged to dominant groups, often blamed the reservations policy for their lack of prospects.

A poor Jat farming family investing in their daughters' education.

When investments in higher education do not yield expected 'returns', family relations get strained. During one of my visits to MDU, Pradeep shared how his relationship with his father, and other males of their patriline, had changed since they started berating him for being unemployed and unmarried. I soon realized that these rebukes stemmed from the fact that Pradeep was unable to met the local norms and practices of Jat masculinity. In Peepalvas, when I used to meet Pradeep's father, Mahender Singh, a Jat farmer, he often complained to me about his son. For instance, on one occasion he recounted in minute detail the amount of money he had spent on Pradeep's education, and how Pradeep had fallen short of fulfilling his duties as a young male. He often concluded his tirades by lamenting how the money he had spent on Pradeep's education would have been better spent on buying more land or agricultural machinery. Pradeep shared with me a few anecdotes describing how his patrilineal relatives often castigated him for being unemployed, and thus failing to be in a position to support his parents in old age. After having understood how the failure to find a government job was profoundly linked with the performance of gendered roles in the Jat patriarchal society, and how shame was often deployed as a potent cultural technique to bring the so-called astray men on *sahi rasta* ("the right path"), I was able to appreciate Jeffrey's portrayal of educated but unemployed men from rural background as "living at the crossroads"—not knowing what to do and where to go, and thus "somewhat lost in time and space" (Jeffrey 2010:72).

As noted in the previous chapter, for Chowdhry (2005), unemployed and unmarried men like Pradeep constitute a 'crisis in masculinity.' More specifically, in post-liberalization Haryana, Chowdhry has discerned that the fallen social status of these men has resulted in more incidence of aggression and violence against the Dalits and other social inferiors, including women. While exploring historical dimensions of Jat masculinity, including its close relationship with Jat bhaichara landholdings, Chowdhry (2015) notes that the Jat masculine code (*izzat*) has rested on men's ability to establish control over land, women, and members of their dependent castes. In this context, Jat society has

valorized the ideal of an able-bodied man who disciplines both women and low caste dependents. In contemporary Haryana, however, this image of masculinity is waning. Specifically, shrinking Jat landholdings, high rates of unemployment, and an adverse sex ratio have produced a generation of Jat males who are disproportionately both unmarried and unemployed compared to previous generations. Consequently, the economic status of many Jat households has declined. As Pradeep's story shows, these failures of young men to become breadwinners and to extend the patriline has been emasculating. Treated as immature by older men in their communities, they often seek to recuperate a masculine identity by participating in the khap panchayat. Their role in local politics comes to the fore in cases where norms and practices of Jat marriage are breached, for instance, when a Jat girl elopes with a Dalit boy. Under the surveillance of elderly men, they enforce panchayats' punishments like public head shavings, physical beatings, social boycotts, expulsions from the village, and even honor killings.

Hansen (1996:138) observed that "recuperation of masculinity" has been a recurring theme undergirding various projects of Hindu nationalism, including anti-Muslim riots. During fieldwork, I noted a similar dynamic unfolding in Haryana, where loss of power and masculinity contributed to Jat violence against the Dalits and other weaker castes in the countryside. To young Jat men deprived of a chance to become patriarchs of their own families, stripped of critical markers of manhood, Dalits and other beneficiaries of the reservations policy are viewed as having stolen jobs, and more broadly a sense of masculine identity, to which they are entitled. Consider Pradeep's participation in an ad-hoc group of dominant caste university students (mostly men), who proudly described themselves as *arakshan-virodhi* ("those opposed to reservations"). On one hand, this group endorsed abolition of the reservations policy. Yet on the other hand, they demanded reservations for themselves. On university campus, Pradeep and his friends often instigated aggressive discussions (and even physical fights) with pro-reservations Dalit students. In April 2016, Pradeep and two other Jat students were on the verge

of being suspended for attacking a Dalit student who was celebrating being selected for a government job.

The story of Pradeep, and so many other young and educated Jat men, suggests that recuperating a Jat masculinity was one of the critical themes that underpinned participation in the Jat reservations movement. My argument here has been that Jat leaders have been able to tap into a large pool of disaffected young men who are similarly disillusioned with the current reservations system. For marginal Jat farmers, inclusion in the reservations system was widely perceived as a panacea for most economic problems. As mentioned earlier, however, the implications of Jat reservations politics went far beyond the economic benefits associated with inclusion in the reservations system. This was because Jat mobilizations were also framed as ways to reassert Jat political power in the region by settling 'Jat vs. non-Jat' caste rivalries. How did this happen? How did khap panchayats link an array of rural discontents to reservations? This is the story I now explore.

The Khap Panchayat and Collective Political Action

The previous sections brought a specific form of caste identity to the fore. It is not the 'old' form of caste focused on village networks of economic, ritual, and political interdependence (i.e., the jajmani system) that received much attention in ethnographies of post-Independence India. Instead, it is a more contemporary politicized form of caste, which reaches far beyond the domains of family and locality, and influences electoral politics and region-wide social movements. I am drawing attention to what Srinivas called the 'horizontal stretch', or what Dumont termed the 'substantialization' of caste, where trans-regional caste alliances compete for state power and its resources, *inter alia*, by contesting elections at various levels. Caste in this modern sense also plays a critical role in how ordinary people

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stake a claim in the state's resources, such as by demanding to be included in the reservations system.[128] Since caste groups compete against one another in this horizontal framework, there is also an increased tendency towards antagonism.

How have these facets of India's political modernity, especially its varied forms of caste politics, affected the centuries-old institution of the khap panchayat? More specifically, how has the spread of electoral democracy, expansion of the postcolonial state, and the arrival of the private market economy in the countryside, among other things, impacted the khap panchayat and its modes of political action? Previous chapters of this dissertation have responded to this question from different vantage points. Broadly, my argument has been that the historical powers of the khap panchayat have declined considerably, so much so that they are now viewed as having *sookhi chaudhrahat* ("dried-up caste powers"). Yet despite having their power attenuated in many ways, the khap panchayat and its leaders exercise considerable social and political influence. Their massive caste assemblies (maha-panchayats) and staging of anti-state protests, for instance, continue to be effective means of engaging in collective political action. Put simply, the khap panchayat is able to mobilize Jat farmers around issues that directly relate to Jat power across northern India. For instance, through the 1980s and 1990s, the khap panchayats of west Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, and Rajasthan organized large-scale mobilizations against the state's agricultural policies, demanding higher market rates for their produce, and subsidies for fertilizers, electricity, and water, among other things (Byres 1986; Gupta 1997; Sahay 2015).[129] In Haryana since the early 2010s, the khap panchayat has mobilized Jats around the reservations demand.

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[128] Recently, reservations claims have been made not merely by dominant farming groups like Jats but also by weaker groups, such as, the Dhankas of Rajasthan (Moodie 2015) and the Gaddis of northern India (Kapila 2008), who either sought re-entry in the reservations system or constitutional reclassification from one reservations category to another.

[129] Popularly known as the New Farmers Movement (Brass 1995), these protests against government's agrarian policies were organized by khap panchayats organized under the banner of Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU). About this aspect of the BKU, Sahay (2004:405) wrote, "Although the BKU was registered as a union and a written constitution was adopted to legitimise it, Chaudhari Tikait ran the union on informal lines patterned on the traditional *sarv khap* panchayat (an umbrella institution constituting all *khaps*)."

The participation of the khap panchayat in present-day political action either in the name of peasant or Jat caste identity suggests that this centuries-old multi-village framework has adapted to modern political realities. Hobsbawm (1983:4) argued that older forms of community, their authority structures, and their "institutional carriers and promulgators," must either adapt in the face of rapidly unfolding socio-political transformations or risk becoming extinct. Over the past two and a half centuries (i.e. from the start of the colonial period to the present), India has experienced sweeping socio-political transformations, during which few pre-British political forms have endured. My argument is that the khap panchayat continues to exert its powerful force in Haryana's countryside well into the twenty-first century precisely because it has been able to recalibrate its identity in relation to modern society and politics.

Examples of recalibration include how various networks of the khap panchayat from different sub-regions of northern India are today stitching together geographically expansive coalitions and alliances under the title of sarv khap panchayat, or as ad-hoc Jat organizations like ABJASS, or the peasant organization Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU). Earlier forms of collective political action roused by the khap panchayat were confined to much smaller localities, specifically, to ancestral territories of two or more feuding clans or a slightly larger territory comprising multi-clan village clusters. For instance, Bhadra (1988) studied the nature of Jat collective political action through the personality of Shah Mal, a small Jat peasant proprietor from district Barout (presently in Uttar Pradesh), in the context of the rebellion of 1857 against the British rule. By foregrounding how Jat insurgency was based on kinship and territorial units like tappa and khap, Bhadra points out that the geographical extent of Shah Mal's influence was confined to *chowrasse des*—a tract of land comprising eighty-four villages under the occupation of Jat clans. In comparison, contemporary forms of Jat political action are radically different. Today's khap panchayats coalesce not to launch armed peasant insurgencies against the

extractive state, but to demand a greater share in the state's resources by constituting trans-regional coalitions and holding anti-state protests in the wider context of democratic politics.

The khap panchayat, i.e., its leaders and Jat clansmen, describe their present-day campaigns as *arajneetik* (non-political). This draws attention to the ambivalent nature of their relationship with state power and politics, especially the kind occasioned by the elections, which, as I earlier discussed in chapter three, is largely perceived in moral terms as *gandi rajneeti* ("dirty politics"). Ordinary Jat farmers sometimes suspect leaders of the khap panchayat for having come too close to the politicians. Such allegations cast aspersions on the public image of Jat chaudharies for they are then no longer viewed as working for the welfare of Jat *quam* (community) but are believed to have come under the corrupting role of electoral politics (*vote ki rajneeti*) and money (*bhrashtachar*) to pursue their individual self-interest. Considering such censure against the trappings of state power and politics, leaders of the khap panchayat neither invite nor permit *rajneetik* (political) personalities to speak from their podium.

Construal of state politics as inherently corrupting enables Jat khap leaders and farmers to evoke and publicize positive and optimistic visions of Jat community, its unity and political action from their panchayats and maha-panchayats. In doing so, the khap panchayat inhabits what Spencer (2007:142) has called the "cleansing space," wherein transpires "a radical cleansing of the profane aspects of the state and the political." Further, Jat criticism of state power and politics is also an extension of their view that regards the state as an external entity (Gupta 1997:88-102). As discussed earlier in chapter two, many Jats (mostly men) believe that they would be better off if they could adjudicate their disputes in face-to-face panchayats. Government courts and police, as well as the officials through whom high-tier development fund percolate into the village's Gram Panchayat, are widely perceived as corruptible (Jeffrey 2010; Lieten & Srivastava 1999; Moore 1998). Jat disdain for state authority also stems from their belief that marginal farmers are being short-changed by the government. In Jat maha-panchayats

and village baithaks, I have sat through long stretches of discussions where Jat farmers criticized the government, as well as the grain traders from the Bania and Punjabi trading communities, for procuring their agricultural produce at low prices.

This brings me to the final part of this section—the sanctity of Jat collective action, its forms of mobilizations, public protests, and violence. All large-scale mobilizations organized by the khap panchayat, which coalesce either against the state or rival caste groups, are oriented towards a finality. They culminate in public protests and demonstration, which oscillate between peaceful Gandhian-style sit-ins (*dharnas*) and the more aggressive blocking of roadway and railway routes and destruction of government property. In this regard, Chakrabarty (2007) has noted that the leitmotif of legitimate resistance to state power, or what Hansen (2001:229) called "an opposition based on ethics of community and culture," runs through narratives of popular politics in postcolonial India and draws on the long history of anti-British nationalist struggle of the pre-Independence period. In Mumbai, India, Hansen (2001) discerned a similar *arajneetik* (non-political) sphere of collective political action in the context of the rise of Shiv Sena, a militant Hindu movement. He termed it as 'anti-politics' and defined it these words, "To denounce *rajkaraan* (politics), to separate the nation and its cultures from the realm of rational statecraft, and to adopt a moral, antipolitical critique of political leaders is possibly the most legitimate and the most common oppositional stance in contemporary India" (Hansen 2001:229). Following Hansen, I argue that by adopting a high moral ground of what the Jats call *arajneetik* (non-political) struggle, or in other words, by inhabiting Spencer's "cleansing space," the khap panchayat and its leaders claim legitimacy to criticize the state, its officials, and politicians. At times, the khap panchayats' dissent is directed against the government and police force, on other occasions, it is in opposition to rival castes and communities. In both cases, it broadly draws political impetus from the drive to break the law, and from publicizing various issues related to agriculture and

unemployment to claim certain benefits or entitlements, for instance, in form of reservations, for the Jats.

The khap panchayats' long history of mobilizing the Jats for political action shows how they have enabled small-scale Jat farmers to adapt in conditions of economic and political insecurity. Following this, their latest project—i.e., to get included in the reservations system—must be seen in the same light. For marginal Jat farmers, the demand for reservations was a means to address and find a remedy for their declining economic, social, and political status. Further, Jat mobilizations for reservations also bring into bold relief the adaptability of the khap panchayat, i.e., its ability to adjust to changing economic and political conditions. In the post-liberalization era, when the influence of private capital based in real estate, commerce, business and financial services, and peri-urban manufacturing is expanding in Haryana's countryside, Jat leaders and farmers recognize that their fortunes are increasingly getting linked with urban and non-agricultural economy. This shift in the rural political economy of Haryana is also reflected in the ideas and discourses articulated in Jat panchayats and maha-panchayats. In the final section of this chapter, where I analyze excerpts from speeches made by Jat khap leaders, I pay attention to how misgivings and anxieties about privatization of education, unemployment, shrinking landholdings, and inter-caste rivalries co-mingled with agrarian populism of Jat farmers.

The Making of the Jat Political Dialogue

Though the character of Jat mobilizations has evolved over time, the modus operandi followed by Jat leaders to rally their caste- and clan-brethren in the countryside has largely been the same. Rural mobilizations among Jats continue to take place through centuries-old kinship networks that are foundational to the institution of the khap panchayat. This entails holding a series of smaller Jat panchayats at both village and multi-village levels, and larger maha-panchayats in towns and cities that

draw hundreds and thousands of Jat clansmen. During my fieldwork, both village panchayats and the maha-panchayats served as sites of collective reflection and publicity where a range of ideas and discourses related to Jat reservations demand were discussed. In addition, questions like what processes and strategies of mobilization were to be adopted, and what concrete programs and activities were to be undertaken, were also debated. Among other things, these features suggest that Jat mobilizations unfold at multiple levels—the village, the multi-village, and regional towns and cities. The connection between these various levels is provided by the khap panchayat, whose inter-village networks function as political pathways, enabling a to and fro movement of Jat village leaders from their clan territories to various parts of Haryana to attend maha-panchayats. Upon returning to their villages, Jat leaders disseminate the ideas and discourses they heard by organizing the village and multi-village panchayats. In this way, Jat political dialogue stretches from villages to regional centres of power.

As noted in earlier chapters, the politico-juridical institution of the panchayat has religious sanctity. Those leading panchayats receive legitimacy through oft-repeated proverbs like *panch parmeshwar* ("God is in the elders"), and are widely considered as being gifted with knowledge and wisdom. While studying the role of the khap panchayat in organizing farmers' mobilizations, Lindberg & Madsen (2003:206) rightly noted that panchayats have "a loosely defined and ever-shifting agenda, with a minimum of procedural rules." During the Jat mobilization over reservations, village and multi-village panchayats took place in village *chaupals* (rest-houses) situated in Jat quarters of a village. They were commonly led by 2-3 elders who typically sat on a wooden cot (*takhat*) in front of a group of farmers seated on the ground. These leaders encouraged attendees to speak their minds. In fact, each panchayat included exhortations like *apni baat khul kar bolo* ("speak your mind openly"). All viewpoints were heard, including disagreements, and then a final decision was taken by the Jat chaudhari leading the panchayat, which was (at least in theory) binding on all. The larger maha-panchayats were different

and often resembled a political rally. They had a large rostrum upon which were seated several Jat leaders—khap chaudharies, various village-level leaders, and other important men like retired police or army officers, or a school principal—who were invited for their oratory skills. These leaders gave short, high-octane speeches through which they tried to persuade farmers to join various mobilization programmes.


A Jat maha-panchayat.

A multi-village Jat panchayat

In this section, I focus on four excerpts from speeches by Jat leaders in village and multi-village panchayats and maha-panchayats that I attended between 2015-17. The topics discussed in these excerpts include the privatization of education, unemployment, agrarian debt, inter-caste rivalries, and the mobilization campaign for including Jats in the reservations system. These excerpts reveal key features of what I call the Jat political dialogue. After being shared in Jat caste assemblies, these ideas and discourses traveled the countryside through Jat village leaders like Jai Bhagwan, who attended panchayats and maha-panchayats along with a coterie of clansmen. Though I have chosen to focus on Jat leaders' speeches, this sphere was not a one-way street where the public call to mobilize was absorbed without any critical reflection by Jat farmers. During this period, in fact, village sites of Jat male sociality like baithaks transformed into critical nodes through which participation in political dialogue took place. In a village baithak, for instance, neighbourhood Jat men drew on their own life

experiences, such as the marginal statuses of their unemployed sons, to collectively reflect on issues raised by leaders. Indeed, Jat mobilizations were successful precisely because the grim portrayal of agrarian realities sketched by leaders resonated with many farmers, motivating them to take action.

A village Jat panchayat

December 20, 2015.

Jat maha-panchayat

Gohana, Sonipat, Haryana.

JAT LEADER 1: Our elders used to advise us [*salah dena*] on two benefits of education [*shiksha*]. First, they told us, education helps to transform a boorish [*an-padh jahil*] villager into a civilized [*sabhya*] man. An educated [*padha-likha*] man can confidently walk into any government office, interact with its officials, fill out forms on his own and get his work done without paying any bribe [*rishwat*]. On the other hand, an uneducated man is scared to even enter a government office let alone speak to an official unless accompanied by someone else. Second, our elders told us, education will give you jobs [*naukri*]. You can become a government officer, teacher, or doctor. Earlier, in my time, children used to go to government schools. Now, we are in a different era [*waqt*], the era of private schools and colleges. Even the poorest of farmers [*kisan*] are now trying to send their children to private schools. Had anyone imagined twenty, thirty years ago that private schools would enter the countryside [*dehat*]? A farmer must make many sacrifices [*balidaan*]. He will himself wear torn and soiled clothes but will ensure that his children are well-dressed in school uniforms. He will borrow money from banks and village moneylenders [*sahukar*]. He will bear the weight of debt [*karza*] on his chest for his children's education. But what does he get in return? Brothers [*bhaiyon*], it is very crucial to reflect [*sochna*] on this question. Despite spending so much money on their education, our children are not getting jobs. Do we not have the right to ask these politicians where the jobs have disappeared to? In frustration, our children are turning towards crime, alcohol and drugs, and gambling. Is this why we spend lakhs of rupees on their education? This is why the Jats need reservations.

This excerpt succinctly captures the nature of many Jats' outlook on education. By framing this discourse in terms of a two-pronged advice given by caste elders, the leader subtly hinted at the

historical relationship the Jats' have had with education. Indeed, both Chowdhary (1984) and Datta (1999, 2009) have observed that the first push towards formal education among the Jats was closely associated with the adoption of Arya Samaj and the rise of Jat leaders like Chhotu Ram in the late colonial period, when several Jat educational institutions and gurukuls (vedic seminaries) opened in what is now Haryana. From those early days, education has had two interlinked meanings. First, for Jat farming families, education has had value in itself because it is widely regarded as a way to counter loud and boorish behaviour associated with illiteracy. In this regard, Jeffrey (2010:62) has noted that Jat farmers are frequently ridiculed by high-ranking castes like the Brahmans and Banias for their rustic and unrefined conduct. Thus, over decades, education has been perceived as an empowering tool, enabling Jat farmers to rise above such caste-based derision through adoption of 'civilized' demeanour, which, among other things, is expressed through the way they talk, eat, and sit. Education also raises a person's status in the village, and gives them the skills to navigate complex bureaucratic structures.

Second, education is also meaningful for it is a means to gain salaried employment, and, more broadly, upward mobility. In this regard, the Jat leader marked off two distinct time periods vis-à-vis education–: pre- and post-liberalisation. Pre-liberalization, the state was responsible for education, which it exercised through running government schools and colleges in the countryside. Post-liberalization, however, the state has not only disinvested from education, but it is also failing to provide adequate resources to its schools, leading to closures.[130] At the same time, with the influx of private capital, education has become heavily privatized. Rural people perceive such transitions not merely in economic but also in moral terms. For instance, in Haryana's countryside, I often heard people say that education had been a noble activity (*nek karya*), but was now simply a profit-making enterprise.

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[130] See https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/haryana-government-to-shut-over-1000-schools-43-in-gurgaon/articleshow/81559574.cms; accessed on May 2, 2023.

To give their children a better chance to access market opportunities, and to enable them to realize their post-agrarian aspirations, Jat farmers are investing heavily in private education. This tends to involve borrowing money from both banks and village moneylenders, with their farms, machinery and cattle as collaterals. To draw attention to these extractive forms of paying for private education, the Jat leader shares a powerful image of a poor but virtuous farmer (*garib par seedha kisan*) who prioritizes spending on his son than on himself, in this case foregoing much needed new clothes. Among other things, this image also throws into sharp relief how the ideology of education has penetrated the interiors of rural India, so much so that it is now influencing household budgeting, marriage strategies, and family planning.

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February 10, 2016.

Village panchayat

Lakhanpura, Rohtak, Haryana.

> JAT LEADER 2: Today, the number of government jobs has come down. On top of that, we have the reservations policy [*arakshan-neti*]. Without any hard work, the Dalits' children [*kamin ke balak*] get admission in colleges, and later they get jobs. They get scholarships [*vajifa*], grains [*kaan*], homes [*ghar*], and so many other benefits from government schemes. These benefits have made them lazy. They have forgotten how to be respectful. Our children work doubly hard and get better grades, but they get nothing in return. What kind of system is this? Those who work hard get nothing and those who do nothing get everything. Today is the age of *kalyug* where everything has been turned upside down. Either end the reservations policy or give reservations to poor Jat farmers.

Reservations policy for Dalits is often the topic of discussion in Jat male gatherings ranging from village baithaks to big maha-panchayats. Though in today's Haryana there is a marked decline in the caste ideology of ritual pollution that justified the practice of untouchability, the dominant Jats' anti-reservations views (however biased and imperfect they may be) have emerged as "the principal idiom" through which discrimination against the Dalits is perpetuated (Still 2013:69). Frequently, I have heard the Jats, as well as other high-caste men, complain with a mix of anxiety and resentment about the rise of the Dalits, e.g., how the Dalits have taken all well-paid high-status jobs, and how they receive every type of support from the government. In the Jat-dominated western Uttar Pradesh, Jeffrey (2010:54) has observed circulation of similar "vastly exaggerated tales of Dalit economic success and political power." Likewise, reporting from Haryana's countryside, Chowdhry (2009) has argued that stories describing the 'rising' Dalits are often brought up to justify reinforcement of caste subjugation, including infliction of violence on them. At the center of such hyperbolic stories is a criticism of the reservations policy through which the Dalits are said to have attained upwards mobility. The Jats express that reservations must be given on economic grounds rather than caste. In their discussion, they often bring up the figure of a poor Jat farmer (*garib kisan*), whose economic status is not too far from a nonpoor Dalit family but whose children compete for government jobs in what is commonly known as the 'general category.' They believe that reservations have made the Dalits lazy and arrogant as they no longer perform customary forms of subservience towards their employers and caste superiors.

Such transformations in caste relations brought about by the reservations policy are often made sense of through the idea of *kalyug*, i.e., the final of the four eras through which time rotates infinitely according to Hindu thought. Kalyug is often described as a period of moral decline, or an *ulta-pulta*

(upside-down) time when proper actions cease to produce expected results (Cohen 1998:171-174). For the Jats, much of their evaluation of the Dalits echo moral deterioration characteristic of kalyug. Similar dominant caste attitudes vis-à-vis reservations are reported from other regions of India like Andhra Pradesh (Still 2013), Tamil Nadu (Deliège 2010), and western Uttar Pradesh (Froystad 2010). Kapadia (1995:174-175) has noted that hostility caused by reservations policy is out of proportion to the benefits received by the Dalits. Most of the Dalits find government jobs not in the upper but in the lowest echelons of state bureaucracy comprising occupations still associated with untouchability, e.g., sweepers and cleaners. More broadly, this draws attention to how the reservations policy has transformed caste society but perhaps not always as expected as anti-Dalit discriminatory attitudes are now being framed in a new vocabulary.

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March 2, 2017.

Jat dharna

Village Jassia, Rohtak, Haryana.

> JAT LEADER 3: Sir Chhotu Ram gave two pieces of advise to the Jat community [*quam*]. First, he urged us to get educated. And second, he taught us to identify our enemy [*dushman*]. Oh Jat, Chhotu Ram ji said, the Bania and Punjabi, these trading [*vyapari*] castes are your enemies. Brothers [*bhaiyon*], now please listen to me carefully. Tractor companies decide the price for their tractors. Likewise, leather companies decide the price of leather items. The farmer is the only producer who never gets to decide the price of his produce. It is always set by the trader [*vyapari*] in the grain market [*anaj mandi*]. Today's Khattar-led BJP government is anti-farmer [*kisan-virodhi*]. This government is controlled by traders. Khattar himself is a Punjabi. Brothers, what

should I call him? A Pakistani? I want Khattar to listen to this. If he decides to fight the Jats, we will send him back to Pakistan. We will teach him a lesson he will never forget. Get ready to fight for your self-respect [*atma-samman*]. Do not get side-tracked by factional politics [*gut-bazi*]. We Jats must be united. Long live Jat unity [*Jat ekta zindabad*].

This excerpt goes to the heart of caste antagonisms that spurred Jat mobilizations between 2015-17. Earlier in the chapter, I explained how the BJP-supported multi-caste coalition opposing the Jats' reservations demand had emerged in Haryana. This coalition included not only traditional elite castes like the Brahmans, Banias, and Punjabis, but also OBCs, including the Dalits. It was not for nothing that this Jat leader speaking in a maha-panchayat evoked the memory of Chhotu Ram, who is widely credited for instilling political unity among the Jats. One of the ways in which Chhotu Ram had contributed to a unified Jat identity was by mobilizing Jats against rival groups.[131]

Among these rivalries, the exploitation of Jat peasants by village Bania, who served as moneylenders (*sahukar*), is most deeply etched in Jat collective memory. The leitmotif of the usurping Bania, in fact, ran through Chhotu Ram's rhetoric, both in his political writings and short stories like 'Sahukar Ka Phanda' (The Noose of the Moneylender). In them, the Bania was depicted as manipulating prices and ledger accounts (*bahi-khaata*), dispossessing peasants of their lands, and having unfair access to the police and government courts. Chhotu Ram's mobilization of Jat peasants against usury radically changed Jat-Bania relations. As noted by Chowdhry (1984), by the late colonial period, Bania

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[131] Broadly, in the late colonial period, the Jats were at loggerheads with two different sets of caste groups. On one hand, there were traditionally high caste like the Brahmans and Banias, who up until the late colonial period publicly denigrated Jat agriculturalists by socially classifying them with other lowly-ranked Shudras, whereas on the other hand, the Jats frequently clashed with the then untouchable caste of the Chamars, who skinned the carcasses to tan leather in the village and worked as agrarian labourers in Jats' lands (Chowdhry 1984; Datta 1999).

moneylenders were physically attacked in Jat villages, their ledger accounts destroyed, and their shops (*dukan*) ransacked. In the post-Independence period, Bania families migrated to Haryana's cities and towns, where, among other sectors of the economy, they established control over local grain and vegetable markets (*anaj/sabzi mandi*). As a result, even in contemporary Haryana, most Jat farmers still sell their agricultural produce through Bania traders, and often borrow money from them at exorbitant rates of interests. Since the material basis of the old Jat-Bania rivalry are still intact (albeit not in an identical form), marginal Jat farmers continue to draw upon Chhotu Ram's ideas and stereotypes when reflecting on their position in the agricultural economy.

Like the Banias, the Punjabis in Haryana are likewise a Hindu trading community. Their settlement in this part of northern India took place after the Partition of 1947. During Partition, Muslim communities, such as the Ranghars (the Muslim Rajputs), left for what is now Pakistan, and the Punjabis migrated to various parts of northern India, including Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and south-west Punjab (present-day Haryana). In Haryana, many Punjabi families were given lands in formerly Ranghar-controlled villages. However, like the Banias, they gradually sold their lands and migrated to cities and towns, where many took up shopkeeping and trading. Today, Punjabi urbanites are widely regarded as part of the BJP-supporting Hindu upper castes not merely in Haryana but also in other north Indian states. M.L. Khattar, chief minister of Haryana, is from the Punjabi community, and was often insulted by Jat leaders in panchayats and maha-panchayats. In the above excerpt, he was derisively called a Pakistani—a slur used against Hindu migrants from Pakistan.

Jat leaders and farmers widely believed that the Khattar-led BJP government was *kisan virodhi* ("anti-farmer"). I was told that the BJP government had introduced policies that favoured the traders who procured agricultural produce at low rates, and then sold it for inflated prices. Jat leaders also complained about the recent entry of large corporations into the agricultural economy, the revocation

of farm-related subsidies provided by earlier governments, and long waits (often for days) at local grain and vegetable markets to sell their farm produce. For those cultivating sugarcane, such delays led to the desiccation of the cane, which made it less valuable. Often, famers added, payments for their produce by traders are late, sometimes by a year, and no interest is paid. These burdens, they argued, were being completely ignored by the BJP government. In making their case, many Jat leaders and farmers cited contemporary research on agriculture being done in economic institutes and local universities, which reached them through English and Hindi newspapers and social media channels like YouTube. Indeed, Jat activists found arguments in favour of their demands, including for reservations, from diverse sources.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

February 5, 2016.

Jat panchayat

Rohtak city, Haryana.

> JAT LEADER 4: I want to tell my brothers to be prepared for *dilli gherao* [encirclement of Delhi by Jat protestors]. We will be left with no other option if this government does not give us reservations. They tell us that Jats do not believe in the Constitution [*samvidhan*] and the judiciary [*nyaya-palika*]. Has the Jat not followed the right path? Didn't Justice K.C. Gupta's Commission give us reservations? The study conducted by Maharishi Dayanand University clearly said that poor Jat farmers need reservations. Then why were we thrown out of the reservations system? Our children who had qualified for various jobs, why were their appointment letters cancelled? Does the Jat not have the right to get government jobs? This government has mastered the art of political doublespeak [*do-galapan*]. They say something but do something else. Do not

supply milk to any dairy, do not sell your vegetables to the market, we will stop the water flowing to Delhi, we will block all roads leading to Delhi. We will make this government fall on its knees. Brothers! *Dilli gherao* will take place in February when farmers do not have much work to do in farms. Once we have taken back reservations, you can start harvesting wheat in April.

In September 2015, Yashpal Malik, a Jat leader of ABJASS, first introduced the idea of *dilli gherao*—encircling Delhi with protestors—in a maha-panchayat. To execute this plan, he noted, the Jats of Haryana would be supported by Jats of neighbouring states. Among other things, this alerted me to how present-day khap panchayats have also undergone a process of horizontalization, as they today are part of territorially expansive coalitions to pursue issues affecting not an individual clan but the wider Jat caste.

Malik had laid out in detail how encircling Delhi from various directions would unfold, and what its precise objectives would be. Since the city of Delhi is flanked by Jat-dominated sub-regions in multiple directions, a complete blocking of national and state highways, as well as local roads, leading into the city was critical. Cutting off Delhi's water supply by damaging the Munak water canal passing through Haryana was also discussed by Jat leaders. By carrying out these collective political actions, the Jats aimed to abruptly cut off the daily movement of people and goods, including essential items like milk, vegetables, and fruits, to Delhi. In their pomp, Yashpal Malik and other Jat leaders had declared that the *dilli gherao* would bring the BJP government to its knees (*gode tik jaeinge*). In a later panchayat, Malik announced that the proposed timing of *dilli gherao* was poorly thought-out as it was too close to the rice harvest in October, which was labour intensive and which most farmers could not miss. Moreover, matured rice crop is highly combustible, and thus requires constant supervision by the farmer and his

family. To avoid disrupting rice harvest season, the *dilli gherao* was postponed and took place in February 2016, when farmers were less busy.

While publicizing these plans of political action in maha-panchayats, Jat leaders invariably drew on the Jat warrior (*kshatriya*) tradition. They delved into the past of the khap panchayat, which is not only much elaborated in Jat caste literature, but is also part of collective memory. Specifically, Jat leaders narrated how their ancestors, whether in the sixth century (during the reign of King Harshvardhan), or in the twelfth and thirteenth century (during the period of the Delhi Sultanate), or more recently during the British period, fought against state injustices. Jat leaders glorified their status as fighters by eulogizing their participation in several righteous wars (*dharam yudh*) that had been fought in Jat-dominated regions of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Among the historic sites they mentioned in their speeches, Kurukshetra, Panipat, Baghpat, and Barout were the most prominent. They also shared local oral histories about khap panchayats which reached important decisions that were respected by nearby Jat clans and villages. In this way, the Jats portrayed themselves as patriots who have upheld and protected vast stretches of Jat-dominated lands which had only recently become part of the sovereign Indian state.

As noted by Bhardwaj (2012), the reliability of the historical narratives perpetuated by Jat leaders is dubious, but these histories have never aspired to be accurate by the standards of professional historical scholarship. Rather, they are deeply ideological and partisan, and their objective is to substantiate Jat political and cultural claims. Put another way, they aspire for legitimacy in what Chatterjee (2003) has called "the domain of the popular." Such histories are an integral part of the Indian political landscape and are published in various vernaculars in the form of pamphlets, magazines, newspaper columns, books, and other genres of writing. To my mind, what is critical is that Jats in Haryana have been thinking about their past in terms of kinship and territorial units like

tappa and khap, and have developed a shared memory of collective action undertaken by these units. Especially in moments of mobilization, Jat leaders summon these collective memories to reconstitute and reassert Jat authority.

Jat leaders also derived legitimacy for their plan of *dilli gherao* by framing it as a last resort. In other words, it was the only thing they could do after having exhausted all other options available to them. In doing so, they were countering a charge often made by BJP leaders who claimed that the Jats did not believe in the authority of the state and its rational-legal procedures, which determined which groups to include in the reservations system. BJP leaders had stated that the Jats wanted to take reservations by force. In response, Jats repeatedly described themselves as victims of state discrimination. For instance, they pointed out how two out of three backward state commissions set up by previous Haryana governments recommended their inclusion in the OBC category. They also cited a study by Maharishi Dayanand University that found that Jats as a group were socially and economically marginalized in Haryana. Through these arguments, Jat leaders created a much-simplified narrative—a narrative later relayed endlessly by Jat farmers—framing the cancellation of the Jat reservations quota by the judiciary as inaccurate and unjust.

Conclusion

In 2015-17, landowning Jats were seeking entry into the reservations system to gain access to a larger share of government jobs and seats in institutions of higher education. As I have described in this chapter, this campaign was part of a wider caste-based effort, led by various networks of the khap panchayat, to improve Jats' declining political and economic fortunes in Haryana's countryside. What do these developments tell us about India's political modernity and its caste politics? Many scholars study caste-based political mobilizations in India in terms of interest-driven politics. According to these works, democratic state institutions are prone to surrendering to the demands of electorally

significant caste groups, leading to crises of governability (Bardhan 2001; Kohli 1991; Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). While these analyses of postcolonial politics shed light on critical aspects of modern caste politics, I ask if there is a different way to think about Jat reservations politics without reducing it to solely political manipulation and/or making claims on state resources.

Chatterjee (2010:181-202) has noted that the bulk of scholarly literature examining politics in India relies heavily on assumptions borrowed from western political theory, for instance a sharp distinction between the conceptual domains of state and society. In the western framework, the state is viewed as either standing apart from society and implementing its agenda by modernizing traditional social institutions and practices, or as capitulating to the demands of powerful groups. To escape the confines of this framework, Chatterjee (2004, 2011) reflected on a field of practices mediating between state institutions and civil society. He views 'civil society' as an elite-inhabited arena constituted by formal legal-constitutional structures, whose functioning is based on abstract ideals like equality, liberal citizenship, deliberative procedures of decision-making, and non-violence. But in actual fact, as Chatterjee (2004:38) starkly puts it, "Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then, ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution." This is the domain of 'political society' where social groups maneuver, manipulate, or subvert government practices, policies, and categorizations, often in contravention of formal legal systems, to either gain or enhance access to state resources to secure their unstable positions. This gap, Chatterjee (2010:169) has argued, "is the mark of non-Western [political] modernity."

Anthropological studies have shown that politics in rural India is far more complicated than that (Michelutti 2007, Witsoe 2013). Specifically, it is not marked by a strict separation between institutional and popular domains of politics, nor between Chatterjee's civil and political society. While institutional politics (civil society) is structured around politicians holding elected office, the leadership of various

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political parties, state bureaucrats, and state-constituted commissions, popular politics (political society) encompasses struggles for local and regional power that are shaped by routine acts of violence and protest. A closer look at the diverse range of actors participating in Jat reservations politics, or what Shah and Shneiderman (2013) called "the social field of affirmative action"—Jat and non-Jat politicians, state-appointed commissions that evaluated Jat reservations demands, Jat farmers demanding reservations, village networks of the khap panchayat mobilizing them, rival caste groups— throws into sharp relief how institutional and popular domains of politics interpenetrate. This suggests that formal state institutions, especially in rural India, do not function autonomously, as they are, for the most part, embedded in local and regional structures of power. Networks of caste, including those manifest in village networks of the khap panchayat, link state institutions with locally powerful groups, thereby "blurring the boundaries" between the state and society (Gupta 1995:384). In this context, political issues like village elections and the inclusion/exclusion of social groups from the reservations system are not merely about choosing leaders or implementing politically neutral policies through which the state would impartially deliver its services to abstract citizens. Rather, they are critical in determining which caste group gets to control the village, as well as local and regional centers of power.

Conclusion

During the heyday of the paradigm of village studies, between roughly the 1950s and 1970s, the institution of panchayat was widely regarded as an important subject of analysis by anthropologists and sociologists of South Asia. It was believed that a focus on the panchayat—its various forms, functions, and compositions—could teach much about caste and its forms of power and subjugation in India's villages. Specifically, anthropologists were concerned with how the landowning caste (or, rather, a small nucleus of its caste elders called panch) wielded authority in the village in two intertwined ways: first, by framing village laws and customs; and second, by resolving village disputes and meting out justice (*nyaya*) (Cohn 1965; Dumont 1980). In addition to the panchayat of the landowning caste, other groups, especially the more populous Dalit castes, were also subjected to the authority of their respective elders who constituted what came to be known as 'caste panchayat' (Dumont 1980:167-183; Mendelsohn 1993:809-811). Broadly, caste panchayats functioned as self-disciplinary bodies supervising and regulating social conduct of its members bound by ties of kinship. In addition to these networks of panchayats in the village, anthropologists also examined the workings of Gram Panchayat, which, as explored in chapter three, is the formal development agency of the postcolonial state in the village.

Over the past decades, the institution of panchayat has been figuring less and less in anthropological scholarship. Why is that the case? Part of the reason has to do with the demise of village studies, and the concomitant sidelining of the village from much anthropological research (Mines and Yazgi 2010). That apart, the institution of panchayat is commonly regarded as one of the old features of Hindu caste society, whose foundations, many argue, disintegrated during the latter twentieth century due to forces such as the modernization of the postcolonial state and, more recently, the rapid expansion of private capital in the countryside. For instance, as early as the 1970s, Chakravarti (1975) recorded a

marked decline in the dominance wielded by the seigneurial Rajputs and their panchayat in village Devisar, district Jaipur, Rajasthan. For Chakravarti, two major state-led interventions, namely, the abolition of the *jagirdari* system (a form of landlordism) and the introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions, were responsible for it. Firstly, the abolition of the jagirdari system wrested surplus land from the Rajputs and redistributed it among peasant groups, and secondly, the introduction of Panchayati Raj Institutions gave rise to competitive political relations in the village. Chakravarti noted that the loss of economic and political power also undermined the historically constituted jural authority exercised by the customary Rajput-dominated panchayat. Likewise, in the 1990s, based on decades-long fieldwork in Behror, an Ahir-dominated village in Alwar, Rajasthan, Mendelsohn (1993) contended that the decline of land-based patronage (the jajmani system), along with the expansion of non-farm employment opportunities outside the village, has led to a de-linking of land and authority in rural India. This, according to him, loosened the economic hold of the landowning caste, which, among other things, also resulted in a downgrading of its panchayat.

In the same vein, in an article published posthumously, Srinivas (2003:455), the doyen of village studies, wrote "an obituary" of caste system as it historically prevailed in the village-based framework in India. Specifically, for Srinivas (2003:457), the rupturing of "subsistence economy bound up inextricably with castewise division of labour" was critical to the eventual death of caste "as a system." As these older features of caste declined, so did the institution of panchayat that administered over them. Similarly, Gupta (2005) has viewed the transforming character of the Indian village at the start of the twenty-first century in terms of economic stagnation of agriculture, outmigration from villages towards urban centers in search of non-farm employment, and more broadly, the decline of caste hierarchies. Against this backdrop of rapidly unfolding rural change, he argued that the old anthropological model of the Indian village must be revised. More recently, scholars like Manor (2010, 2012) have claimed that contemporary transformations have given rise to newer configurations of

caste, which are characterized less by land-based hierarchical dominance and more by geographically expansive horizontal solidarities (also known as caste networks) through which various caste groups compete for state power and resources. These works broadly suggest that the decline of historical logics of caste power, along with the expansion of postcolonial state's apparatuses of governmentality, and a greater penetration of the modern legal system, including government courts, have led to a reduction in the dominance of landholding castes, and a thorough disintegration of the juridical authority of the institution of panchayat in the countryside.

These points are well taken as they lay out the social and political ramifications of contemporary transformations transpiring in India's countryside. However, the precise affects of postcolonial transformations vary considerably from one region to another. As I have argued, various regions of India have had dissimilar histories of land tenure, which have, in turn, produced different permutations of caste power and subjugation. For instance, while forms of landlordism prevailed in what are now the states of Rajasthan, Bihar and West Bengal, the Jat-dominated region of northern India has been characterized by the figure of the peasant-proprietor. Furthermore, in postcolonial India, the project of land reforms and the introduction of Green Revolution have had uneven trajectories. In the context of Haryana, for instance, Judge (2001:118-136) has noted that postcolonial land reforms could not take off as long as the landowning Jats could manipulate tenancy laws against the Dalits with ease. Further, some states like Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh proved to be more suited for the introduction of Green Revolution technologies than others (Jeffrey 2010; Gupta 1998). Put simply, in light of such regional variations, broad generalizations have limited capacity in terms of capturing complex caste and agrarian realities in India's countryside.

As I have tried to illustrate in this dissertation, this argument that modernizing forces have undermined and obliterated caste power is overstated. Specifically, while it's true that caste hierarchies are not as

omnipotent and transparent as they once were, institutions that support them have evolved and adapted, rather than withered away. Though land in India is no longer capable of supplying what Srinivas termed "decisive dominance," its ownership nonetheless continues to be a marker of social and political status, especially deep in northern India's countryside. For instance, as shown in chapter three, landownership, coupled with usurious networks of village moneylending, function as critical resources for establishing a foothold in village politics. Moreover, the symbolic value of land—i.e., how land is perceived not merely as an economic entity but as part of ancestral territory of a lineage—has not lost its importance. Upwardly mobile landed families, for example, may sell off their farms to migrate to local urban centers, but their insistence on retaining ownership of a small plot of land, especially the ancestral house, shows how land is still an important signifier of their membership in a landowning lineage. And, despite a reduction in the land-based dominance of farming castes, their members tend to reproduce their power in the region through newer avenues, such as obtaining higher education and government jobs.

As I have argued, though the political, social, and jural authority of intra- and inter-village networks of the khap panchayat has also waned in the postcolonial period, they continue to be influential in Haryana's countryside, and are possibly also undergoing something of revival. Towards the end of this dissertation, I suggest that it is precisely in such moments marked by what Jeffrey (2010:49) has termed as "threat[s] to Jat power," produced by challenges to the agricultural economy, reduced opportunities for government employment, and political and economic gains by lower castes, that a reassertion of traditional Jat authority through the khap panchayat can be discerned.

In many ways, this dissertation can be viewed as exploring two phases of Jat power. The first is the historical aspect, where I examined how the khap panchayat emerged as a precolonial species of power, specifically, as multi-village frameworks through which a diverse set of values, practices, actors,

and institutions associated with localized forms of caste power and authority were stitched together. This included establishing control over ancestral land and its produce, the agrarian and artisanal labour of formerly subjugated castes, and the reproductive and productive labour of women. The ethnographic part of this dissertation then argued that though the khap panchayat has undergone a decline in the postcolonial period, its leaders nonetheless work to reproduce its powers across a number of connected spheres simultaneously and in mutually reinforcing ways. In chapter two, I have studied the shrinking jurisdiction of the khap panchayat, along with an increased reach of the state and its legal system, over Jat domestic disputes. In chapter three, I have examined how Jat patrilineages struggle to extend their political clout over the functioning of Gram Panchayat, as well as over its institutional links with higher level of government. In the final chapter, I have explored how Jat farmers' endeavours to invest in higher education of their children with the aim of getting salaried government jobs are thwarted by broader economic processes of neoliberal restructuring and state disinvestment, which have overall resulted in a markedly reduced opportunity of government work. In this context, I studied how the khap panchayat, and its leaders, tapped into a pool of economic dissatisfactions to demand caste-based reservations as a means to address and find a remedy for their declining statuses.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that while the role of the khap panchayat in the adjudication of domestic disputes and formal village politics has diminished, the institution in modern times has been largely reinvented as a political force. Specifically, the khap panchayat has successfully mobilized Jat farmers and organized public protests around issues that directly impinge on the question of Jat power in Haryana and neighbouring regions of northern India. The centuries-old institution of the khap panchayat is continuously recalibrating and adapting to modern forms of society and politics.

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