

POPULAR DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF CASTE

RISE OF THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES IN INDIA

Satendra Kumar



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This book examines the intersection of caste and politics in North India and highlights its contribution to the anthropological study of democracy. It argues that the long-term process of internalization of democracy within the caste body has fundamentally changed the workings of the Indian party system. Drawing on an in-depth ethnographic case study of the Gujjars, a marginalized caste group in India, the book presents a systematic analysis of the political mobilization and culture of political participation of the Other Backward Classes to understand why and how certain caste groups have been more successful in politics than others. It discusses various key themes such as popular democracy and the politics of caste, regional politics and territoriality, myth, legends and heroes in the Gujjar community, the transition from lineage deities to caste deity, and the (re)formation of caste-community identity. It reveals the symbiotic relationships between religion and caste and shows how religion shapes contemporary caste.

The book makes an important contribution to the study of marginalised groups and their politicization and fills a significant gap in the political sociology of India. It will be useful for scholars and researchers of sociology, history, exclusion studies, Dalit studies, political studies, history, social anthropology, and South Asian studies.

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CONTENTS

<i>List of tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Glossary</i>	xii
Introduction: The Caste View of Democracy	1
1 The Rise of Caste and Popular Democracy in North India	16
2 Caste and Region: Gujjars in Western Uttar Pradesh	32
3 Myth, Heroes and Hi(stories): The Re-imagining of the Gujjar Community	48
4 The Rise of Shri Devnarayan Bhagvan: From Lineage Deities to Caste Deity	63
5 Hero-Gods, Kings, and ‘Rebels’ in the Making of Gujjar Political Culture	78
6 ‘We are a Martial Caste’: Gujjars’ Understanding of Democracy	94
7 Conclusion: Caste and the Anthropology of Democracy	112
<i>Bibliography</i>	120
<i>Index</i>	132

TABLES

2.1 Caste Groups in Khanpur	41
6.1 Political connections in Khanpur	95
6.2 Political participation in Khanpur	96

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GLOSSARY

adhikari	commonly used for a government officer
Ahir	caste of milkmen; a subcaste of the Yadavs
Ambedkar	main architect of the Indian Constitution and Dalit leader, a Mahar by caste who fought tirelessly for Dalits' rights
arya samaj	Hindu reform movement started by Dyanand Sarasvati
Bania	caste of shopkeepers and traders
barat	bridegroom's marriage party; marriage procession of groom's party to bride's village
bigha	approximately 1/5 of an acre in Khanpur
BJP	Bhartiya Janata Party, a Hindu right wing party
Brahmin	caste of priests
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party, a Dalit party that was set up in the early 1980s
chaddar	sheet or covering
Chamar	caste of leatherworkers, former untouchables, often grouped with the Jatavs
chulha	cooking hearth; by extension, a household, the people who eat food cooked at the same hearth
chunri	head shawl; presentation of gifts to bride's family
dhaba	inexpensive road-side restaurant
dharamshala	place for short stay either free or with minimal charges. These places are widely part of public culture and built by a caste or a group of caste members
dhoti	large piece of cloth tied around the waist and drawn up between the legs
diwali	festival of lights that marks renewal
dwija	twice born
gali	narrow lane
ganges	holy river for Hindus
ganges snan	holy dip in the Ganges in the month of Kartik (the lunar month matching with November)
ghar	house, women's quarters

GLOSSARY

gher	men's quarters with cattle
gram pradhan	village leader
gram sabha	village council
Gujjar	pastoral caste of cattle rearers
halwai	sweet makers
holi	festival marking the transition to spring
hukka	large free-standing pipe, the smoke is drawn through water in the base
izzat	prestige, family or personal standing or status
jajman	patron
jajmani system	system of economic exchanges characteristic of rural India involving landlords and patrons
Jatav	caste of agricultural labourers, former untouchables, often grouped with Chamars
jati	caste group, in the sense of a local kin network within which marriages are arranged; to be distinguished from <i>varna</i> , one of the four classes described in the classical texts
kauravs and pandavs	two rival groups of descendants of two brothers from the Mahbharata epic
khandan	family, a group of relatives linked through the male side, a lineage
kisan	peasant, cultivator
kotwal	police officer
kunba	extended family
lok sabha	the lower house in the Indian parliament
mohalla	neighbourhood
mukhia	head of a caste or village
Nai	a caste of barbers
neech jat	lower caste
nyaya	justice
OBCs	Other Backward Classes, para-cultivators, groups associated with traditional services and artisanal occupations. The OBCs in India comprise low-to-middle-ranking poor pastoral-peasant and labourer castes, including many artisan-service castes, the majority of whom live in the countryside.
pakka	cooked, boiled; perfect; strong; finished; made of brick (house)
pradhan	leader
SCs	Scheduled Castes, an administrative category of castes traditionally held to be untouchable
shakhas	physical training camps run by Rastriya Swam Sevak Sangh, a militant Hindu organization
sifarish	influence or recommendation
STs	Scheduled Tribes, an administrative category of tribal groups
tehsil	administrative unit of a district; county

GLOSSARY

updeshaks	volunteers of arya samaj
Upper Doab region	plain between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers
Yadav	a caste of milkmen
zamindar	landlord, person responsible for paying ground rent to the Government

INTRODUCTION

The Caste View of Democracy

This book is a tale of hope and despair. By focusing on caste and its engagement with politics, the book provides a systematic examination of what popular politics looks like at the local level. It takes readers into the urbanized rural landscape of western Uttar Pradesh, and shows how the people of marginalized groups understand and rework democracy by using their economic, cultural and social resources, and imaginations. This is a story of making, (un)making, and (re)making of both caste and democracy. I begin with a caste meeting. In February 2014, a powerful Gujjar leader named Narendra Pradhan called a caste gathering in Mawana¹—a small mofussil town, in western Uttar Pradesh (UP), which is an epicentre of the Gujjar caste—to express solidarity with the ongoing Gujjar agitation in Rajasthan demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for their community. Hundreds of people from villages across the Meerut district gathered at the Mihir Bhoj Gujjar Chowk (intersection), stopped the public transport and created traffic jam. Narendra claimed that his call for Gujjar unity was received well and brought his community people out at the spot to stage a protest.

“We want to put pressure on the central (federal) government so that our community rightfully gets its due. We want ST status and we support the ongoing agitation in Rajasthan and across India”, said Narendra Pradhan. Though Narendra is a member of the Samajwadi Party (SP), he says the protest is apolitical in nature. “It is a protest of the Gujjar community in Meerut district who are spread over 200 villages. In the coming Lok Sabha (2014) elections Gujjar community will vote the political party which supports their demands”, he said.

After the meeting I joined two of my Gujjar friends (Rajkumar and Manoj) over a tea at the roadside *gumati* (shop) in the main bazaar of Mawana town. It was about a month before the general Lok Sabha elections. While I was flipping through the pages of Amar Ujjala, the local Hindi daily, the chai-walla and two of my Gujjar friends started an animated debate about the Gujjar caste meeting-cum-rally and upcoming elections. I have known the chai-walla Mahkar Gujjar (54 years old) since 2004 when I started my field research in the area. In the preceding 12 years, I had regularly returned to this field site and spent eight months there between 2012 and 2014. Mahkar asked me if I had attended the meeting and if there had been a good turnout. I said that the event had been quite a success.

Rajkumar (32) interrupted and pointed out that Narendra is a good leader but he is with the Samajwadi Party (SP) which has turned into a Muslim Party. “He has little chance of winning in this area ... since the SP is against Hindus”, he added.

Manoj (46) commented, “This time Gujjars will vote for Modi. Modi is a good leader. People will vote for development. He will change UP. You will see. Modi will convert the state of UP into America in few years”.

For about ten minutes, they took turns criticizing what they called the “Yadav and Muslim Raj” (the rule by Yadavs and Muslims) in UP, the level of impunity that a number of local politicians ‘enjoyed’ and the fear that the Samajwadi party workers-cum-goons were creating in the area.

Manoj again commented, “Ordinary people are fed up with the Samajwadi Party government. In Mawana, I saw by my eyes the way SP party workers had beaten shopkeepers and grabbed properties. I often found that Narendra was leading these party workers-cum-goons. More importantly, the SP has been transformed into a Muslim Party and cared for Muslim interests only. Muslims have become nuisance in this area. Gujjars are not happy about it”.

This conversation continued for a while. I listened it patiently. After some time, I intervened and asked, “So are you going to vote for BJP next elections?”

They denied this clearly. “Of course not, we will vote Narendra Pradhan whichever party he contests”.

I was a bit puzzled. After about an hour of criticism about the failure of the SP government, I assumed that they will show their preference towards the BJP since Narendra Pradhan is alleged to be involved in ‘criminal’ activities in the area. ‘Why?’ I asked.

The unanimous reply was, “*Narendra apani biradari ka hai. Vah hamari naak hai*”, which literally means ‘Narendra is a Gujjar like us and he is our nose’, which means Narendra is our honour. “Without our caste leaders we are nothing, even if we appreciate Modi, we will vote for Narendra Pradhan. Without caste leaders who will help us? Who will protect us?” Security and honour emerged as big issues before and during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in western UP, particularly in the wake of Muzaffarnagar riots.² While the main focus of this study is the pre-2014 political scenario of UP, particularly from early 1990s to 2010s, it also sheds light on how the politics of marginalized caste groups created space for the post-2014 politics when the BJP and its Hindutva captured the national politics, including the western UP region. Further, it also shows despite the emerging Hindutva identity and the BJP, a section of marginalized caste groups has remained loyal to their caste-based candidates and caste based political parties.

Caste and Democracy: Emergent Politics

This ethnographic encounter frames the research question of this book on the study of caste and politics and its contribution to the anthropological study of

democracy. Set in the northern Indian towns of Meerut and Mawana, as well as in a village named Khanpur, and their urban-rural neighbourhoods of pastoral-peasant Gujjars, this book explores the various avenues through which Gujjars assert their identity, create new histories, and engage with electoral processes.

Caste and politics generate instant interest among public as well as political commentators. Moreover, caste and politics has been a recurrent theme in the anthropology of India and a huge body of literature is available on it.³ From the 1950s to the early 1970s, anthropologists, together with political scientists and sociologists, produced a wealth of literature exploring how the new logics of democracy were shaping caste (Jodhka 2006; 2014; Michelutti 2019). Concepts such as ‘dominant’ caste, ‘vote bank’ and Sanskritization (Srinivas 1959) and ‘vertical and horizontal mobilisation’ (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967) were developed in this period. This body of literature suggested that Indians vote in groups and they were not voting as individual(s). Most of the times group is ‘caste society’ or ‘tribal society’ or a religious group and that means Indian democracy was producing particularistic ideas of ‘the people’. Despite this, Michelutti (2019: 200) underlines that ‘the specificity and varieties of caste sovereignties and their fluidity and changes, and the role of the individual remained largely ethnographically under-explored’. There has been a lack of contextual and regional studies on caste politics, particularly from the below. As Jodhka (2006) pointed out, the literature on the subject was still deeply anchored in a macro-analysis of electoral politics or studies of caste associations, which talked about caste in general terms and failed to grasp the ways the interaction between caste and politics was experienced differently by different castes and in different localities. Following this line of argument, Michelutti (2008) takes a lead by studying the Yadavs in Mathura, a north Indian town, and shows the ways in which Yadavs engage with modern democratic politics in the region. I follow this lead in this book and examine the ways in which Gujjars, a semi-agriculturist-middle caste, engage with and perceive democratic politics in Khanpur, Mawana and Meerut in western UP. Using Michelutti’s insights into the theories of divine descent, I interpret Gujjars’ political mobilization in a regional context. Studying politics in a local setting has provided fruitful results. Spencer persuasively argues that there is a need to re-focus attention on the ways in which democracy is perceived and reworked in different socio-cultural and religious settings (Spencer 1997; 2007; Michelutti 2008; Kumar 2013).

After the 1970s, anthropologists show little interest in studies of local politics due to the global shift from colonial to post-colonial rule (Spencer 1997). However, at the end of the 1990s, there had been a general revitalization of political anthropology, as anthropologists attracted by the phenomenon of caste mobilization and Hindu nationalism once again returned to the study of Indian politics at the local level (see, e.g., Hansen 1999, 2001; Ruud 2003; Gorringer 2005; Ciotti 2010 Shah 2007; Doron 2008; Michelutti 2008; Witsoe 2013; Banerjee 2014; Kumar 2018; 2019). Importantly, this new literature draws attention to the everyday lives and political struggle of marginalized groups. The present

book contributes to this emerging literature and critically looks at how democratic ideas and practices are perceived, experienced, and reworked among historically marginalized caste groups of the Indian society. It is in this intellectual context that I explore dynamics between caste and democratic politics in a regional context and show how caste has become a modality of conceptualizing and asserting collective identity and the struggle for parity and social justice. Further, I show the ways in which democratic imaginations and practices took socio-cultural root among a community of Gujjars in western UP. Focus on these processes informs the ongoing changes in the structure of Gujjar caste or community, particularly how ordinary Gujjars imagine Gujjar community and how they engage with politics and political leaders. This focus sheds light on regional politics and its relationships with national and local political processes, and brings out weaknesses and strengths of democracy in an Indian context.

Deepening Democracy: Political Rise of the Marginalized

The measuring rod for political modernity has been democratization, understood not simply in the sense of conforming to the formal, legalistic, and institutional principles of democratic rule, but in assessing whether politics was indeed freely and equally accessible to every citizen; and whether politics performed its task to spread the benefits of the modern liberal world to each and every segment of the populace. Such as universalistic approach, while certainly having its importance, has by now gone beyond any reasonable limit. Furthermore, most importantly, theories of democratization have tended to focus on the macro-level explanations of ‘transition’ and ‘consolidation’ that stress the roles played by institutions and elites (Linz and Stepan 1996; Schmitter & Sika 2017). Further, there is also a growing concern about the decline of democratic institutions and fall of democracy, particularly in India (Chowdhury and Keane 2021; Chotiner 2019; Patnaik 2014). However, this focus on ‘institutional factors’ do not pay attention to ‘the practice and ideas of local people’ which locally legitimate or do not legitimate democracy and practices associated with it. In other words, how a particular group of people, which is defined by a caste identity, engages with democracy and (re)makes it. This has been a weakness of the studies on institutions which have provided accounts of only one side of the process. This book aims to redress this lacuna by focusing on the ways in which democratic ideas, imaginations, and practices become embedded in particular regional, cultural practices, and, in the process, entered the consciousness of ordinary Gujjars. More specifically, this book is about the ways in which, and to what extent, democratic ‘ideas’, imaginations, and practices have taken root in socio-cultural practices of marginalized groups in the western UP region, north India, and to what extent marginalized groups have been shaping democracy and democratic politics in India.

Despite the economic rise of India, people live with poverty and high levels of illiteracy, along with religious and ethnic heterogeneity. Thus, according to the

conventional and liberal theories of democratization, India would not be conducive for democracy to grow and succeed. However, despite these apparent challenges to democracy, since the first election in 1952, India has not done so badly and it has witnessed uninterrupted democratic rule, with some exceptions, in competitive multiparty system in which power has been peacefully transferred from one party to another on a regular basis. Ruling parties have accepted their electoral defeat and helped to strengthen the institution of Election Commission. However, the recent rise of Hindutva authoritarianism has questioned the ‘success’ of Indian democracy. This rise has divided political commentators along ideological lines across India and across the world. This study of marginalized and stigmatized groups’ engagement with democratic ‘ideas’ and practices may also shed light on the recent political developments in India.

In this growing political ambience, the commitment to the ‘idea of democracy’ on the margins calls for a study into why and how democracy comes to be accepted and legitimated in the popular consciousness, if this is so. Through the exploration of the relationship between the regional, the ‘cultural’, the ‘political’, and the ‘democratic’, this book uncovers the processes through which democracy gains legitimacy among a historically stigmatized and marginalized community which today has become a significant political force in western Uttar Pradesh region: the Gujjars.

The Gujjars were traditionally a low-to middle-ranking cluster of pastoral-peasant castes and have become one of the most assertive and politically powerful caste formations in Uttar Pradesh. Importantly, their political leaders (Hukum Singh and Malook Nagar in Uttar Pradesh; and Rajesh Pilot and Sachin Pilot in Rajasthan) have acquired a pivotal role in mobilizing Gujjars and similar caste groups. Through the lens of caste, this book shows what the Gujjars have done to ‘the idea of democracy’ (Khilnani 1997: 15) and how democracy has changed the socio-cultural world of Gujjars beyond the domain of electoral politics.

Over the last three decades in North India, the political rise of lower castes or marginalized communities was termed a ‘silent revolution’, which dramatically transformed the Indian political scenario at all levels (Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2008; Kumar 2018). As a result, leaders of marginalized groups have formed new political parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Apna Dal and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP). These new political parties draw their major support from marginalized groups. Their main demand is caste representation and ‘social justice’, and in their political propaganda ‘democracy’ is often thought of in narrow terms relating to caste-community socio-economic upliftment (Khilnani 1997; Chatterjee 2004). However, this case study of the Gujjar shows that local political participation is not only driven by economic but also by symbolic interests. In other words, the politics of social justice is not merely confined to redistribution but also intertwined with a claim of national building or historical contribution to the

‘nation’ or ‘desh’. Therefore, this study attempts to create a dialogue between the politics of social justice and nation building. By describing and illustrating that democratic practices such as voting, contesting elections, participating in election campaigns, organizing political meetings, this study shows how direct or indirect ways of getting a share of state resources and as ways to maximize power are interwoven with issues of honour or *izzat* of caste, family, and the rhetoric of nation building. This pattern is not exceptional to the Gujjars, but reflects a more widespread trend across UP. Michelutti (2008), for example, shows the ways in which the Yadavs are likely to vote for Yadav politicians on the basis of their ability to connect people with the state. Similarly, Chandra (2004a), in her study of the Bhujan Samaj Party in UP, demonstrates how people are increasingly likely to vote for politicians who are able to benefit their voters through state resources. Thus, politics has become a vehicle for upwardly mobile people, particularly for the status and material gains that political office can obtain. Furthermore, this study goes on to show that the material and the symbolic are closely connected and are shaped by each other in regional politics.

This book documents and examines the ways in which Gujjars think they are political leaders, warriors, and belong to a martial race. Ordinary Gujjars believe that they have natural skills ‘to do’ politics, and they often traced back their political qualities and the political craft to the Gujjar patron deity, Shri Devnarayan Bhagavan and medieval and ancient kings. The book shows that, in Gujjar political rhetoric and imagination, Devnarayan is depicted as a God-cum-democratic politician who fought for ‘social justice’ and against ‘social evils’. In the everyday domain it is increasingly clear that the use of caste, descent, and religious idioms or an obsession with group identity shows how the political actors in Indian politics are not modern citizens but rather groups such as castes, tribes, and communities (Michelutti 2008; 2019; Tambiah 1997). This understanding of caste and politics not only has a colonial but also a pre-modern genealogy in which ‘past’ and ‘present’ inform and shape each other with seamless narratives. While the colonial governmentality strengthened ‘caste’ and community-like formation, it also facilitated the conditions under which different groups of Indian could participate in the political processes (Appadurai 1981; Cohn 1987; Bayly 1999; Kumar 2018). At the same time, these processes were also shaped by the religio-cultural myths, folk knowledge, and political discourses prevalent in a community life. Colonial rule and its state practices transformed many castes and sub-castes into larger communities (*samajs*) in which internal hierarchy was flattened, endogamous marriage rules abandoned, and the idea of united, numerous and pan-Indian ‘imagined communities’ created. The combination of everyday socio-cultural-mythical memory anchored in the caste cosmology and colonial state practices produced today’s modern caste-communities which were also refashioned by caste associations in terms of *samajs* or cultural discrete identities (Kumar 2011; Natrajan, 2011).

The colonial legacy and premodern imaginations continue to shape post-colonial Indian society and polity. A policy of reservation was introduced to uplift the historically marginalized groups—former untouchables (Scheduled Castes, SCs), the tribal groups (Scheduled Tribes, STs) and Other Backward Classes, (OBCs)—by reserving quotas in government jobs, higher education, and in the legislative assemblies. This reservation system immensely helped marginalized groups to achieve upward mobility in India, which has been one of the most hierarchical and unequal societies. Along with the intended consequences, the reservation policy also had unintended consequences such as a group rights, rather than individual citizen's rights, becoming the guiding light of politics and democracy in India—this has created a new dynamic between caste and democracy beyond electoral politics. Gradually, the increasing focus on group rights has created a tension between individual rights and community rights.

Therefore, in modern India, the Constitutional recognition of the collectives rather than if individuals has made categories like caste, tribe, religion, and ethnicity open to endless political manipulation, manoeuvring and possibilities. This book shows the political use of caste is deepening democracy among all sections of society, in particular among the marginalized. However, the outcome of this use is unpredictable and contextual. Thus, the dynamics of Indian democracy challenge many prevailing theories that stipulate preconditions for the working of democracy, particularly liberal democracies which have been idolized, idealized, and universalized. Emerging scholarship from global South and post-colonial societies provides a complex critique of liberal democratic political theories and points out to their unsuitability for understanding the development of the Indian state (Chakrabarty 2000; Kaviraj 2000; 2001; Michelutti 2008). Focusing on the subaltern or 'marginalized',⁴ Chatterjee (2004) draws attention to the coexistence of two domains in Indian society: 'civil' and 'political' society. While 'civil society' represents modernity and is governed by modern notions of citizenship, 'political society' is the site in which the traditional comes to terms with the practices and ideas of modern politics and where negotiations and struggles between the state and populations take place and oppose it.

The study of Gujjar politics in this book shows the ways in which caste practices bridge relationships between community, state, and society (Gupta 1995; Brass 1997; Fuller and Harriss 2000; Michelutti 2019). In particular, this book shows the ways in which ordinary Gujjars rework democratic values and practices in their everyday life which is neither 'modern' nor 'traditional', but rather popular. In these popular and everyday spheres of society, I explore the relationship between caste, religion and democratic politics and shed light on the contradictory nature of Indian popular democracy driven by caste imagination. In the western UP region, contemporary ordinary rural and village life is neither 'modern' nor 'traditional' but shaped and informed by each other in the domain of everyday living (Kumar, 2018).

The changing nature and structure of caste has been well documented in village studies. Very early on sociologists have recognized ubiquity of caste (Srinivas 1962: 41). Ordinary social and political life, even today, is run by caste in Khanpur and its rural-urban neighbourhoods. While caste is still viewed by many as obsolete, as institutions from a 'past' and as synonymous with 'backwardness', caste becomes acceptable for many when used in politics. Among the marginalized, mobilized by caste associations or '*samajs*', caste is accepted as a readymade 'democratic' category. Thus, today's caste is a product of democracy as much as democracy is a product of caste.

The modernists believed that caste is a vestigial organ and will disappear with development of modern institutions. However, post-independence modern political leadership, despite its sincere efforts, has failed to eradicate caste and caste-based inequalities. Yet, modern politics propagated the idea of political equality and this idea of equality has made inroads into the everyday lives of ordinary people across India. This book shows that the idea of equality continues to enchant ordinary people in the Indian hierarchical society. Despite widespread inequalities ordinary Indian people work towards equality and freedom through democratic means such as voting which has, and is, promoting the political use of caste and its social reinvention into *samajs*. The shift from 'caste' to '*samaj*' or caste as ethno-cultural group has been described as the 'substantialization of caste' (Dumont 1980: 226–27) or as 'the ethnicisation of caste' (Barnett 1975: 158; see also, Fuller 1996: 22; Michelutti 2008: 105). Not being static, the caste system has seen a gradual change. These changes are reflected by the substitution of the term 'caste' with the term *samaj*, which refers to community or cultural group (Mayer 1996: 59; Kumar 2011; Natrajan 2013). This reconfiguration or transformation of caste into *samaj* has created a new churning in democratic politics. This book shows that when an institution like *samaj* enters into democratic politics, it renews political and democratic imaginations. By this process, the dynamics between caste and democracy produces new social relations and values which in turn help democracy to make space further into society and culture. The entry of caste into democratic politics as *samaj* has produced contradictory effects. It has ruptured the linear path of modern, liberal, democratic politics.

The colonial period was very fertile for the caste system in India. During the colonial period, caste associations gained strength and continue to play important role even in post-independent India. The political role of the caste associations was a point of academic discussion in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, Rudolph & Rudolph (1967) described the spread of caste association as an expression of 'the modernization of tradition'. The Kayastha, Brahmin, Bania (Agarwal) and Rajput caste associations emerged as big platforms for community reforms, articulating their political interests. These caste associations were described as 'paracommunities' and expressions of civil society which contributed significantly to the success of Indian democracy by providing bases for communication, representation, and leadership. Modernization theory, based

on the assumption of linear evolution, described caste as ‘traditional’ and assumed that as long as caste-like ‘primordial’ sentiments were confined to private life, the modernization and democratization process would continue to deepen. Most of the literature produced on Indian politics, in general, comes within an overall narrative of modernization. Thus, modernist thinkers and post-colonial leadership considered caste as an aberration and were waiting for caste to either disappear or be secularized (Sheth 1999; Beteille 1991). Such was the influence of modernization theories on Indian political studies which needs critical examination.

The political ethnography of Gujjars in this book, however, shows a different picture. Gujjars in Khanpur, Mawana and Meerut did not have to transform their caste and caste associations into ‘secular’ institutions in order to enter and succeed in the political field. They continue to use whatever was available to them in terms of cultural and material resources along with adopting and reworking ‘ideas’ and ‘practices’ of modern institutions such the Indian Constitution and democracy. For Gujjars, the politicization and *samajikaran* of their caste are not separated from the ‘private’ sphere, but are, rather, closely intertwined. This overlapping between private and public explains why ‘democracy’ has entered the Gujjars’ political imagination through their cultural resources, which are shaped by ideas and practices of territory in regional politics. At the core of the Gujjar community lies an everyday understanding of divine connections, according to which all Indian pastoral castes are said to descend from Bhagavan Devnarayan who is an incarnation of the God Vishnu. Gujjar processes of *samajikaran* in the kinship domains have been accompanied by the adoption of higher forms of Hinduism and a gradual substantialisation of the Gujjar god; Devnarayan (God Vishnu) has progressively become the main god as well as the main ancestor. This transformation of the Gujjar *samaj* is linked to Devnarayan (Vishnu’s avatar) as a ‘substantial deity’ who helped the Gujjar community, from different parts of the country, to interact with one another horizontally. This shows that such ‘horizontal’ mobilization and interaction are shaped by a religious ethos. Gujjars’ genealogies are replete with divine and religious origin. These popular descent theories are discursive and are retold as public truth within families and communities in everyday life in Mawana and its rural areas.

Gujjars in everyday discourse constantly relate themselves to the higher religion and gods such as the God Vishnu and his kingly incarnations, which regulate their relations with other castes, particularly with the ex-untouchables such as Dalits who had been below the pollution line. The pollution line divides castes between those castes which can claim ‘clean origins’ from the untouchable castes (Kumar 2018: 39). The religious imaginative connections with higher gods, with a sense of *sanskritization*, not only shape Gujjars’ everyday relations with Dalits and other low castes but also the macro-level political alliances between Gujjars and members of the Scheduled Castes. Thus, the religious idioms, social memory, and imagination of religious origin not only shapes the

relationships between Gujjars and members of the Jatav community, but also frames the discourse which depicts the descendants of Devnarayan (the God Vishnu) as carriers of ‘political’ knowledge by the very fact of their divine origin and their blood line with the ancient kingship.

In Uttar Pradesh today, each caste-community is busy to setting up hi(story) connections which have gained extraordinary importance, particularly in relation to the rise of Hindu nationalism (Pandey 1990; Pollock 1993; Davis 1996; Michelutti 2008; Chaturvedi 2014). Print media becomes the basis of these hi (storical) claims as it provides a viable option both for the consolidation of as shared identity as well as its communication. Increasingly, social media has also become a medium of new caste hi(stories). Circulated by the right wing, these hi(stories) with a twist have gained wider acceptance and popularity on social media. Emerging print and social media have challenged historical objectivity in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult to separate myth from history. This amalgamation of myth and history has been systematically promoted by right-wing organizations in the name of recuperation. This book shows how this emerging amalgamation of myths, memory, and history has a lot to do with democracy itself and, in particular, with ‘Indian democracy’. In post-colonial India, democratic politics opened up an arena for all Indians to rewrite their own histories. Using their cultural resources, along with new technologies, marginalized communities have been rewriting their ‘history’ by re-imagining their past and identities. Thus, this book tries to show that in order to make sense of the emerging ‘new’ histories, attention should also be paid to the ways in which ordinary people relate with deities and gods and their descent from, and kinship with, them (Michelutti 2019). This goes beyond the ways the traditional religious ideology of hierarchy has been manipulated by a so called ‘egalitarian’ and ‘democratic’ religious ideology of descent and lineage.

This focus on the Gujjar understanding of democracy through the lens of caste not only sheds light on the complex relations between caste identity politics, religion and democratic politics but also helps to explore more specific aspects of everyday political life; for example, the working and the making of political leaders and the effectiveness of particular political styles. This approach also has the potential to throw light on the everyday dynamics of what Chatterjee has described as ‘the dark side of political society’ (2004: 75). Literature in political science has not gone beyond rational choice theory; little attention has paid to how caste violence, criminality, and local political violence are legitimized on the ground and received by ordinary people. Following Chatterjee, I argue, this is partly because ‘the heart of political society’ is not only the streets, parks and neighbourhoods, but other domains of life (for example, villages, small towns, fairs, and idioms of gender and masculinity). In this book I show the ways in which villages, small towns, sacred sites and popular religion are the realms in which democracy becomes part of the caste body, and, in the process, generates new social values which also come to legitimize everyday political violence and corruption. This explains why, in the

everyday and ‘popular’ domains of democracy, some people silently support muscular politics and why they vote for *dabang* (strongman) politicians. Most importantly, why do some people appreciate authoritarianism?

The emergence of local strongmen and caste violence has been coupled with the rise of popular democracy over the last three decades (Singh 1997: 635; Bardhan 1998: 133; Michelutti 2008: 198; Kumar: 2019: 55). The strongmen style politics has become order of the day. Michelutti (2008; 2019) shows how the non-elites so called ‘backward’ Yadavs changed the language and practice of politics by creating new patterns of authority in Mathura. In similar ways, in Mumbai, Hansen (2001) shows how the deepening of democracy has created different patterns of authority and established a muscular class of politicians who do not rely on ‘traditional’ ideas of respectability and practices of clientalism and patronage. Following these works, the case study of Gujjars in this book shows how new discourses of manhood, respectability and authority are developing in the western UP region and how they, in turn, legitimize the authority of *dabang* politicians. I analyze the growing appreciation for authoritarianism or the *dabang* style of leadership at local and regional level.

While the Indian Election Commission had attempted to make election process transparent and appealed to political parties not to give tickets to criminals, the results of past several Lok Sabha elections (2004, 2009 and 2014) shows that the criminal–politician nexus has been thriving (Vaishnav 2017; Kumar 2018). Gujjar political ethnography shows how and why some people legitimize their support for allegedly criminal politicians and attach positive values to criminal politicians. In this book I try to show how muscular styles of politics are historically and culturally part of the western UP region and how some people consider these political styles attractive. On the one hand, the appeal of *dacoit* Sultana or Sunder Gujjar to *dabang* politicians is linked to the prospect of getting material benefits from state, on the other hand it also reflects a desire to become heroes by deploying the imagination of the extraordinary. Ordinary people often look for leaders or persons who can get their work done in government offices or help people in their day-to-day matters, such as admission to school or to hospitals. In these searches, strongmen leaders come in handy around the village or neighbourhood. Strongmen politicians are often seen as ‘saviours’ of their caste members and protectors of the poor people. This line of thinking underlines that attention should be given to ordinary people’s perception of their leaders. This will enrich our understanding of the phenomenon of the politicization of criminals in Uttar Pradesh and help to understand why and how *dabang* politicians are so successful in Uttar Pradesh. More importantly, it shows the ways in which participatory democracy is seen as a vehicle for upward mobility and for gaining legitimacy in a highly unequal society.

Marginalized groups in UP have successfully inserted themselves into the political process at the local, state, and national level and gained political office at various levels. Political participation enabled marginalized caste groups, to

some extent, get state resources previously inaccessible to them. Often their politics is allegedly ‘violent’ and ‘corrupt’. However, disadvantaged caste-communities continue to show their faith in the Indian Constitution and political processes and uphold democratic institutions that have been advanced by liberal democracy. Marginalized communities infuse new energy into democracy by drawing on to both liberal democratic ideals as well as the cultural and material resources available to them.

Methodology

Meerut district in UP was selected as the primary field site for the purpose of this study because of the predominance of the Gujjars. The Gujjars are numerically strong in certain parts of Meerut, such as Mawana, and control its economic resources. The district of Meerut is a part of Upper Doab/Western UP and plays a pivotal role in the economic, social, and political spheres. In economic terms, the western UP region is considered prosperous because of its large-scale production of sugarcane and horticulture. In recent times, the sport industry, as well as the scissors and meat industry, has made the district economically vibrant. Meerut has become the educational hub in the region. The social composition of the district is as diverse as the other districts in UP with different caste groups (upper, other backward classes and schedule castes), tribes, occupations, and rural-urban linkages.

In addition, fieldwork was carried out in Khanpur, a village, primarily to capture Gujjar caste politics and their relation to caste deities. Fieldwork was also carried out in Ghaziabad and Noida which also are pivotal in the manoeuvring of Gujjar political aspirations. Fieldwork in Meerut and Ghaziabad consisted of participating in caste-related activities, such as caste gatherings, caste association meetings, and numerous Gujjar caste-related activities.

This work is a combination of ethnographic, historical, and sociological methods. By devising a checklist and after snowball sampling, semi-structured and informal in-depth interviews were conducted with ordinary Gujjars, political leaders, village leaders, government officials, and local historians (including caste genealogists and intellectuals). It also draws on a variety of other sources, including local newspapers, official publications, caste literature, political party publications, books, and household surveys.

More specifically, the material for this book has been gathered in the course of various field visits in the western UP (Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Ghaziabad and Noida districts), and Delhi area. I lived in Meerut for six months and another six months in the village of Khanpur. During this course of stay, I spent plenty of time in Mawana and Hasitanapur on different occasions such as caste meetings or political rallies. Both Mawana and Hasitanapur are at the centre of the Gujjars’ political and religious activities along with Meerut and Ghaziabad.

The main fieldwork for this work was done in two stints (2004–2005) and (2013–2014). Thus, this study mainly focuses on the pre-2014 UP politics. The

first stint fieldwork was done for my PhD thesis and in the second stint I updated my previous data. I also conducted additional fieldwork in Meerut, Mawana and Khanpur for other projects including comparative elections studies in 2009, and youth entrepreneurs in Meerut in 2012. For this book I sought to understand the difference between the everyday reality of democratic government and its abstract image by looking not only at the historical genealogy of Indian vocabulary of democracy, but also studying what was happening at the limits of the conventional political arena at the local level.

The combination of multi-site ethnography along with archival research enables this book to show how Gujjars reinterpret and rework democracy on the one hand by using their religious and regional views of caste, local notions of person hood, popular understanding of ‘the past’ and ‘the political’, and, on the other, by drawing on the Indian intuitions of democracy and practices associate with it. In other words, indigenous idioms have significantly contributed to the internalization of democracy in Gujjar consciousness and, in turn, the internalization of democracy has informed changes in the structure of their caste-community, in terms of their devotion to god and support to political leaders. By examining kinship, caste understanding of the past and hi (story), popular religion, and leisure activities, this book sheds light on the political imaginations and practices of Gujjars in contemporary India.

The Gujjars of Meerut, Mawana and Khanpur educated me throughout my fieldwork through their imaginative political strategies, manoeuvrings, claims and demands. I learnt that the back door story is as important as the front door, or even more since politics and ‘democracy’ have entered the lives of ordinary people from both doors. Hence, in Meerut and Khanpur to study politics through the method of ethnography meant both to observe and listen carefully in different contexts but most importantly pay close attention to rural and cultural imagery, which is the key to understand everyday politics in a regional context.

Structure of the Book

The argument in this book is cumulatively constructed throughout the six chapters.

Chapter 1 describes the socio-historical and economic trajectories which led the processes of internalization of democracy into the caste body in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I pay special attention to social, economic, and political transformations over the three decades. I argue that low-caste politics did not spring out of nowhere in the 1990s in Uttar Pradesh and across north India, but rather are linked to long-term processes of the internalization of democracy in the caste body which have changed the working of the Indian party system—from single dominant party to multi-party system. Caste played important role in changing the Indian political system. The chapter looks at the links between identity, caste consciousness, and democratic practices and illustrates the dynamics behind the appeal of caste in contemporary politics.

Chapter 2 maps out the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the political ethnography of the Gujjars has been conducted, namely in western Uttar Pradesh (Upper Doab), Meerut and nearby towns and villages. On the one hand the chapter highlights the importance of historical topographies (like the land of Gujjar kings or Gujjar territory) and of socio-cultural spaces (like gang activities) in shaping the formation of the local Gujjar community, and on the other, it describes the neighbourly relations and everyday politics of the locality.

Chapter 3 seeks to explore Gujjar caste historiography. I show how Gujjar caste ‘historians’ and associations re-write their histories by re-interpreting their past, thereby claiming their place in the national history. By these processes the Gujjars not only assert their caste identity and fight against the stigma of a ‘criminal tribe’ but they also mobilize their *samaj*/community into democratic politics. When aligned with contemporary ethnography, this mytho-historical exploration reveals how important idioms of descent, relations of blood, and religion are in the creation of a Gujjar community and in the internalization of democratic ideas and practices.

In Chapter 4, I document and describe how Gujjars worship and who they believe to be their ancestors and deities. In the recent past, the Gujjars of Khanpur and its surroundings would worship the *kuldevis/kuldevtas* located in their courtyards, agriculture farms and the region. However, this has changed over a period of time. The new Gods have taken over older Gods. More specifically, in the last three generations there has been an evident shift from lineage deities to caste deities which helps to bind Gujjars together as a socio-political community.

Chapter 5 explores the relationships between hero-gods, rebels and democratic politics. This shows how muscular, pastoral hero-gods are localized in the Gujjar political arena. Hero-gods, ancient and medieval kings, and rebels are used to legitimise Gujjar political leaders, their muscular and violent political style, and their roles. By relating Devnarayan Bhagvan, the medieval king Mihir Bhoj and rebel Sundar Gujjar to the modern democratic political world, Gujjar political rhetoric appeals to contemporary Gujjar political interests and, at the same time, helps the formation of an all-India Gujjar community. Gujjar writers and leaders use the idiom of ‘religious descent’ and kingly past to create links of ‘blood-substance’ between Gujjar hero-gods, kings, rebels, Gujjar contemporary political leaders, and ordinary Gujjars. Gujjar political rhetoric presents relationships between the past and present seamlessly and brings together gods and humans on one platform.

Chapter 6 shows how the popular understanding of politics and democracy is successfully deployed and performed in the politics and is simultaneously used to reinforce a sense of Gujjar *samaj* through religious kinship and descent with hero-deity, Shri Devnarayan Bhagvan. This shows the organizational ability of caste associations and of political parties, which not only shapes ideas of what the Gujjar *samaj* is and what democracy is and should do, but also promotes

the pursuit of power as a way of getting economic benefits from the state. This reveals the ways in which imagination of kingship, sense of caste territory, and democratic rhetoric are intertwined and shaped by each other.

The concluding chapter reflects on the political ethnography of Gujjars in Meerut, Mawana, Khanpur and their neighbourhoods. The chapter shows how democratic rules and imagination have been internalized, reinterpreted, and deployed in contemporary Indian politics. This process is not unique to the Gujjars. Across India, for example, people share a common popular democratic language draws its symbols from geographic/territorial cosmology, everyday kinship and religious practices, ideas of kingship, masculinity, legends, nationalism, ideas of justice and the modern Indian Constitution. Democracy becomes internalized through popular ideas and available cultural resources, and then acquires different meanings, agendas, and interests according to the castes, communities, movements, and political parties that use and reinvent it. I argue that the dynamics between indigenous idioms of politics and global democratic discourses and practices have been key in making democracy part of the Indian political imagination and informing the political rise of historically marginalized groups such as the Gujjars.

Notes

- 1 Mawana is located 25km north of Meerut city. The town is the tehsil and block headquarters for neighbouring villages.
- 2 The clashes between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh in August–September 2013, resulted in at least 62 deaths including 42 Muslims and 20 Hindus and left more than 50,000 people displaced. The riots communalized the entire western UP region and led the rise of the BJP in UP and across India. The riots also resulted in the electoral defeat of the SP in the 2017 assembly elections.
- 3 Srinivas (1962); Bailey (1963); Lynch (1969); Beteille (1969); Fox (1969); Kothari (1970); Robinson (1988); Frankel and Rao (1989). A huge literature is available on caste and politics and I cannot cite the whole body of literature here.
- 4 Subaltern and marginalized are not synonymous. However, I prefer to use marginalized through the book.

THE RISE OF CASTE AND POPULAR DEMOCRACY IN NORTH INDIA

In modern Indian history, particularly in post-independent India, the development of the Indian politics and party system can be understood and discussed in three stages. In the first stage (1951–1967) Congress dominated the political landscape across the country. The second stage is defined from 1967 to 1993, and it is termed the Congress opposition system (Yadav 1997). This is the period when the new political forces started taking shape. During this period, Congress faced lots of opposition at state and regional levels where new forces were emerging. In the third stage, which started in the early 1990s, the Indian political system changed from a system dominated by a single party to a multiparty system. This shift changed the political scenario not only at the regional level but also, in the longer run, at the national. Regional parties began to assert themselves by mobilizing voters from lower castes—this was the strength of the regional parties. At the same time, this period also saw the rise of Hindu nationalism and the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist party which was in office at the national level for much of the time from 1996 to 2004 in coalition with regional parties. The rise of Hindu nationalism (Hansen 1999) and the political mobilization of lower castes/classes (Kumar 2018) overlapped in the late 1990s and 2000s. The rise of these two different but overlapping electoral constituencies has created a great revolution in the Indian political system.

The political rise of the Other Backward Classes and lower caste which is the focus of this book has been called the ‘second democratic upsurge’ (Yadav 1997) and ‘Silent Revolution’ (Jaffrelot 2003). Political anthropologists have shown that, by the early 1990s, ‘democracy’ had taken socio-cultural roots in North Indian society (Michelutti 2008: 10; Hansen 1999). Democratic ideas and practices had fertile ground among lower castes and produced new social relations and values which changed the political and politics at all levels. Khilnani (1997) described, ‘the democratic idea has penetrated the Indian political imagination and has begun to corrode the authority of the social order and a paternalistic state’ (ibid.: 17). The idea of *loktantra* or *janata ka raj* touched the heart and mind of ordinary people. Most importantly, the idea of democracy or *janata ka raj* (rule of the people) also affected the ways ordinary Indians viewed

themselves in society and how they related to each other beyond electoral politics. In everyday life, ideas and the rhetoric of democracy entered into day-to-day conversations in such a way that underlined the people were living in a new political order in which ordinary people could elect their political representatives.

The entry of the 'lower castes' and the rise of lower caste political parties not only changed the socio-political composition of state legislative assemblies but also of national politics and the Indian parliament. This reflected the ongoing transformations in the socio-cultural and economic structures of society. This rise of caste-based political parties and the development of caste populism in the 1990s was encouraged by different interconnected social processes. By focusing on the relationships between caste and politics I look at the ways in which the vertical unity of caste weakened, including changing patterns of local authority. I also pay attention to patronage politics and the *samaj*-like formation of castes. By describing the ongoing changes in the state of Uttar Pradesh, this chapter introduces the political scenario in which by the 2000s the Gujjar had gained political power and become politically visible in western UP.

Changing Power Structures

As mentioned before, after independence Congress dominated federal government and most of the state governments. During this period, the party formed an alliance of different caste groups, religious communities, and lower and upper castes. Since the Congress party emerged through the freedom struggle, it had developed mass support across the regions. In the early 1950s, the Congress had a well-developed organizational structure from village to district, provincial and regional levels and to the national level. During the colonial period, it worked as a pressure group to defend the interests of the middle classes, the majority of whom came from upper castes who were also the first beneficiaries of modern education. It was hoped the educated middle class would provide leadership during the freedom struggle. However, the arrival of Gandhi changed the Congress party and, in the early 20th century, it became a mass movement. Despite this change, the party retained an elitist structure, and Congressmen were hardly interested in articulating the interests of lower castes, particularly of the OBCs. The leadership of the Congress party, with few exceptions, from local to national levels, came largely from upper castes.

In the early years of Independence, anthropological and political studies described the political organization of Congress and the modalities through which the electorate was mobilized at the local level. Very early on, Bailey's study showed that in Orissa the middle castes and the common people were linked by political brokers and their networks (1963: 11–12). Bailey highlights the existence of an important divide between the core and the periphery of the Congress party. He showed the ways in which the provincial party units had a large degree of autonomy. Provincial units were financially independent and, importantly, they provided patronage through the state machinery. Mayer (1960) in Central India and the

studies of the Congress party in Uttar Pradesh conducted by the political scientist Brass (1965) highlight the ways the Congress party by the 1960s had built an organization that was dependent on 'big men' who linked local people with the state and extended state benefits. Michelutti (2008) in Uttar Pradesh shows that the exchange of offices and jobs and access to public resources are the primary tools for mobilizing electoral support. In the early years of independence, the Indian State came to be perceived as a 'patron' who was expected to provide jobs, money, permits, and so on.

These exchanges of offices and jobs and access to public resources are termed by Chandra 'patronage democracy' (Chandra 2004; Michelutti 2018; Martin 2019). In Uttar Pradesh, the studies of Brass (1965) and Michelutti (2008) show the ways in which 'the lower castes' had quickly come to master the Indian democratic political game and used district and local politics to maximize their interests. These are the ways in which the language of party politics very powerfully entered the everyday life of villagers and began to change the local rural structures. This further dominated the urban neighbourhoods of Uttar Pradesh (Michelutti 2014; 2018).

Since Independence, Indian society has been going through gradual changes. These changes have been documented by anthropologists working across regions. Land reforms, together with the competitive processes of electoral politics, impact of education, reservation policies, and implementation of the 73rd Panchayati Raj Act, opened up political spaces for historically marginalized castes and communities and changed the power structure and patterns of authority across the country. A study of the village of Andhra by Robinson (1988) illustrates how people at the local level stopped voting along vertical lines of mobilization by the early 1970s. Robinson explains this shift as a reflection of changes in patterns of local authority and the political rise of landless people (ibid.: 248). Another study in rural Andhra Pradesh shows similar dynamics in a village (Price 2006). According to this study there have been marked changes in the patterns of authority in rural Andhra Pradesh. Similarly, in rural Gujarat, Breman (1996: 262) shows that the idea of inequality has lost its social legitimacy in post-independence India. Thus, all these studies show that there has been a shift from vertical to horizontal political mobilization which reflects changes in patterns of local and regional authority and power structure.

In their studies of Rajasthani villages, Mendelsohn (1993) and Singh (2016) present similar line of arguments. Mendelsohn illustrates how ideas and practices of representative democracy among other things have delegitimized 'the moral economy of the old order' (1993: 818). For example, he shows how the position of the untouchables in the studied Yadav village has substantially changed. Mendelsohn argues that 'if there has been a significant stiffening of resistance on the part of the untouchable as a general phenomenon throughout India, then this can only reflect a major change in the structure of authority' (ibid.: 808). The old *jajmani* system weakened and gave way to the interests of

the horizontal community. Further, Singh (2016) shows the ways in which Dalits have undermined the upper and middle castes, working in cities in the non-farm sector jobs, and asserted themselves during the elections. Mendelsohn (1993) argues that the political role of ‘the dominant caste’ was questioned very early on in the 1950s when the concept of dominant caste was developed by Srinivas (1959). Anthropologists have documented the ways in which in the last 50 years, many dominant castes have lost their ‘traditional’ power at the village level but they have gained extra strength at the state and regional levels (Kumar 2018; Martin 2019). Generally, these castes were historically and numerically strong, with extensive land resources, which enabled them to affect the electoral system in post-independence India. Simultaneously, new dominant castes have emerged—such as Yadavs and Kurmis in Bihar and Jats and Gujjars in Uttar Pradesh—which reflect a continuum between changes of the local political structures and changes at the state level of politics.

The ongoing political transformation changed caste dominance at the village levels in other states also, such as Uttar Pradesh. However, the upper caste continued to rule at the state level. From the early 1950s, the Thakurs of UP started participating in the new electoral politics of India at the very time that they began to face political challenges at the village level. For a time, the Thakurs and the Brahmins were able to exert a high level of dominance in the ruling Congress Party. However, the situation changed gradually after 1967, when electoral competition increased among different parties, bringing a dramatic shift. Bihar also underwent a similar political transformation. In the late 1960s, the increasingly powerful opposition of the so-called backward classes changed the political landscape in the states of UP and Bihar. And ‘new’ dominant castes, such as Yadavs, emerged.

New dominant castes (Yadavs and Gujjars) used their ‘numbers’ which are crucial in electoral politics. Increasingly, political parties mobilized support from castes through both identitarian and developmental appeals. There is a common-sense understanding that caste members will vote en bloc for a candidate of the same caste, either in pursuance of the decision of the caste *panchayat* or of the caste association; the selection of the candidate for a constituency is based on whether she will be able to get the support of a particular caste or different castes; and finally, when a single caste is not likely to be effective, alliances are formed on caste basis by the candidate or by the voters (Beteille 1969; 1996). Recently, Michelutti (2008; 2019) illustrated when and how people vote for caste-based candidates and parties and, conversely, the ways in which political parties appeal to caste cleavages. According to Michelutti, the patterns of voting are closely related with caste and party patronage.

However, in the electoral process, limitations of caste have been pointed out by various scholars. The numerical strength of a caste can only be effective when it has the organizational ability. Dipankar Gupta challenged the assumption that political success in India depends primarily on the caste composition of the individual constituencies (2000: 149). According to him, the organizational ability of caste is more

important than its numbers. In the following sections, I will pay close attention to Gupta's argument and will explore it through the lens of Gujjar ethnography. Gujjars have great organizational ability and draw on the historical and cultural resources available to them. During the fieldwork, I observed during the election season that conversations are rife with speculation about numbers of a particular caste. Caste leaders always forecast greater numbers than exist in reality. Thanks to their populations and numbers, lower castes and so-called OBCs have gained political prominence. The Gujjars in western Uttar Pradesh and NCR, the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the Lingayat and Vokkaligas in Karnataka, the Nayars and the Ezhavas in Kerala, the Jats of western UP, Rajasthan and Haryana, and the Reddis and the Kammas in Andhra are a few examples. However, in the case of Gujjars, more than numbers their organizational skills, along with economic resources and culture of masculinity and violence, have helped them gain ground in the regional and democratic politics. The disintegration of *jajmani* relations changed local patterns of authority and allowed the horizontal political mobilization of marginalized castes. Importantly, a growing consciousness of the Indian Constitution and the rule of law provide caste groups with the language and ideas of equality that have not only changed relations between lower and upper castes but also within caste groups. The rhetoric of equality has created political aspirations among the marginalized. Political processes started a century ago in the British period have transformed castes into larger communities which are popularly known today as *samajs*. After independence electoral politics, based on numbers, has further consolidated caste groups into *samajs*. These ongoing changes have, in turn, influenced power structures at the local level and developed new political leadership (Michelutti 2008). The processes of horizontal mobilization of caste, particularly of the OBCs have, changed the political landscape across north India.

For instance, Hansen (2001) has pointed out a new type of leadership in Mumbai. His study of Shiv Sena in Mumbai shows a shift in local ideas of authority. He points out that by the 1980s, 'India's democratic revolution gradually undermined the idiom and practices of patronage' (ibid.: 72) and that

in Bombay of the 1980s, the strongman style of politics enjoys a long history in Bombay and other Indian cities as a popular model of authority and power, acquired new prominence as a style of public and political conduct as *Dadaism*.

(ibid.: 72)

This highlights the way in which the old authority has given in to the new type of leadership and authority over the last three decades (Witsoe 2011). In Uttar Pradesh, Michelutti (2008: 182–183) shows how in the town of Mathura, a similar transformation had occurred and a *goonda* style of political culture emerged around the concept of 'self-respect' and social justice.

In the chapters that follow, I show how in the village of Khanpur and towns like Mawana similar transformations have occurred and a *dabang* ('strongman')

political culture has emerged around the concept of ‘self-respect’, social justice and caste honour. A combination of desire for self-respect and recognition, ideas of honour and a share in the state resources are the major drivers for voting for caste-based political parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Apana Dal (AD) as well as for legitimizing local muscular styles of politics.

Uttar Pradesh: Politicisation of the ‘Backward Castes’ and the Rise of Hindutva

The state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) with its population of 200 million and one-sixth of the Members of Parliament (MPs), occupies a central place in national politics (Census 2011). At the same time, Uttar Pradesh is considered one of the most socio-economically ‘backward’ states. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, 80 of the total 543 seats were in UP. Besides its national political importance, UP is the site where lower castes are most effectively challenging the upper caste political domination. Simultaneously, it is one of the states where Hindu nationalism has been most highly supported throughout the 1990s. Hasan (2000) wrote, ‘conflicts between castes and communities are played out in U.P. will influence the course of democratic politics in north India and after the ways of wresting and sustaining political power at the national level’ (ibid.: 148). While the Hindutva brigade attempted to integrate and assimilate backward castes into the larger Hindu identity, lower caste political parties tried to challenge the traditional Hindu hierarchy by asserting caste identity and propagating politics of social justice. By asserting caste identity, however, the low caste political parties and leadership could not bring much needed structural changes.

The politics of UP can be viewed in three phases. In the first phase, which lasted from Independence to the late 1960s, the Congress Party dominated the political arena of UP by forging a formidable coalition of higher and lower castes (Brahmins, Muslims and Scheduled Castes or Dalits, formerly derogatorily called ‘Untouchables’). Its leadership was generally monopolized by the higher castes who had control over blocks, village *panchayats* and cooperative institutions (Brass, 1965). The upper castes remained politically dominant for a long time because of the patterns of ownership which allowed them to consolidate their power during the colonial time and retain a considerable influence despite the land reforms in 1947. ‘Until the early 1970s, the upper-caste Members of Parliament (MPs) represented more than 50% of the North Indian MPs as against less than 5% for intermediate castes and, at the maximum, 10% for the Other Backward Classes’ (Jaffrelot 2000: 86). However, in 2000, the social composition of the Indian Parliament changed and the number of the OBC MPs increased (Verniers 2014).

In the second phase, land reforms and the Green Revolution, along with the policy of positive discrimination, brought prosperity to the middle castes such as Yadavs, Jats, Kurmis and Gujjars, and prepared them to challenge Congress

domination. The famous ‘bullock capitalists’, who were generally smallholders and not members of the dominant landowning class, were given a political voice by the Kisan movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Hasan (1998) has demonstrated that the agriculture policies favourable to richer landowners, however, did not satisfy them, and a broad section of the middle and backward caste peasantry in UP felt excluded from democratic politics under the rule of the Congress Party (*ibid.*: 134). Middle and backward castes such as the Jats, Kurmis and Yadavs developed a feeling of social and political discrimination in the allocation of public-sector employment. Leaders of these caste groups alleged that Congress had not given them proper representation. It seems that upper caste domination over the Congress leadership blocked political change and the democratization of political office that was desired and needed at that time.

Consequently, the political expression of the broad grouping of OBCs, particularly of Jat farmers, and the consolidation of the power of its wealthy rural leaders, had to wait until 1967, when Charan Singh resigned from Congress in frustration at the policies and practices of the party leader CB Gupta (Byres 1988; Jaffrelot 2003). Charan Singh subsequently launched the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) in 1969, Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD) in 1974 and Lok Dal in 1980 (Duncan 1988; 1997; Hasan 1989: 180; Saroha 1999). The results of the 1969 elections in UP showed the first instance of change in political choices of voters who shifted towards new forms of horizontal coalitions and vertical alliances between landlords and low castes began to be weakened (Brass 1985: 131; Michelutti 2008: 26).

Gradually, after 1967, the Congress party organization became more and more centralized. Having developed a fear of losing and facing challenges from the opposition, Indira Gandhi adopted populist policies and campaigns. Her slogan about abolishing poverty gained enormous popularity. That helped her to win elections. Indira Gandhi’s Congress won with a massive margin. Indira Gandhi revived the socialist project that her father had attempted to implement as a political technique to assert her authority. However, Indira faced widespread unrest in the country, across the states. While left and socialist movements emerged in West Bengal, peasants rebelled against the oppressive system of landlords in many parts of the country. Bihar became the centre of a politics against corruption and mismanagement. The government tried to suppress these movements in Bihar and other states, and in 1975 it imposed the Emergency. Several opposition leaders and activists were jailed. Simultaneously, the Congress government began the implementation of land reforms, the abolition of bonded labour, the prevention of tax evasion, and special benefits for ‘weaker sections’. By implementing these programmes, the government intended to portray itself as pro-people and tried to legitimize the Emergency.

Soon, Indira Gandhi was convinced that her government was doing great work and people were happy. Following that understanding, in 1977 she called for parliamentary elections which defeated her government and a coalition of

the Janata Coalition (Congress (O), Jan Sangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal, and Socialist Party) emerged victorious. Following that, the Congress party also lost legislative elections in north Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, in 1978. However, it returned to power when the Janata Coalition started to have internal fights with factions and *guts* (cliques) which led to its dissolution and parliamentary elections in 1980 which brought Congress back into power.

Gradually, by the early 1980s, Congress began to convert into an electoral machine. Political support was no longer gathered from below and a top-down style was adopted. Party workers at the state level, along with district and local levels, were neglected. Conflicts between landowners and cultivators got sharper. Clashes between upper and lower castes were on the rise because of the association of politicians with criminals and the entrance of the latter into politics (Brass 1997: 308). The criminalization of politics became widespread. In the coming years, several political leaders with criminal record gradually entered the Indian Parliament and state assemblies. Along with the criminalization of politics, the politicization of other domains of the state such as police, bureaucracy and courts also took place. Recently, media has become highly politicized, which has a large bearing on democratic institutions. At state and local levels it became increasingly difficult to separate the police force from the party workers. In many instances, party workers took over the police. Michelutti (2008: 32) describes the relationships between the police and politicians. She emphasizes that control over the police become a critical matter for district-level politicians and it becomes quite difficult to understand local politics in North India without understanding the linkages between criminals, politicians, and the police (ibid.: 39). During my fieldwork between 2012 and 2014, the Samajwadi Party government was accused the police of being 'Yadavised'. Similarly, during the BJP government it was alleged that the police either Brahminized or Thakurized. Caste had not only changed the Indian political party system but also the composition and nature of police and bureaucracy, and thereby the state. Caste has played very important role in state formation in post-independent India (Witsoe 2013).

In the 1980s and onwards, the Punjab faced a tough time. A series of events culminated in the assassination of Indira Gandhi, which earned the Congress party huge sympathy. Consequently, this sympathy wave helped Rajiv Gandhi win the national elections. However, it was not easy for Rajiv to resolve the emerging contradiction in Indian polity and economy. The biggest challenge faced by Rajiv was how to integrate the socialist economy into the growing liberal economy being pushed by the western countries and their institutions, such as International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite his sincere efforts to reform the economy, he failed and Rajiv was accused of corruption. Within the Congress Party leaders started dissenting and a huge internal opposition developed. V.P. Singh came out in the open to challenge Rajiv.

In the 1980s, the Indian countryside also grew restless. Farmers across the country started facing a decline in agricultural income which gave birth to the

New Farmers' Movement (NFM). The NFM mobilized farmers across the country and challenged the Congress Party. The mobilization of middle castes/dominant castes such as Jats and Marathas forced the Congress Party to accept their demands of higher prices of their crops and lower costs of inputs such as fertilizers. The Congress Party was left helpless when faced these regional forces in the form of *Bharat*. Gradually, these movements and new economic developments shifted power from the centre to state and regional leadership, which brought the OBCs and middle castes onto the national political scene.

This was the time when the politics of both Mandal and Mandir mobilized the OBCs, albeit in different ways. Initially, the backward castes were mobilized by the Janata Dal (JD) party by deploying the language of social justice and caste representation. The JD claimed the socialist legacy and presented its socialist-like manifesto, which emphasized social justice and promised the backward classes reservations in education and government service. Simultaneously, the Ayodhya *Ramjanmabhumi* movement organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization related to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), changed the Indian political landscape forever. The RSS, VHP and BJP's aim was to mobilize Hindu identity against the threats posed religions like Christianity and Islam, who were alleged to be involved in forced conversion and the mission of proselytization. The RSS created the anxiety in a section of society that these religions will obliterate the identity of Hindus and their birth place. This commonly held understanding was supported by social media and IT cells of the BJP and RSS.

The RSS began with the Ayodhya and *Ramjanmabhumi* and mobilized the Hindu voters by tapping into their religious anxieties. The *Ramjanmabhumi* movement led the decline of Congress party in Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s and onwards. At the same time, the electoral success of the BJP in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed the ways in which the BJP party organization changed and used identity politics in Uttar Pradesh. The Sangh Parivar developed identity politics and communal forces to such an extent that, in 1992, the BJP state government facilitated the RSS in the demolition of the Babri *Masjid*, which was then followed by widespread rioting between Hindus and Muslims. At the same time, the Janata Dal state government (1989–1991), led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, consolidated its power base by extending reserved places for backward classes in state educational and public services (Hasan 2000). Surprisingly, the demolition of the Babari Mosque and the ensuing communal riots did not bring the expected results for the BJP and, in the 1993 UP assembly elections, the BJP lost to a coalition of non-Congress parties. While the non-Congress political coalition (the SP and the BSP) won power, fights over the control of public resources generated conflict between the SP and BSP and the coalition collapsed in June 1995. For many who had been familiar with local rural structures across UP, it was not a surprise collapse since the two communities (members of the Scheduled Castes and Yadavs) had been engaged in a violent conflict over land, wages, and issues of dignity in the villages (Kumar 2018). In the aftermath of

this, the BJP supported the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit based party, to form a state government and this new coalition attempted to control the OBCs' political rise. In the 1996 national elections, the BSP and the SP continued their upward march as strong political forces in UP. Since 1995, the BSP has held power at the state level four times and, in 2007, the BSP formed the government with a large majority. However, the BSP failed to repeat its spectacular 2007 victory in the 2009 and 2014 Lok Sabha, and 2012 and 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections, which not only puzzled Indian media and political commentators but also shocked its sympathizers.

In the fourth phase of UP politics, which started with the 2014 national elections (followed by 2017 UP legislative elections), the future seemed to belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its new socio-political coalition of non-Yadav OBC groups, non-Jatav SCs and upper caste voters. This fragile political coalition of the extremely backward (non-Yadav) and *Maha* [very] Dalits (non-Jatavs) with upper castes was again reflected in the outcome of the 2019 national elections despite an alliance between the SP and BSP. Whatever the future of the BSP and SP, their rise has changed lower caste politics and their political aspirations forever. From the early 1990s to 2014, the rise of the SP and BSP not only transformed local power structures but also brought many caste groups, including the Gujjars, into mainstream politics, which is the focus of this book.

Political commentators and scientists hailed the rise of the lower caste as a new politics which had the potential to bring structural change in power relations and social values. According to Yadav (1997: 175), 'A future historian may remember the three rounds of assembly elections held in sixteen states from November 1993 to March 1995 as having ushered in a new phase in democratic politics in India', that is, the entrance of the OBCs into politics. In the last 30 years, up until the 2014 national elections, the political landscape of Uttar Pradesh has been characterized by the emergence of 'backward castes' as major voters in opposition to the so-called 'upper caste'. Political parties such as the Apana Dal, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party mobilized the lower strata of society against the upper castes by demanding a greater share of political power and national resources. However, these parties also diluted their agenda, from time to time, by oscillating between politics of social justice and *sarvasamaj*. For instance, in 2007, the BSP re-structured its electorate focusing on *sarvajan* instead of *Bahujan* and brought Brahmins into its fold. Similarly, in 2012 the SP also diluted its 'backward politics' while wooing upper castes and corporate capital. The SP started playing with the symbols and icon of Parshuram, the emerging god of the Brahmins. Both parties have paid a heavy price for their shift.

Despite all these oscillations and turns, the backward castes such as Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhs and recently Gujjars have been active protagonists in the so-called Backward Classes movement, termed the 'silent revolution' (Jaffrelot 2003). While the Jats have been at the front of non-Congress mobilization, by the

1990s Yadavs and Gujjars of Uttar Pradesh had also gradually inserted themselves into political processes at the local, state and national levels. Initially, it was during the 1960s, as followers of Charan Singh, that the Yadavs and Gujjars entered the State Assembly of Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, the rise of the OBCs is the rise of the Jats, Yadavs and Kurmis (Jaffrelot 2000; Verma 2005). Gujjars have been late comer and could make public and political presence only in the late 2000s and early 2010s when the neo-liberal reforms picked up and urbanization of agricultural land benefitted the Gujjars in western Uttar Pradesh and NCR (National Capital Region) immensely. The number of Gujjar MPs and MLAs steadily increased from the 1990s. Up to 2014, Gujjars and other 'lower castes' have made their votes even more effective, thanks to their organization and the development of electoral majorities based on caste and community, which seem to still matter.

The Political Rise of the Other Backward Classes

After independence, the Scheduled Castes (former untouchables) and the Scheduled Tribes (tribal groups) were given reserved places but the identification of the Other Backward Classes was not made. While the question of identifying the Scheduled Castes and Tribes was settled before independence, the category 'other backward classes' became a residual category. In the early years of independence, the Kalelkar Commission was constituted to identify who are the backwards and what characterized 'backwardness'. However, the federal government rejected its recommendations by pointing out that the commission had failed to apply other criteria such as income, education, and literacy in determining backwardness. The recommendations were never discussed in parliament.

After this rejection, the Yadav caste associations, along with All India Backward Front, began to lobby the government for the adoption of the caste criterion for determining the status of the OBCs. The Yadavs played a leading part in the Other Backward Classes' movement. While Jats took a role of farmers' politics, the Yadavs took a different route and led the All India Backward Classes Federation. The All Indian Yadav Mahasabha (AIYM) is a caste association which was founded in 1924 to promote Yadav interests at the all-India level (Michelutti 2008: 31). Very early on, at its annual conferences in the 1960s, the AIYM began to pass resolutions and demanded the revival of the caste criteria. Further, the AIYM demanded the implementation of the recommendations of the Backward Classes Commission (Rao 1979: 157). The AIYM criticized the government for not discussing the Backward Classes Commission's report. The AIYM campaigned for the implementation of the Commission's recommendations and for the revival of the caste criterion for determining 'backwardness'. The All India Backward Front submitted several memoranda to central government regarding the implementation of the caste criterion for determining backwardness (Verma 1998).

In the following years, different States formed various Commissions to develop a means to identify who are the 'backward' castes. In 1978, a Backward Classes Commission was formed and B.P. Mandal headed the Commission. The Commission reported 3,743 castes as 'backward', over 52% of the Indian population. For this, the 1931 Indian Census was used to extrapolate their number, since after the 1931 Census the British stopped using caste categories. Since there were no caste censuses or surveys regarding the OBCs demographics, obviously, the search for 'backward' castes was not a straightforward process.

The JD government, headed by V.P. Singh in 1990, implemented reservations for the OBCs. The entire country boiled and upper caste youths protested against the reservations. The upper caste students burned themselves in a sign of protest. Yadav student leaders along with other OBCs student supported the reservations. The Yadav caste publications of the period praised the move and hailed B.P. Mandal as their messiah. The latter has become one of the legendary personalities of the Yadav community and he is praised in Yadav caste literature. In 1999, the All India Backward Front and the AIYM resolved that the portrait of B. P. Mandal, the messiah of the backward classes, should be placed 'in the Central Hall of the Parliament without any further delay' (Michelutti 2008: 33). Recently, Samajwadi Party's youth associations, such Yuvjan Chatra Sabha, have started celebrating his birthday along with V.P. Singh, the late Prime Minister who created the Mandal 'revolution' by implementing the Mandal Commission Report.

The ongoing politics of reservations also inspired Jats to join the politics of social justice. After the death of Charan Singh in 1987, *kisan* politics declined. Jats felt left out and joined the politics of social justice. Most importantly, *kisan* politics was taken over by Mulayam Singh Yadav, claiming the legacy of Charan Singh as his foster son. Though the real son of Charan Singh (Ajit Singh) assumed control of the Lok Dal, Jat politics gradually shrank to the western UP districts. Realizing the limitations of Jat power and politics, paired with agricultural decline, the All India Jat Mahasabha and Jat Aarakshan Committee launched a move, in 1995, to be included in the OBC's list in Uttar Pradesh and the central list. After a couple of years, the BJP government in UP included Jats into the state OBCs' list in 2000, which created huge unease among the Yadavs and Gujjars who felt that Jats would take the lion's share. This has affected the equations in UP's political scene, and has created new political coalitions.

The Rise of the 'Backward' Caste Parties

The implementation of the Mandal Commission reports brought the OBCs to the national scene and they entered into national politics. So far, OBC politics have had different manifestations at State levels, such as the *kisan* politics or son of the soil politics. The formation of the Samajwadi Party consolidated

OBC politics in Uttar Pradesh. The Samajwadi Party (SP) was founded by Mulayam Singh Yadav in 1992. It emerged out of a series of defections from Janata Dal and gradually emerged a political force in Uttar Pradesh. Mulayam Singh Yadav, who was a follower of Charan Singh in the 1960s, was elected as an MLA for the first time in 1967 on the ticket of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD), a party lead by Charan Singh. Mulayam Singh acknowledged Charan Singh as his mentor on many occasions. However, Mulayam Singh oscillated between the *kisan* and socialist politics and later on credited his success to his mentor Rammanohar Lohia whose writings on socialism and politics are acknowledged as a major source of inspiration. Lohia is considered as one of the few political leaders who early on in the 1960s and 1970s recognized the political potential of the horizontal mobilization of the lower castes on issues of social justice. Lohia favoured caste mobilization over class polarization. Lohia was one of the first who articulated the policy of reservation on the basis of caste for the OBCs. He constantly pushed that Shudras should be mobilized into politics and should be given positions of leadership.

Following the socialist legacy, the Samajwadi Party's rhetoric focuses on 'the common man' and the 'ordinary people'. It targeted the Backward Castes and mobilized them on caste lines. Muslims and backward castes have been the main supporters and voters of the party. Following the caste mobilization strategy, the Samajwadi Party mobilized Muslims also on caste lines. Among Muslims, the SP draws its strength mainly from backward Muslim castes like the Quershi or Qusaabs, Safis and Gaddis. The party has put a political coalition of castes together. Each caste has its own identity and demands political representation according to its numbers. Thus, so far the OBCs have not been able to emerge as a political category at ground level. However, there are moments when different caste groups come together in the name of '*shudras*' or 'backwards' against upper castes or 'forward castes'. These categories are very dynamic and keep mutating in each electoral season.

While in the early formative years of the SP, Mulayam Singh made a special effort to portray the party agenda as designed for the poor; later on he attempted to recruit support from the 'forward' castes. This strategy was also followed by his son, Akhilesh Yadav. In the 2012 assembly elections, Akhilesh Yadav, the president of the SP allotted 26% of seats to upper castes. From 1998, the SP started wooing upper castes by putting them into important positions in the party organization. Most famously, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the SP tried to woo Thakurs by giving a platform and recognition to All Uttar Pradesh Kshatriya Mahasabha, an association that brings together castes which claim Kshatriya origins. The SP made sincere efforts and went a long way to bring upper castes into its fold, and has finally become like any other party, working on electoral reasoning.

The 2007 manifesto illuminated the party's specific social targets. The SP's political agenda was framed in the following manner: the party stands for equality and prosperity for everybody; it is against communal forces; it believes

in democratic socialism and it opposes the uncontrolled entry of multinational companies to India; it believes that agriculture and small-and medium-scale industry are the backbones of the Indian economy, and hence every assistance should be given to these sectors. Most interestingly, the party almost stopped presenting itself as essentially a party of farmers. In particular, when Akhilesh took over the SP, the focus shifted from farmers to businesses and multinationals. While Mulayam Singh portrayed himself as an 'ordinary' man, from a modest background, who has achieved personal success, Akhilesh became a symbol of neoliberalism which supports aggressive capital. This also created a shift in the SP's electorate—a general shift. While Mulayam continued to attract men from modest background and first generation, Akhilesh emerged a leader of neo-liberal India. A significant number of youth across castes backed Akhilesh. He has been portrayed as a youth leader in UP.

Despite the SP's appeal to the poor and backwards, the Dalits have been excluded from its organization and electorates. The party further excluded the Dalits from the development schemes and designed these schemes exclusively for backward castes. In 1998, Mulayam Singh Yadav, facing pressure from Yadavs and its upper caste constituency, accused Dalits, particularly, Jatavs 'of misusing the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Preventions of Atrocities Act to humiliate members of the other caste categories' (Lerche 1999). Locally in Meerut and Mawana, Gujjar SP leaders explicitly expressed their commitment to undermining Scheduled Caste interests and attempted to mobilize a coalition of other caste categories against the SCs, particularly against the Jatavs. Local, long-standing Jatav-Gujjar hostilities do not allow the SP leadership to seriously work for the SCs. The SP has been wooing Valmikes and Dhbois and created a political coalition with them.

Following its old strategy of caste mobilization, the SP, before the UP assembly elections, held a rally in October 2011 in Meerut. Akhilesh Yadav exemplified the SP's mobilizing techniques and targets during this political rally. Akhilesh made a special effort to reach out to the Muslims and Gujjars. This also alienated the Jats in western UP. He began his speech by saying that the SP is the party which gives a voice to the poor, the working people and youth. Further, he added Gujjars have a great history, but they are not given their dues. He said that Muslims do not need to give proof of their loyalty to this country every day. Muslims have contributed immensely to the development of this country. He went on to say that the Congress and the BJP are wasting their time by discussing how Indian borders are not safe and do not pay enough attention to unemployment, poverty, and lack of water and electricity.

In the last decades, relationships between the Muslims and the BJP have deteriorated. This continues to be reflected during elections campaigns. Following the same text, the SP leadership highlighted the dangers posed by the BJP and Muslims were encouraged to vote for the SP. Akhilesh explicitly said that the BJP had a negative attitude towards Muslims. He said that many Muslim shrines were attacked in the nearby area. He referred to the cases of

two meat businessmen who had been harassed by Hindu fundamentalist organizations in previous months. He also mentioned the killing of Gujjars in the village of Bhikund (Hasitanapur) and said that he had sent 'his men' to raise the issue widely and organize a protest strike in Meerut and nearby towns. Thus, Akhilesh Yadav presented himself as a 'muscular' defender of Muslim and Gujjar interests. He promoted himself as a fearless leader who promised to work for Muslims and other communities such as Gujjars who had been left out.

While the SP leader invoked old rivalries between the Jats and Gujjars indirectly, Gujjar audiences were also indirectly courted by a long digression on the unjust treatment of Gujjar villagers by Jatav killers and subsequently by the BSP government. Akhilesh said that the poor Gujjar villagers were innocent, and the killers should be punished in the court. He accused the police and the BSP government of not acting swiftly. He said that the local BSP leader politicized the incident for the worse. He said that Congress had destroyed the country in 50 years and the BSP had managed to do the same in only four years. He ended the speech by saying the SP was the party of youth, and that in the next assembly elections (2012) the party would form the government in UP. During his speeches, Akhilesh Yadav relied on language which highlighted the weakness and failures of Congress. Akhilesh asked his 'brothers and sisters' to assert themselves and to take control of their lives and ended up calling on them to defeat BJP 'communalism'.¹

In the 2012 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, Akhilesh Yadav proved his mettle and his political relevance was confirmed by the successful performance of the Samajwadi Party, despite the family fights. The Party won 224 seats, a large majority in the Vidhan Sabha, and was the largest single party. The SP is said to have owed its strong showing to Akhilesh's all-out campaign and his image of pro-development, pro-liberal reforms along with youthful energy. His organizational skills successfully mobilized SP workers across the state.² While the BSP was reduced to 80 seats, the BJP got only 47 seats. The Congress and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) alliance got 37 seats together. Since 1993, this was the most outstanding electoral performance of the SP under the leadership of Akhilesh Yadav.

In the previous sections I have highlighted some of the trajectories of Indian popular politics and how they were interwoven with caste politics. Following on, caste popular politics introduced many 'social' and 'political' transformations which have been both the products and the producers of what I call the process of localization of democratic politics. Similarly, I have shown the ways in which democracy has internalized caste. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss in detail the political rhetoric and populist strategies employed by the SP and BJP, along with caste associations, in mobilizing Gujjar votes in the 2000s and 2010s (until 2014) and how they are coupled with the rhetoric of Gujjar caste associations and the consolidation of a Gujjar sense of commonality at the all-India level and simultaneously in Mawana and Khanpur. But, most importantly, I will also show that for the generation of Gujjars who witnessed and

participated in the 'silent revolution' of the 1990s, ideas and practices of democracy came through popular politics, and further, how Gujjars have come to reinterpret and rework liberal democracy. I will illustrate how and why Gujjar leadership and ordinary Gujjars continue to uphold the Indian Constitution.

Notes

- 1 The election commission data shows that throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and 2010s for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections Samajwadi Party steadily increased its share of seats. In Lok Sabha elections, SP continued its upward march from 17 in 1996, to 20 in 1998, 26 in 1999 and 36 in 2004. However, the SP declined gradually and in 2009 the SP could get only 23 Lok Sabha seats and went down to five seats in the 2014 (Election Commission of India www.eci.gov.in).
- 2 Amar Ujjala, 13 April 2012. Meerut edition.

CASTE AND REGION

Gujjars in Western Uttar Pradesh

From Harit Pradesh to 'Greater Delhi': Claiming the Territory

On 13 October 2014, in the city of Meerut, Pathik Sena organized a convention demanding 'Greater Delhi', a separate state for over 80 million inhabitants of 17 districts of western UP.¹ The movement for a separate state was spearheaded by the national president of Pathik Sena,² Mukhiya Gujjar, who was also a member of BJP's state working committee for OBC front, and his son Kulvinder Singh, president of Zila Panchayat, Meerut. The demand had been in existence since independence with names such as Kisan Pradesh, Indraprastha and Harit Pradesh. Like Kisan Pradesh and Indraprastha, the demand for Harit Pradesh, which was led by Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) chief Ajit Singh, lost its momentum over the years. Pradeep Raghunandan (53), one of the activists of the Sena, said that the step-motherly treatment of governments had given rise to the demand. Citing examples in support, he said, "Demand for timely payment of sugarcane dues has been persisting for decades as also the demand for a bench of High Court in western UP". Mukhiya said in his speech that all three central universities were established in Allahabad, Varanasi and Lucknow and the west has nothing in the name of government education institutions.

"Why so?"

He said the only solution to peoples' problems now was the formation of 'Greater Delhi'.

Gujjar stressed that the formation of 'Greater Delhi' would resolve all of their issues.

"We will get high court in Delhi and the state capital will also come closer to their districts apart from all benefits of a smaller state. The level of education, employment, development and health services will definitely improve, people across sections feel".

Mukhiya Gujjar highlighted that when the British shifted capital from Kolkata to Delhi, they included 65 villages of western UP. The present east Delhi was made of these villages. For example Shahdra was in western UP in that time. "Therefore, it will not be a problem to include the 17 districts in 'Greater Delhi'".

R. K. Dev Tomar, (37) of the Sena pointed out that political aspirations of Ajit Singh and the Jats was one of the main reasons for dilution of the Harit Pradesh movement. This demand for the creation of a separate state ('Greater Delhi' or Harit Pradesh), either by the Gujjar or Jat leadership, is closely intertwined in the politics of caste and region in Uttar Pradesh (Singh 2001).

In the last couple of years the Gujjar leadership in western UP has blamed the Jats and Ajit Singh for not pushing sufficiently for the demand of separate state/Harit Pradesh. Ajit Singh and his political party, RLD (and its different avatars including Bhartiya Kisan Kamgar Party) has been at the forefront for demanding a separate state of Harit Pradesh, particularly after losing the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. However, the demand for a separate state was raised on earlier occasions. Highlighting the cultural links between the Hindu Jats of Haryana and Bharatpur in 1931, Chaudhary Lalchand, president of the Delhi session of Jat Mahasabha demanded a separate state for Hindu Jats comprising Meerut, Agra and Delhi divisions. In 1935, Chhotu Ram demanded a province populated by Hindu Jats alone, including south-east Punjab (present Haryana), western UP and Rajasthan with the purpose of protecting the cultural and economic interests of the Hindu Jats (Datta 1999: 134). In 1954, 97 MLAs hailing from western UP gave a signed memorandum to the central commission for the reorganization of the states, demanding a separate state of western UP, comprising districts of western UP and some parts of Haryana. The demand was articulated in terms of cultural and linguistic affinities, historical precedent and administrative convenience (Brass 1974: 18). In the 1970s at different occasions the Janata Party MLAs raised the demand of Harit Pradesh (separate state) in the UP assembly (Singh 2001).

In the last decade or so the gradual decline of Jat political power, including the Ajit and its RLD, has weakened the demand for creation of Harit Pradesh or the Jat land of western UP. The new articulation of, and demand for, 'Greater Delhi' is connected with the political and economic rise of the Gujjars in the National Capital Region (NCR) and western UP over the last two decades against the backdrop of neo-liberal reforms and the 'silent revolution' (Jaffrelot 2003). The Gujjars are a farmer-peasant-tribal community of cattle herders (historically) and milk tenders located throughout northern India. Being socio-economically a diverse community, many Gujjars had also been landlords, *zamindars* and big farmers in western UP. However, Gujjars had not been as fond of cultivation as the Jats. Despising cultivation and, reputedly, considering the hard life of an agriculturist incomparable to that of a raider, many of the Gujjars, at first, restricted themselves to keeping large number of cows, buffaloes and goats (Kolff 2010: 137). According to colonial records in the 1820s, the Gujjars were on the whole still indifferent cultivators, seldom made use of wells, and trusted to their rain-fed autumn crops (Nevill 1922; Colvin 1882).

According to caste histories (which seem, to a large extent, speculative) Gujjars migrated from Georgia (Gurija or Gurjaristan) in central Asia through the territories of contemporary Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Baluchistan) (Bhati

2008). Descriptions suggest that during the sixth and seventh centuries, a breakdown of the famous Gujj tribe that lived in south Khurasan (Central Asia) took place and some of its groups, after failing to capture Ghazna, came to Hind. There is evidence in support of the settlement of such tribes known as Gurz or Jurz in most part of Rajasthan after the eighth century. Thus, gradually Gujjars became incorporated with East Persian and South Khurasanin tribes.

Bhati (2008) writes that, “the Gujjar Pratiharas belonged to the area called Bhillamala-Jalor”. The Pratiharas continued to be known as Gurjara even after they had moved away from their original home and established an empire at Kannauj, meaning that they carried the name Gurjara with them (Sharma 1966: 472–473). After the eighth century, the term designated the territory of Gurjaradesa and referred to inhabitants of different castes.

Gujjar leaders estimate of the Indian population of Gujjars between 17 to 50 million. They are very diverse and heterogeneous group. They include the Gurjar-Pratihara rulers of western India; the Gujjar and Bakkarwal nomads of Jammu and the Kashmir valley, who are today mostly Sunni Muslim but still largely support the National Conference; the cow and goat herders of Rajasthan; and the peasants of Uttar Pradesh. In Uttaranchal, the van Gujjars are forest communities that, as in Rajasthan, inhabit the forests of the Aravalli Mountains. Gujjars are spread over Pakistan and are part of the subcontinent’s student and worker diasporas in the West (Werbner 1990). Despite these larger numbers, there is a paucity of ethnographic work on these communities.

The Gujjars of the Upper Doab: Before and During Colonial times

The Upper Doab—the region between Ganga and Yamuna upstream from Aligarh up to the districts of Bulandshahr, Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur and Dehradun—were administered by the British for most of the nineteenth century. Before the British conquest of 1803, the Upper Doab was contained in one single district that of Saharanpur, also called 52 *parganas* (Kolff 2010: 135). The region had been a part of the Mughal Empire for centuries. It was controlled by a series of regionally dominant communities that had great influence on the politics of the nearby Delhi court. The Saiyids of Saharanpur were one of the communities who managed a large number of *parganas* in the area. After the British conquest and throughout the nineteenth century, Saiyids and Afghans would maintain an important presence and had been big political players in the Upper Doab. However, in the countryside, in more than a dozen *parganas*, Gujjars’ influence was such that anyone in Delhi who intended to try and raise an income from the region would have to work through them. Gujjars, a militant group of semi-pastoralists, were very powerful at the village level (*ibid.*, 136). It is said that the Gujjars were originally from the other side of the Yamuna, from where they had moved east from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards.

The majority of the Gujjar population settled largely in the grazing lands of the Ganges, Yamuna, and Hindan riverain tracts of the Upper Doab. A big group of them were to be found in the district of Meerut.³ Some of the prominent Gujjar clans were concentrated in the Baghpat and Loni *parganas* on the west and the Hasitanapur and *kithor parganas* on the east, abutting the Yamuna and Ganges respectively. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Gujjar chiefs of the Khubar, Nagari, and Bhatti clans took advantage of the unsettled times of the Delhi empire to win for themselves an extensive local domain (Stokes 1986: 149). The Gujjar chief of the Nagri clan, Rao Jit Singh, had found the occupation of a leader of banditry more profitable and attractive than his hereditary calling of grazier and cattle-lifter, and more to his taste than cultivating the soil for crops.⁴ While to the south-east the Jat leader of Kuchesar established control over the *parganas* of Puth, Sayana, and Farida, Jit Singh set himself up in the eastern *parganas* of what became the Meerut district (Stoke 1986). Subsequently, his nephew and successor, Nain Singh, obtained from Perron, the French Maratha governor of Aligarh, over 300 villages in *jagir*. Gujjars under the leadership of Jit Singh centred their power east of Meerut at Parikshatgarh and subsequently Bahsuma, with a sold block of territory which in 1814 measured 20 miles from east to west and 40 miles from north to south and comprised 349 villages with a fixed revenue of Rs. 49,000 (Elliot 1862: 202).

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the Gujjars' power peaked in Upper Doab, which all together had five *muqarraridaris*. Under the leaderships of Raja Ram Dayal Singh Gujjar of Landhaura, Rao Ajit Singh Gujjar of Dadari, and Raja Nain Singh Gujjar of Parikshatgarh, the Gujjars obtained three *muqarraridaris* and had control over 804, 138 and 350 villages respectively. The two remaining *muqarraridaris* were with the Jats of Kuchesar and the Nawab Saiyid of Saharanpur. However, on Nain Singh's death in 1818, the Gujjar lordship was brought crashing down and the British captured all but 35 of the villages. The *muqarrari* was resumed and an order was given to proceed with the settlement of the lands with village proprietors—exactly what the British did to the other four large fixed-revenue tenure (*muqarraridaris*) elsewhere in the Upper Doab on the death of their *muqarraridars* (Kolff 2010: 151).

The Gujjar political decline was doubtless accompanied by relative economic decline. Despite their control over extensive tracts of arable land, the Gujjars continued to derive much of their livelihood from cattle-keeping and cattle-trading. Traditionally they had found these activities more paying than agriculture as mentioned above. In 1826, R.C. Cavendish noted that, 'The Gujjars and Rangurs, keep many buffaloes and cows, will not exert themselves in the culture of land and prefer the easy life of keeping herds of cattle to the hard work at the plough' (Cavendish 1826). Further, it is also noted that the trading and stealing cattle remained an important activity for the Gujjars in the Upper Doab until the 1857, the first war of Independence (Stokes 1986). The British policies of land revenue and settlement caused the political and subsequently economic decline of Gujjars in the Upper Daob (Bhati 2007). Gradually, the

Gujjars developed huge resentment against the British. The resentment against the British policies of land settlements played important role in mobilizing the Gujjars in open rebellion in the 1857. Former Gujjar *rajas* and *zamindars* along with ordinary Gujjars led the war against the British. One of the fierce battles was fought by Rao Kadam Singh, former *raja* of Parikshatgarh, the eastern *pargana* of Meerut.

In May 1857, Rao Kadam Singh declared himself the *raja* of Parikshatgarh and announced a Gujjar government. He was supported and joined by the Gujjars of nearby villages of Booklana, Himmatpur and Parikshatgarh. He commanded an army of 2,000 men who attacked and plundered the British officials and police and the Jat villages in Mawana and Parikshatgarh. Rao drove the police out from Parikshatgarh and mounted three guns on the fort (Stokes 1986: 156). The Gujjar violence appeared as the most serious threat to British control of the countryside. The threat was most acute in Meerut and Bulandshahr districts. In Meerut, Gujjar villages of Ikhtiyarpur, Sikari and Gagaul and Panchali had become notorious for stopping post deliveries and other acts of rebellion. Under the leadership of Dhan Singh Kotwal, Gujjar villagers from Panchali went around killing and plundering. The first task of the Meerut Khaki Risala (which was developed by Dunlop, Magistrate of Meerut) was to sally forth on 4 July against the Gujjar villages of Panchali, Ghat, and Jamalpur, where the villagers were surrounded and assaulted just after daybreak by a force, 300 strong, of European troops. A considerable number of Gujjar villagers were killed, 46 taken prisoner, 40 of whom were subsequently hung, a large number of cattle carried off, and the villages burnt (ibid.: 157). The effect of this draconian action was such that the Gujjar *raja* Rao Kadam Singh was said to have quit his fort at Parikshatgarh and retired to Bahsuma, a village nearby, and his army disbanded.

The Gujjar rebellion had not been quelled but had shifted its ground. Spread over a broad area within easy reach of Meerut, the Gujjar villages were easily crushed by surprise punitive raids before they could concentrate their power. That is why Rao Kadam Singh made the obvious move in retiring to the Ganges *khadir* (low laying land) where the broken country made pursuit difficult for the British police and army. After the British recaptured Delhi in September 1857 and reoccupied the Upper Doab in strength, Kadam Singh, his immediate followers and the nearby Gujjar populations of Mawana, Parikshatgrah and the Ganges Khadir, went to join the rebel Rohilkhand force (ibid.: 160). Throughout Upper Doab, the Gujjar rebellion was crushed mercilessly by killing, hanging, and imprisonment. It is said that the Gujjars were the big losers in the 1857 rebellion. Subsequently, a section of Gujjars were declared 'criminal tribes' in 1871 by the British. Thus, the Gujjars were suppressed in such a way that it took them years and decades until Independence to overcome the suppression and discrimination perpetuated by the British.

The Formation of Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) and the Gujjar Leadership

After the setbacks of 1857 and 1871, it took a while for the Gujjars to assert themselves in the public life of Upper Doab. When the Jat Mahasabha, an Arya Samaj offshoot, was founded in 1905 in Muzaffarnagar, the Gujjar leadership of the Upper Doab shared a common platform with them for couple of years. However, in 1908 the Jat leaders persuaded the Gujjar leadership of the region to form their own caste association (Verma 1998 [1908] see Chapter 3). This resulted in the formation of Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) in 1908 in Muzaffarnagar. Shri Hira Singh of the village of Sisona and Choudhary Maharaj of Mundlana were the founder members of the ABGM.⁵ The manifesto of the ABGM stressed improving the socio-educational position of the Gujjar community by establishing new schools and colleges and by eradicating social evils such as child marriages and dowries. From 1909 to 1938, the ABGM set up around 20 educational institutions including boarding houses in Meerut, Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur.⁶ The ABGM disbursed fellowships and bursaries to poor Gujjar students and encouraged them to study further. As well as this, in 1941 the ABGM organized its annual All India conference in Hoshiarpur, Punjab and gave a memorandum to the Punjab government promoting policeis for the welfare of farmers. This conference brought Gujjar leaders across India together and initiated all India Gujjar solidarity.⁷ Thus, the ABGM in the early twentieth century began with the collective action of caste associations in pursuit of self-betterment and social respect. However, the ABGM proceeded after independence and adult suffrage to facilitate political participation, representation, and access to political power, going on to replace the Brahmin *raj* with Sudra *raj*, then transitioned to 'patronage democracy' and, as century ended, morphed into *goonda raj*, the rule of violent and criminal muscle men (Rudolph and Rudolph 2012; Michelluti 2008; Hansen 1999). In the Chapters 4 and 5 I show the ways in which ABGM ended up supporting the rule of violent strongmen.

After independence, ABGM played a crucial role in connecting the Gujjar voters (and their aspirations of political representation) with the Congress Party which dominated the political arena of Uttar Pradesh by forging a coalition of higher and lower castes (Brahmans, Muslims and Scheduled Castes) as mentioned in Chapter 1. By adopting local elites, the Congress Party strategically ensured they did not disturb the local power structure. In Upper Doab, many Jat, Gujjar, Tyagi, Rajput, and Muslim leaders who had joined the Congress during the freedom struggle continued to work with the Party after independence. Charan Singh, a prominent Jat leader, was born on 23 December 1902 in a rural peasant Jat family in the district of Meerut. Charan Singh entered politics as part of the Independence Movement, motivated by Gandhi. He was an active member of Arya Samaj from 1931 in the Ghaziabad District as well as the Meerut District Indian National Congress for which he was jailed twice by

the British. Before independence, as a member of the Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces elected in 1937, he took a deep interest in the laws that were detrimental to the village economy and he slowly built his ideological and practical stand against the exploitation of workers of the land by landlords. Between 1952 and 1967, he was one of the most powerful political leaders in Congress state politics. Facing severe factionalism, Charan Singh defected from the Congress on 1 April 1967, joined the opposition party, and became the first non-Congress chief minister of UP. Ram Chandra Vikal, a Gujjar leader (of the Congress), supported Charan Singh in becoming chief minister in the name of the unity of the backward castes. Vikal was made deputy chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in the cabinet of Charan Singh.⁸ Despite emerging as the leader of North Indian farmer communities such as Jats, Yadavs, Gujjars, Kurmis and other backward classes, and also of Muslims, Charan Singh did not give much political space to those other than Jats. In the 1970s to 1980s, Western UP politics was dominated by the Jats and Gujjars remained with the Congress Party. Vikal went back to join the Congress within a short span of time.

Ram Chandra Vikal started his legislative career as a Member of the UP Legislative Assembly in 1952 and was Member of that Assembly from 1952 to 1971, representing the Congress Party. Being a farmer, Vikal championed the cause of the farmers, labourers and backward classes, and was instrumental in implementing various social welfare measures, such as getting irrigation rates reduced and land revenue written off (Verma 1998). Vikal was a Member of the Fifth Lok Sabha from Baghpat and represented Uttar Pradesh in the Rajya Sabha from April, 1984 to April, 1990. He remained with the Congress Party until his last days. In Upper Doab/Western UP, the Gujjar leadership more or less remained with the Congress Party until the 1990s when the emergence of the new political parties such as Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samajwadi Party and Bharatiya Janata Party changed the political scenario in Uttar Pradesh.

In the 1990s, the economic reforms which had adverse effects on agriculture also severely affected farmers' political power. Consequently, political power of the Jats gradually declined. The economic reforms opened new opportunities for semi-cultivator communities such as Gujjars and Sainis. This was the time when urbanization gained speed in the NCR and Western UP and brought non-agricultural land into market which benefitted Gujjars immensely. The emerging land market not only brought new wealth but also economic opportunities. Gujjars grabbed such opportunities and converted their unemployed youth into real estate agents, investors, builders, and contractors using their caste-kinship organization and territorial bonds in the new, loosely regulated, economy. The threat and use of physical violence became operational tools and negotiation rather than formal rules and regulations. In this new context, old cultural skills of 'theft' and negotiation helped the Gujjars. The new economy brought prosperity and confidence to economically marginalized groups such as Gujjars, who not only started re-claiming the Upper Doab (Greater Delhi) of the early nineteenth century but also began contesting for political office. The emergence

of the new political parties (SP, BSP and BJP) opened up new political opportunities for the Gujjar entrepreneurs to fulfil their political aspirations. In the post-Mandal period, the Gujjars have been successful in inserting themselves into democratic politics and obtaining political office in Western UP. In the subsequent chapters, this book describes this story by locating Gujjars in Khanpur village and its region. In the following section Khanpur village is described in its region.

Meerwada and Khadir Regions of Meerut District

Meerut District is located on the Upper Doab of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers. In 2011, the population of Meerut District was recorded as 34.4 lakhs. The city of Meerut has a population of around 15.2 lakhs and lies 65 kilometres north-east of Delhi. According to the 1931 Census of India, the last census in which caste was variable, 12.1% of the total population of Meerut District were Jats, 7.1% Rajputs, 6.7% Vaishyas, 6.1% Brahmins, 4.4% Gujjars, 3.4% Tyagis, 1.2% Pathans, 1% Ahirs, 0.7% Saiyids and 0.2% Kayasthas.⁹ The remaining 55.2% were made up of the lower OBCs, artisan-service OBCs (the majority of whom are Muslims), SCs and other Muslim low castes. The village of Khanpur is situated on the west side of the river Ganges, in the Mawana and Hasitanapur blocks of Meerut District. Khanpur lies between the Meerwada and Khadir cultural regions of Meerut District. It is about thirty-two km. northeast of Meerut and is adjacent to the border of Muzaffarnagar district on the northern side. Meerut is the seat of administrative division comprising four districts of the region. In a sense Meerut is a regional city. It is a university seat, which regulates examinations in more than 70 colleges spread over the five districts. Meerut was the place where the first war of the Independence started and the struggle was spread in the rural areas by Gujjars as mentioned before. Khanpur comes under Hastinapur *pargana* which is largely Ganges Khadir. The town of Hastinapur is located on the banks of the Ganges, and is the famous mythico-historical capital of *Kauravs* and *Pandavs* in the great epic Mahabharata. Hastinapur has many Jain temples, and is considered an important pilgrimage centre for them. Next to Hastinapur is Parikshatgarh, which was the capital of Gujjar raja Nain Singh and a seat of Gujjar power. The Khanpuriya Gujjars share blood and clan with *raja* Nain Singh and claim his ancestry. In many ways Parikshatgarh is a socio-religiously important town for Khanpur and its neighbouring Gujjar population.

On the other side, Khanpur has been a part of Meerwada or Meer-baraha—a *zamindari* of 12 villages. During the Mughal period, and later during British rule, it was under Sardhana's control. Meers were the Mirasi, a caste of entertainers, who used to sing and dance in the court of Begum Somru¹⁰ at Sardhana. Being pleased by their services, she granted them tax collection rights over the 12 villages. In the course of time, the Meers bought a few more villages from other *zamindars* in the region and themselves became *zamindars* of around 20 villages. These villages stretch from Lawar, a village north of

Meerut, to Phalawada, an old town on the border of Meerut and Muzffarnagar districts. There is a famous old proverb that defines the territory of the Meer-baraha ‘Meero Ka Ghoda Lawad tak’, which means the horse of the Meers runs only until Lawar. Local people and scholars told me that once there had been 450 villages under the Meerwada,¹¹ but no recorded history is available for these claims. According to local people, the Meerut district is divided into four socio-geographical (territories) regions,¹² namely, the Meerwada, the Meethwasa, the Saydwada and the Khadir or low-lying land on the bank of the Ganges. Meethwasa is to the south, Saydwada surround the Meerwada in north, and Khadir is to the east. Irrigational facilities made possible by the construction of the upper Ganges canal have had significant socio-economic impacts on the region and its villages. In Meerwada, almost 95% of agricultural land is under irrigation. Irrigation and transport facilities helped in the manifold increase of agricultural production during the green revolution.

Khanpur Village and Mawana: Rural-urban Linkages

Khanpur and Mawana are integrated, with everyday exchanges of labour, consumer goods, medical and educational services, and middle class aspirations and life styles. Khanpur politics is closely connected with Mawana—block and tehsil offices, along with the local MLA office which constantly intervenes in the village politics. Many Khanpuriya villagers have their second house in Mawana where their children study in private English medium schools. Investing in urban housing is one of the markers of upward mobility among the Khanpur Gujjars.

The inhabitants of Khanpur belong to a total of 15 castes. Among them, the Gujjars, Ahirs, Sainis, Gaderiyas, Dhimvars, Kumhars, Lohars, Badhai, Nai, Dhobis, and Fakirs constitute the OBCs. Brahmins and Banias represent the upper castes, and Jatavs and Valmiki or Bhangis, the erstwhile untouchables. The latter are called SCs in official parlance. However, in the village, both the groups are addressed by their caste names. Khanpur has 447 households and a population of 2,823. The caste break-up of these households, along with the size of the population, is presented in Table 2.1.

At present, in the neighbourhood (*gavand*), Khanpur is called *Gujjaro ka gaon*. At the block and tehsil office at Mawana state officials also refer to the village in the same way. Three interpretations come from Gujjar, Ahir, and Gaderiya respondents, respectively, for this nomenclature.

Ordinary Gujjars articulate their claim over the village for three reasons;

a) Khanpur is a part of the larger Gujjar region called *Gajarat* that stretches along the Ganges from Noida, Ghaziabad, Garhmuktesvar-Makddumpur, Hastinapur and Parikshatgarh to Haridwar. This region is dominated by Gujjar population and had been partly under the rule of Gujjar Raja Nain Singh;

b) Gujjars have been a landowning caste in the region, and in Khanpur village in particular, since the inception of the village itself. Many individual Gujjars had been single *zamindars* and not been under the Meers. Some of the Gujjars

CASTE AND REGION

Table 2.1 Caste Groups in Khanpur

<i>Caste Group</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Households</i>	<i>Population</i>
UPPER CASTES			
Brahmin	Hindu	13	76
Bania	Hindu	01	5
Total		14	81
OBCs			
Gujjar	Hindu	45	276
Ahir/Yadav	Hindu	40	252
Saini	Hindu	76	478
Gaderiya/Pal-baghel	Hindu	31	216
Dhimvar/Kashyap	Hindu	29	194
Lohar/Safi	Muslim	07	53
Badhai/Safi	Muslim	05	42
Kumhar/Prajapati	Hindu	05	33
Nai/Salmani	Muslim	14	102
Dhobi	Muslim	04	29
Fakir/Alvi	Muslim	23	171
Total		279	1,846
SCs			
Jatav/Dalit/Jatav	Ex-untouchables	147	866
Bhangi/Valmiki	Ex-untouchables	07	30
		154	896
Total		447	2,823

Source: Field data, 2014

also claim that they are the original settlers of the village, though the Jatavs and Yadavs also make an equivalent claim; and

c)The Gujjars of Khanpur, with the help of Gujjar rebels and dacoits, killed Meer Yusuf Ali (a *zamindar* of Khanpur) in 1942,¹³ which is claimed as the end of Muslim rule in the village and the beginning of the Gujjar's rule.

That is how Gujjars of Khanpur stake their claim over the village. However, both Jatavs and Yadavs in Khanpur challenge this claim. The Gujjars of Khanpur narrate the story of their migration from Rivari, Haryana to Meerut and their subsequent settlement in the village of Khanpur after hearing a call from an auspicious bird. Some say that the oxen of their migratory ancestors stopped at the land of Khanpur and refused to move further.

Jatavs in Khanpur have a different story to tell about the village and their claim over it. According to many of the villagers this story has emerged along

with the rise of BSP in Meerut region since the late 1980s, which coincided with political rise of the Jatavs in the village.¹⁴ Young and adult Jatavs of Khanpur call it *Jatavo ka gaon*. Some of them articulated their claim through three arguments:

a) Jatavs constitute numerically the largest group among the population of the village;

b) Many Jatav households claim being the original settlers of the village and these families had been ancestral landowners; and

c) The village was declared 'Ambedkar village' during 1995–2000.

Young Jatavs who are college goers in Mawana and Meerut strongly say that Khanpur cannot be *Gujjaro ka gaon* since Gujjars have only 45 households as compared to 147 Jatav households in the village. Older Jatavs accept that the claim over the village is new and is articulated strongly by the younger generation. However, aged Jatavs stress that many of them had been landowners in the village and was part of the first settlers.

There are voices of Gaderiyass, Dhimvars and Fakirs who support Gujjar's claim over the village and contest the claim of the Jatavs. One of the Gaderiya respondents told me, "after Mayawati's political ascendancy, Jatavs have become arrogant and have started talking with big mouth".

At the same time, the Yadavs/Ahirs also lay claim over the village through two arguments:

a) Yadavs were independent *zamindars* in the village even during Mughal and British rule; and

b) they had been the real inhabitants of the village living there for 13 generations.

Many Sainis support Yadavs' claim and show their fraternity and proximity with them. It is a well-known fact in the village that Sainis get along with Yadavs in village politics.

Thus, the village is a contested territory rather than a harmonious one. Today, contestation is an everyday part of village life whether it is over political debates or development schemes of the state regarding construction of roads or setting up hand pumps in the village. Sometimes these contestations culminate in some kind of agreement. At other times, endless stalemate grows and a sharp division along caste lines becomes manifest. However, the struggle over limited resources for the development of village infrastructure is giving new meanings to the identity of the village. There are also issues over which unanimity can prevail. For example, the construction of the link road in 1982 from Khanpur to Mawana-Khatuli united the entire village against the neighbouring village of Nagala Hareru.

Similarly, there are developmental programmes and allocation of resources undertaken under the aegis of the village *panchayat* giving primacy to the village as a politico-administrative unit. That also gives importance to the identity of the village as a whole. While the older village boundaries increasingly become porous, new ones are drawn such as the affirmation of village membership through voter

ID. Increasing dependency on urban centres and off-farm economic activities has given the lower castes an experience of alternative life. However, individuals of these castes relate to their life worlds outside as much as within the village. The politicisation of these lower OBCs such as Saini, Dhimvar and Gaderiya, artisan-service OBCs such as Kumhar, Lohar, Badhai, Nai and Dhobi, and other OBCs such as Fakir and Jatavs through SP, BSP, RLD and Labour Party) have had a visible impact on their caste consciousness. Village and regional politics has become competitive since Most Backwards (lower OBCs) and Maha—Dalits (non-Jatav SCs such as Valmikis and Khatik)—are being mobilized and are taking part in electoral politics.

Clans and Factions

There are two clans among the Gujjars. One is called Achauhan and the largest section of the Gujjars in Khanpur belongs to this clan. They relate to *raja* Nain Singh of Parikshatgarh. The second is Rawal and only five Gujjar households belong to this clan. Gujjars of the Achauhan clan claim that they are the original settlers in the village. Some of them assert that they are the ones who set up the village. While ancestors of the Rawals migrated from Rewari, Haryana, ancestors of the Achauhan are said to have come from the vicinity of Garhmuktesver. Being early settlers, the Achauhan claim superiority over the Rawals. There is rivalry between the clans in village politics. Clan division is one of the decisive factors in the formation of factions in village politics. Rawal clan Gujjars along with Yadav families formed a faction called Ganje party. The Mange family, whose member Ramkaran had been village *pradhan* during 2000–10, along with Ramchander Gujjar and Chauhal lead the Achauhan clan. Ramchander's cousin Jahariya had been village *pradhan* and later during the 1980s his son Mahkar headed the village. Chauhal's father had been the village *mukhia* (head) during the British rule and is said to have masterminded the killing of Meer Yusuf Ali. These three families had been independent land-owners in the Muslim *zamindars*. They form the core of the Achauhan clan and Mukhia party (faction) which is led by Ramsharan.

The Gangs and *Akhara*: The Formation of Masculinity

Upon my arrival in Khanpur village, I was told not to venture out in the evenings. I was advised that I should arrive to or depart from the village before sunset. However, a month later I needed to attend an urgent meeting in Meerut. Despite the unhappiness of my Gujjar host, at 7 p.m. I set out to catch the last bus from the main road which is 2km from the village. When I was about to reach the bus stand, suddenly a group of young men emerged from sugarcane fields. Their faces were covered. One of them showed me revolver and ordered me to take out everything I had in my pockets and bag. Two of them searched me, thoroughly including my private parts, in case I hid anything there before

embarking on this journey. They took away all my money, mobile, camera, recorder, and watch including my bag. Upon my request, they returned my field note-book with a look of contempt. I missed the bus. In despair, I walked back to the village. I was almost in tears since I had lost the field data stored in my camera and recorder. My host calmed me down and promised to get back my mobile, camera, and recorder the next day. The wife of my host was very thankful to the God that I was not hurt by the robbers. I tried to sleep but could not close my eyes until the morning when my host woke up around 4 a. m. as his daily habit.

Next day, I woke up very late. By the time I got ready, it was noon. As I came out from the room my host emerged from nowhere. He asked me to follow him. He went to a big house and entered into the sitting room where four young men were sitting with an old man. Upon my greeting the old man gently threw a look and asked me to sit down. He asked me if I would like to have tea. I was quite hesitant being in a state of shock and depression. The old man assured me that I would get back my stuff. When the tea arrived, all four men left. One of them touched the feet of the old man. Suddenly, the old man asked me if I recognized any of the four men who were sitting with him. The old man asked me what I am doing in the village. I explained my purpose of the visit and living in the village. He further enquired why I had chosen his village as a topic of my Ph.D. I told him that I wanted to study the Gujjars who have been neglected in the academic literature of the western UP region. He seemed convinced and happy. While we were taking leave, he asked me to visit his house any time for any help without any hesitation. He assured me that now onwards I should not fear anything. I could go anywhere, anytime, in and around the village. If anybody stops me, I should tell him that, "I am a man of Jagat Singh".

When we got back home, I saw the happy face of my host's wife. She said that I must have lunch with them. While we were having lunch, she came with my bag. She told me that the boys had returned my stuff. Before I could get my head around this, my host told me that I had been robbed by Jagat Singh's gang.

Khanpur had two gangs of robbers. One is headed by an old and retired *dacoit*, Jagat Singh, who does not participate in road robberies but patronise young Gujjar men who do this. This is the gang which robbed me that evening. Another gang is headed by a young Gujjar man, Bhup (28) but has an inter-caste mix. Bhup's gang has one Jatav, one Yadav, one Gaderiya, and three Gujjars. Bhup's gang operates at district level and indulges in different kinds of activities including bike theft, road robberies, resolving land disputes by threat of violence, and gathering crowd for political rallies etc. While Jagat's gang is exclusively a Gujjar gang and confines its activities nearby villages, from time to time it plays a crucial role in fixing up non-Gujjars in the village. Thus, gangs play an important part in village politics, particularly during the elections. These gangs are used to threaten and manipulate lower caste voters and

candidates in the village and block level elections. Gujjar young men, after coming of age, hang around these gangs at *khera*, while smoking, chatting, and drinking. This socialization initiates some of them into the gang membership.

Another important place for Gujjar males in Khanpur is the Shiv *mandir akhara* (gymnasium) which provides space for exercising, worship, and also engaging in other social activities (Kumar 2018; Alter 1997; Michelutti 2008). The gymnasium is the locus of political activities and it is an important stage where politics is locally performed (Hansen 1996; Gooptu 2001; Michelutti 2008). In Khanpur, the *khera* and gymnasium are both informal centres for youth activities.

The Shiv *mandir akhara* is the centre of many activities. This place represents many of the symbols and values which serve as primary reference points in the development and performance of the Gujjar reinterpretation of democracy explored in this book. Central to this rhetoric are Devnarayan's muscular deeds and Gujjar martial qualities. Shiv *mandir* is the place where local Gujjar produce and cultivate their sense of community, their fighting spirit, and their strongman reputation.

The Shiv *mandir* complex comprises a wrestling area and a number of shrines including the temple. The main shrines are dedicated to Shiva, Hanuman, and Devnarayan. Indeed, the morphology of the religious landscape, the position of the trees or the wrestling arena, the *lingam* of Shiva, are said to have been designed to the wishes of Lord Vishnu who spoke to the temple priest in his dreams. Small alcoves are dedicated to Kali and to Jahar Vir (Gogaji), a Gujjar hero-god. The complex is maintained by a Gujjar priest/*sadhu* who belongs to Mohan Baba sect which has its seat in Rajasthan. The Mohan Baba sect is also known as 'Kali Kholi wale' and has grown in popularity over the last three decades in western UP. Baba is a *kalyugi* avatar of Krishan, and by caste is Gujjar. In the last decade, almost half of the Gujjar households in Khanpur have become followers/devotees of Mohan Baba and annually visit his shrines in Rajasthan.

Gujjar men from different generations come and meet at Shiv *mandir*. This is the place where Gujjar males can escape from their household duties and their women's complaints. During the day, the oldest come to relax, play cards and gossip. In the late afternoon, the youngest begin to arrive. They exercise, wrestle, and do puja and then stop to chat till late. Mostly it is men who visit the Shiv *mandir* complex. Women do not go to the temple because, they say, "It is an *akhara*" and men are always almost naked. Indeed, the absence of women is determined by the public and political character of the place. For instance, women are not seen in the emerging liquor pubs around Khanpur and Mawana. Women are not part of the public political life of Khanpur and Mawana, even though they work in fields or government offices such as banks or are teachers in schools.

Shiv *mandir* complex is not the only place where 'politics' is discussed but also the place where local Gujjar build up their image of men of strength. Many

times, gangs also meet and chart out their plans at *mandir* before heading to the *khera*. Local Gujjars are generally body conscious and exercise regularly, although only a few of them are proper wrestlers. Many Gujjar young men use wrestling as a leisure activity, though this is on the decline. In conversations, young Gujjar informants often point out the importance of physical strength. In Khanpur and its neighbourhood there is a saying, “Gujjars nurture their sons and male buffalos more than themselves”. Taking care of male child is a central to the Gujjar household. In everyday conversation, young boys’ physical strength is also compared with young male buffalos. Thus, the symbolic equation between physical strength and political activity is continuously expressed in metaphors.

Gang and wrestling culture play key roles in the local Gujjar politics. Young Gujjars emphasize their muscular bodies and violent reputation as strongmen in Khanpur and Mawana. They portray themselves as physically strong, brave, and bold and, hence, powerful and fearless. Thus, it is the physical strength, physical presence, and displaying weapons in the village and outside it that shape local the public image of Gujjars.

Notes

- 1 The concept of ‘Greater Delhi’: 17 districts of western UP (Meerut, Baghpat, Shamli, Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Moradabad, Sambhal, Amroha, Hapur, Ghaziabad, Noida, Bulandshahr, Aligarh, Hathras, Mathura and Agra) will be merged with the existing Delhi state. A select part of New Delhi where Parliament, embassies are situated could be declared Union Territory. It will also resolve the demand for declaring Delhi a full state and over 80 million people of these districts of western UP will also get a new state. Presently, Delhi Assembly has 70 MLAs and with 90 more MLAs from these districts, Delhi Assembly will be bigger in size with 160 MLAs for full statehood.
- 2 Vijay Singh Pathik (1882–1954), popularly known as Rashtriya Pathik, was an Indian revolutionary. He was among the first Indian revolutionaries to set up the freedom movement against British rule. Pathik led the Bijolia’s Kisan agitation in Rajasthan. His real name was Bhoop Singh Gurjar but after being implicated in the Lahore conspiracy case in 1915, he changed his name to Vijay Singh Pathik. Across western UP, Gujjars hold him in high respect and consider him one of their caste heroes.
- 3 Census of the North-Western Provinces, 1865.
- 4 During the pre-colonial and early colonial period, persons of many castes took to banditry. A vast literature has demonstrated that this was the outcome of historical contingency, with no pre-given caste essences responsible for the circulation of mixed caste bandit groups, including gangs of Minas, Gujjars, Mewatis, and occasionally even Brahmans and often organized by Rajputs (see Mayaram 2003; Radhakrishna 2001).
- 5 ABGM, Souvenir 2008 (2008 Preface), Muzaffarnagar.
- 6 ABGM, Souvenir 2008 (2008: 9), Muzaffarnagar.
- 7 Interview with Ramsharat Bhati, President of ABGM, 21 March 2013, Delhi.
- 8 Ram Chandra Vikal was born in Gujjar family on 8 November 1916 in Nayagaon Basantpur, Meerut district. He gave up studies on the call of Mahatma Gandhi and became a freedom fighter, joining the Congress Party. Vikal was influenced by the

- ideology of the Arya Samaj from childhood and worked for social reforms. He also contributed to the setting up of various infrastructure facilities in the towns and villages of Uttar Pradesh by having bridges and railway lines constructed. He was also instrumental in getting several primary schools and colleges set up, establishing agricultural universities in Faizabad and Kanpur and a medical college in Meerut.
- 9 Superintendent of Printing and Stationary, Allahabad, 1931: Census of India, The United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol. XVIII, part II, quoted in Singh (1992: 14).
 - 10 In 1778, Walter Reinhard, otherwise known as Somru or Sombre, was placed in charge of the country adjoining Zabita Khan's territory, and fixed his headquarters at Sardhana. Reinhard had died the same year (in 1778) and the estate then passed into the hands of his widow, known to history as the Begam Somru. In 1781, the Begam was baptized and received into the Raman Catholic Church under the name of Johanna. Her troops were then commanded by a German, named Paoli, who was assassinated by Muhammad Beg in 1783. In 1787, George Thomas, entered the Begam's service and took command of her troops, which formed the backbone of the imperial army. Begum augmented her troops to six battalions in 1797–98 and fought on Sindhia's side against the English in 1802. After the fall of Delhi the Begam made submission to the British Government, and to the end of her life remained faithful their interests. In 1825 she showed her loyalty by leading her troops in person to assist the British at Bhartpur. She died in the early part of 1836 (Nevill, 1922).
 - 11 Dr Azaz, a college teacher and researcher (historian) told me that villages between Sardhana and Parikshatgarh were under the Meers' zamindari and the whole area was famous as Meerwada. However, after the decline of Sardhana estate, some of the villages were taken over by the king of Parikshatgarh. Dr. Azaz wrote a PhD thesis on Sahdat-Barraha which means Sayyadwada, a region that was under Sayyads' zamindari and habitation.
 - 12 According to local people the division was based on irrigation system and prosperity including production of *gur*. For example, Meerwada and Meethwasa was considered to be best among the four since in these two regions land was fertile and it was largely irrigated in contrast to Sayyadwada in which large tracts of agriculture land was non-irrigated and full of sand.
 - 13 The year of 1942 is notorious for the infamous Hindu-Muslims riots that started at Garh Muktesvar—a pilgrimage town at the bank of Ganges. These riots, known in the District and region as 'Garh riot', led to the death of hundreds of people across the region.
 - 14 Despite being the largest population in Khanpur, the first *pradhan* from the ranks of the Jatavs was elected as late as 1988.

MYTH, HEROES AND HI(STORIES)

The Re-imagining of the Gujjar Community

(Key words: myth; heroes; hi(stories); community; past; *samaj*; cultural politics)

In this chapter I show how the Gujjars, one of the historically ‘marginalized’ and stigmatized caste groups, constructed the past while repositioning themselves. I argue that Gujjar cultural realities and the past are produced in specific sociohistorical contexts: the post-Mandal politics in Uttar Pradesh. The post-Mandal politics provided the Gujjar caste-community with the opportunity to decide who they were and how they wished to be represented. Gujjars did not only find themselves in particular historical circumstances which invited them to re-shape their community but they also had at hand cultural resources which helped them to make the best use of the ‘imaginative power of democracy’ (Khilnani, 1997: 17). Examination of the ways in which Gujjar political activists, social workers, caste associations, and ‘historians’ created ethno-history which binds contemporary Gujjars to their heroic and mythical past help us to understand the relationships between caste and democratic politics in the post-Mandal scenario in Uttar Pradesh (UP).

Throughout the chapter runs a concern with the ways in which the caste system is changing and the ways in which democratic politics shape it. Castes are increasingly becoming ‘horizontal’, disconnected groups with their own distinct culture and way of life (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994: 19–20). This shift is reflected by the substitution of the term *jati*, which refers to caste, with the term *samaj*, which denotes community (Mayer, 1996: 59; Natrajan, 2011).¹ I argue that when caste enters the political arena as *samaj*, mobilized by caste associations and political parties, it strengthens the democratic process.

I try to show that strengthening in the five sections that follow. The first section locates the debate on caste and its new facets. The second section discusses the historical encounter of the Gujjars in relation to the 1857 rebellion and rise of the Kotwal Dhan Singh legend. Through an analysis of history booklets or Gujjar self-writings, the third section illustrates the making of the Gujjar *samaj* and its relationship with print culture. The fourth section shows how caste/*jati* is transforming into *samaj*. In the last section, I reflect on the shifting meanings and nature of caste in contemporary India.

Caste, Hierarchy, and Power

The dichotomy of purity and pollution has acquired a central place in the understanding of caste in India. Dumont's description (1980) of the Indian as *homo hierarchies* in contrast to the western impetus to *homo aequalis* set the scene for caste studies. He defined caste in terms of a hierarchical system structured along the dichotomy of purity and pollution. His essentialized description, however, was criticized for over emphasising the consensual nature of social ranking, for missing the complexity of caste relations and for ignoring historical changes and conflict (Cohn, 1968; Dirks, 1987;2001; Deliege, 1993; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960; 1967; Quigley, 1999; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994). While Dumont's theory of a single hierarchy has been rejected, questions of hierarchy, power, and conflict continue to occupy a central place in the discussion of caste (Ciotti, 2010; Gupta 2000). Contemporary caste claims also represent visions of justice and equality.

While in the 1950s and 60s, dominant caste, the *jajamani* system and Sanskritization had been the key themes in the study of caste/structure, in the 1990s and 2000s caste identity, cultural assertion and struggles against discrimination emerged as the main themes (Jodhka 2014). Self-fashioning and the cultural assertion of caste groups from below are my particular concern. Scholars have stressed that the notion of a single hierarchy has no universal appeal. Caste hierarchy varies depending on who is telling their caste position. Like all other castes, Dalits and lower castes, too, express pride in their culture and heritage (Dalits refuse to view themselves as lower than anyone else, projecting an image of royal or pure origin and expressing the hope of regaining their rights and respect in future (Deliege, 1993; Gellner, 1999; Gupta, 2000; Sahay, 2004).

Similarly, I show how Gujjars confront the stigma of being a 'criminal' tribe by reinventing the 1857 rebellion and using their cultural resources to place their community into national history. Gujjar intellectuals, with their caste-associations, have been writing and re-writing their histories, thus re-constructing their past and culture through their imagination of the future and constructing the Gujjar *samaj*. Here, engagement with caste is informed by a sense of common heritage, culture or suffering and 'natural solidarity'. It anchors people in a cultural universe. I illustrate how the past is evoked in these so-called histories that celebrate caste as a fundamental category of belonging. These histories and their public expression in terms of the renaming of public spaces reflect on the contemporary nature of caste today. Imagining *jati* as *samaj* not only redefines the self against the other but also 'the political'. This has important implications for democratic politics in India. Gujjars have been successful in re-imagining themselves by linking their 'democratic' present to a particular past of the ancient and medieval Gujjar rulers and national freedom fighters. This has allowed Gujjars not only to claim dignity, but also a fairer share of state resources in countering inequality (Mayaram, 2014).

The new interpretation of the 1857 rebellion, locating Gujjar individuals as freedom fighters, inserts Gujjars into national history. This allows them to overcome the haunting stigma of being a ‘criminal tribe’, as imposed during the British rule.

From Criminals to Freedom Fighters

In Meerut, people hardly knew about Kotwal Dhan Singh until 10 May 1998 when his statue was installed on the Civil Lines *Chowraha* next to a busy bus stand in the middle of town. The statue installation ceremony was organized under the aegis of three caste associations—the Gujjars-Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM), Uttar Pradesh Gujjar Sangh and Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Vikas Munch (ABGVM). A large number of Gujjars, young and old, along with the Gujjar political leaders across political parties attended the ceremony. Madhu Gujjar (48), mayor of the city and a prominent Rastriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) activist unveiled and garlanded the statue. She announced that, “the real hero of the 1857 Meerut rebellion was Kotwal Dhan Singh and not Mangal Pandey” and asserted that, “finally Dhan Singh got his due respect”. Another speaker, Om Gumi² (59), president of the ABGVM said, “Kotwal Dhan Singh Gujjar led the first battle against the British in Meerut in May 1857 and sacrificed his life. Entire Gujjar Samaj is proud of him. He was a great revolutionary”.

Since then, Dhan Singh Kotwal’s statues have also been placed in other towns in Meerut District and the Upper Doab region. Dhan Singh Kotwal has become a central figure (a legend) in the wider Gujjar community. His role in the 1857 struggle against the British is commemorated every year on 10 May and is profoundly emphasized through speeches by Gujjar caste associations in different political parties. In the last couple of years, the number of Gujjar visitors to this statue has increased, especially on special occasions. New Gujjar rituals have also emerged around the statue. For example, if a Gujjar wins any election (Panchayat, Municipal, State or Central), the first thing he/she is expected to do is to pay tribute to the statue of Dhan Singh Kotwal. Whenever a Gujjar political leader from outside the region visits Meerut, he/she is also expected to visit the statue and pay tribute. The popularity of Dhan Singh Kotwal, who was a local hero, is expanding beyond Meerut and the Upper Doab, thus binding the larger Gujjar community together. The Civil Line Park is named after him and many village entries gates, city and town intersections, private primary schools, and village roads have been named after him. Gujjar politicians and educational entrepreneurs have even dedicated and named their private colleges after Dhan Singh Kotwal. His framed picture or a poster has become an integral part of any Gujjar caste *sammelan* or caste association meeting. His pictures are seen commonly in the drawing rooms of the Gujjar middle-class households across western UP.

Despite the stories being weaved through histories, nobody can say with certainty whether the accounts of Dhan Singh are a part of Gujjar’s actual or

‘discursive’ past. Is Dhan Singh Kotwal an instrument or symbol of the Gujjar’s attempts to forge a larger unity and capture power through the constructed story of their nationalist past? Gujjars may have multiple reasons for using Dhan Singh Kotwal and writing caste histories putting him at the centre. But, for me, the significance lies in writing and celebrating the (hi)stories of these figures. In particular, these new histories have serious implications for democratic politics as they influence Gujjar political mobilizations and their community reshaping into the Gujjar *samaj*, a broader community beyond Khanpur village and its region.

The Kotwal Dhan Singh story is told with mythical and mystic senses of accomplishment. In the 1990s and 2000s in Meerut and NCR, as economic prosperity and the political power of the Gujjars grew, due to the rapid urbanization that led to the skyrocketing prices of land, the visibility of Kotwal Dhan Singh also increased in public spaces. In July 2018, the UP government led by the BJP officially declared him the true hero of the 1857 Meerut rebellion. Uttar Pradesh Director General of Police—O. P. Singh—unveiled the statue of Kotwal Dhan Singh Gujjar on the premises of the Sadar police station. Mr Singh said, “Dhan Singh was posted here 161 years ago during the First War of Independence in 1857 and is still remembered for his contribution to freedom struggle”. Addressing the gathering after the unveiling of the statue, the DGP said, “It was a proud moment for the entire force to recognize the valour of police uniform by installing a statue of martyr Kotwal Dhan Singh on the premises of the same police station where he had served and made the supreme sacrifice for the country”.

In his summing up speech, Rajendra Agrawal, the incumbent BJP MP (Member of Parliament from Meerut) announced that “a chapter of Dhan Singh Kotwal would be included in police training and a documentary made to take his inspiring story of bravery and martyrdom to the public”. In his address, the MP highlighted the sacrifice of Dhan Singh and said he was the only man in khaki who challenged the British Raj. “His bravery is exemplary for all men in uniform”, he said. In the end of function, DGP also instructed Dr Sushil Bhati, a Gujjar ‘historian’ and a teacher in government degree college, who researched Kotwal Dhan Singh, to prepare a chapter about him with help from Senior Superintendent of Police Rajesh Pandey in another 15 days so that it could be included in the police training syllabus from the current session. ABGVM along with ABGM honoured the DGP and the MP by putting Gujjar turbans on their head and gifted them the booklet of Dhan Singh written by Sushil Bhati and published by Navbhart Press, Meerut under the auspices of ABGVM and its president Om Gumi. Jointly, ABGVM and ABGM released a press note and demanded the DGP and the city mayor re-name the Sadar Police station after Dhan Singh Kotwal and to build a *kranti dwar* in memory of the revolutionary.

It is important to underline that the public visibility of Kotwal Dhan Singh is not an isolated example. In the last three decades, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party (SP) not only changed the UP politics but also

public spaces in Meerut and other cities, which manifest dense visibility of statues, posters, wall writings, and pictures of 'lower' caste icons and heroes previously not visible at public places. Heroes and legends not known two decades before occupy city spaces now across UP (Kotwal Dhan Singh's statue is the most apt example).

The Gujjar caste, described in the British ethnographic register as a 'caste of agriculturalist and pastoralist, who also engaged in acts of banditry and theft', was listed as criminals under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871).³ According to R. V. Russell (1916), 'the Gūjars as a tribe has always been noted for their turbulence and habit of cattle-stealing' (1916: 166). These colonial writings and depictions of the Gujjars find resonance in everyday discourses across western UP. Moreover, these colonial categories and images have also been internalized by the Gujjars. However, they are also used by Gujjars to advance their demand for ST status and to challenge their OBC status.

The label of certain groups as criminals under the Act has significant implications for the life chances of the members. It not only amplified their social marginalization but also severely restricted members of such castes from accessing state institutions (Tiwary 2001). Any kind of such legal categorisation can have larger implications for social life. Consequently, this also affected their everyday life interactions with other castes who perceived Gujjars as 'anti-social' or 'thieves'. Their position became worse than that of many Dalit communities in the country. During the colonial era, basic human rights were denied to Gujjars and other ostensibly criminal communities. While the Gujjars of Saharanpur and Muradabad were declared criminal under the Act of 1871, the social affect went beyond geographic boundaries. All over Uttar Pradesh Gujjars were perceived as the same.

However, practices of exclusion and control enacted by the modern state unleashed new forms of identity politics, based on the totalising category of caste, and articulated through the vehicle of caste associations. These associations, such as ABGVM and ABGM, were actively engaged in the process of forging collective caste-identities to fit categories stipulated by the state, contesting their degraded status, and engaging in various strategies designed to uplift their caste's status. Re-interpretation of the 1857 struggle through the heroism of Dhan Singh Kotwal is one such strategy. Gujjars have been using Dhan Singh Kotwal to enter into the national past and try to restore dignity and glory to their *samaj* or community while struggling against the stigma of criminality.

Another strategy of the Gujjars in fighting against the stigma is to create hi (stories) or *gauravgathas* which connect them with the glorious ancient past, and the kings who ruled a part of India at some point, and trace their origin to the Hindu gods. These history booklets or *gaurav gathas* are juxtaposed with the narratives of injustices done to Gujjars during the Mughal rule and British India. Further, these *gathas* articulate how the Indian state has not done justice to the Gujjars, by denying them proportional representation in government jobs

and political parties, even though the Gujjars have immensely contributed to nation-building. In the next section, I analyse some of these *gaurav gathas* or hi (story) booklets written by Gujjar intellectuals either under the auspices of caste associations or as independent individuals.

Gujjar Histories: Re-writing and Re-inventing the Past

In this section, I analyse the material from three history booklets (*gaurav gathas*) from the Gujjar community, all published during the 1990s. I also use the material from Facebook pages and websites of the ABGM, ABGVM, and the Gujjar Youth Association (GYA).⁴ Further, I compare the three histories with a booklet written in 1908. This comparison between the writing of 1908 and the 1990s reveals the reshaping of histories by the socio-economic and political conditions of their time.

I begin with commonalities between all three Gujjar histories. According to the histories and websites, Rajputs and Brahmins have distorted or destroyed Gujjar history and removed and distorted the names of Gujjar kings and legends. Rajputs have been held responsible for bribing British historians to change the real history. This history would have us believe that, unlike Rajputs and Jats, Gujjars were not an ally of the British but instead revolted against them in 1857. This led to them being labelled as ‘denotified tribes’ and ‘criminal communities’. So now educated Gujjars, along with some Gujjar writers, are trying to correct the history through re-writing it and reclaiming respect and dignity. They also call for the formation of a caste-based political party, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party.

In *Gujjar Sawabhimani* (1998), the writer connects Gujjars with *Kshatriya* and the ruling dynasties of medieval times. Simultaneously, the author also refers Gujjars as ‘Dalits’ and advocates for the formation of a larger political alliance with SCs and other lower castes (Verma 1998; 16). The author gives an exhaustive list of Gujjar personalities in medieval times, particularly of members of ruling dynasties, freedom fighters, social workers, and political (caste) leaders in the post-Independence period, including persons concerned with sports, films, and the army. The book is dedicated to four great personalities whose profiles cut across caste and religion (Medieval Gujjar King Atela, Uda Devi Pasi, Vijay Singh Pathik and Rai Singh). The book has contradictory claims as it describes the above personalities to be Dalits as well as Gujjars. The author also uses a pan-Aryan frame to situate the Gujjars. There is a very interesting quote from the text: ‘For many centuries forefathers of Indians, Greeks, Germans and English (*jatis*) were the same—Dr. P. Gailles.’⁵ The author thus emphasizes two important positions of Gujjar history:

- a) without Gujjar history it is not possible to understand Aryan civilisation and;
- b) Gujjar civilisation includes all religions and castes (1998; I).

In this book, the author calls on Gujjars to organise themselves against the ruling minority of upper castes and demand a fair share in national resources since they and other similar castes have contributed immensely to society, not only during the freedom struggle but also in post-Independence India. This history has included 300 million Gujjars all over India and also claimed their global presence in Europe, Russia, Central Asia and the USA.

In another history booklet, *Veer Gujjar* by Satyaveer Gujjar (2001), the author exhorts his caste men: 'We should feel great pride at being Gujjars since we are secular' (2001: cover page). He says, 'Gujjars from all over India have to unite to get seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. Since Gujjars have been the ruling caste in India, they should try to regain political power and contribute to the nation (India) building' (2001: 24). Articulation of caste in this fashion offers an organic critique of modernization theory that understands caste as an anachronistic and primordial form of identity and therefore has no role to play in modern democratic state formation and nation-building.

In the third case, the Bhartiya Gujjar Samaj and Yuva Gujjar Munch Uttar Pradesh jointly publish a monthly journal called *Gujjar Veer Rashtriya Hindi Patra*. The journal informs Gujjars about their history and lists Gujjars who have contributed to the Indian nation in different capacities. Its main focus is to tell people about the social status of Gujjars, who are claimed to have been '*kshatriya* kings' at different times on the Indian continent. At the same time, there are appeals published in many issues that Gujjars should abandon age-old practices and participate in modern education. It is common in rural and urban Meerut to find this journal in middle-class Gujjar households and people read this publication in groups.

In addition to that, this journal regularly publishes a column on the origin of the Gujjars. The myth of origin goes back to the Hindu god, Brahma, who married Gayatri, a Gujjar virgin girl, performing a *havan*, a ritual in Pushkar, Rajasthan. Thus, Gujjars trace their origin and kinship in the divine union of Brahma and Gayatri. According to Devendra Singh Pratihar (56), the column writer, 'Brahma was born from the Vishnu god. Thus, Vishnu is also Brahma'. Further, he goes on to say, 'Pushkar is our sacred place where the Gujjars originated and our god is Devanarayan, who is a *kalki* incarnation of Vishnu'. This is how the Gujjar writers, historians, and activists claim their origin and their connection with the Hindu divine gods. These accounts of the divine origin of the Gujjars have become more visible and pronounced in the booklets, pamphlets, and journals published in the 1980s and since then.

Roop Lal Verma wrote a history booklet titled *Gujjar: Ek Vijeta Jati* in 1908. This book has 111 pages, including a preface and a short bibliography. The book was published by the India Press, Saharanpur under the auspices of the Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) which was also formed in the same year in a meeting held in Muzaffarnagar.⁶ In fact, this is the oldest book I could find about the Gujjars written by a Gujjar author. This shows that writing about caste-self has been going on for more than a century. (Risley, 1891; 1908)

has pointed out how caste associations made claims (of their caste statuses) towards the end of the nineteenth century when the British first started the census.⁷ In his book, Verma (1908) reiterated that the Gujjars were the real *kshatriyas* winning battles and establishing empires. He wrote, ‘Gujjars are kshatriyas. Gujjars had defended the boundaries of Bharat since ancient times. First, they defended Bharat from the Arabs in 781AD on the Gujarat borders, and the later Gujjars aborted the attacks of the central Asian marauders’ (36–39). Further, he wrote, ‘Gujjar is a Sanskrit word which means destroyer of the enemy (*shatru nashak*). However, during the British rule Gujjars lost their glory’.

Additionally, there are several booklets and magazines which throw light on unknown or little-known Gujjar kings (ancient and medieval), freedom fighters (of 1857), and modern political leaders. These booklets and magazines are published and distributed (and sold at nominal prices) during caste association meetings or commemorative events of caste heroes. Some of these booklets and magazines have been published by Navbharat Press, Meerut under the auspices of the ABGVM. Subhas Gujjar, a lecturer of geography and history has edited some of these publications. A Gujjar lawyer, Sushil Bhati—who wrote a biography-cum-alternative ‘history’ of Vijay Singh Pathik and the 1857 struggle—threw light on the role of Kotwal Dhan Singh in the Meerut rebellion of the 1857. These writers have used colonial documents and ethnographies selectively to authenticate their claims about history.

Colonial ethnographies written by the Census commissioners and other administrators have played a crucial role in the projection of certain kinds of images of caste in the everyday life of villagers. These ethnographies have been great resources for contemporary, vernacular history writings. Gujjar writers and thinkers frequently refer to colonial ethnographic sources, gazetteers, reports, etc., produced under the colonial government which are used very selectively in these contemporary caste histories and journals. A large portion of these colonial writings came from folk stories and local proverbial knowledge. Once recorded in colonial government publications, however, these stories became frozen as ‘historical fact’, circulating in contemporary oral traditions and endorsed by the Gujjars themselves (For example, William Crooke wrote about caste and tribe in north India and United Provinces and mentioned that the Gujjars were rebel by nature and notorious for not living peacefully in the Upper Doab region. He highlighted the Gujjar King and his influence in the region and told how Gujjars were very clever cattle thieves (1975).

The caste histories published during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s revolve around caste heroes and the role of caste members during the freedom struggle. These histories are guided by inclusionary egalitarian and citizenship discourses. These caste histories point out three things and revolve around the following issues:

- a) ancientness (roots in myths, Puranas and local narratives of caste members blended with vernacular writings) of the caste and its relations to ruling dynasties;

- b) contributions of the caste heroes/legends/members in the freedom struggle and to the nation after Independence in the fields of sports, army, social work and politics by individual caste icons;
- c) contemporary economic and political marginalisation of the caste and demands for its redressal to the state.

Gujjar history romanticizes an imagination of a larger community, including similar castes and sub-castes beyond the Hindu religion and Indian nation. As one of the authors says, ‘Gujjars are secular since the Gujjar is a civilization and encompass all religions of the world’ (Verma 1998). Their claim for a proportional share in the national resources and public employment is based on their contribution to the Indian nation.

The difference between 1908 and 1998 writings lies in their claim-making. In 1908, R.L. Verma largely focused on the claim-making for Kshatriya status—a symbol of upward mobility in a caste-based society. But in 1953, P.S. Verma, a Dalit, wrote that ‘Gujjars are backwards, and they are left behind from Rajputs and Jats’. Interestingly, the 1998 revised version of the 1953 book made comprehensive and contradictory claims which highlighted the role of Gujjar heroes in the 1857 struggle, and demanded justice for their backward caste status while romanticising their Kshatriya past. It seems that the 1998 version of history had been influenced by the rise of the low caste parties in the 1990s, the ‘Silent Revolution’ (Jaffrelot 2003). Besides this, these caste histories and the larger literature is also influenced by the Hindu nationalist rhetoric which informs these texts, portraying Devnarayan as a historical person and his native place Pushkar. As I have mentioned before, in the 2000s Gujjars demanded and claimed the status of Scheduled Caste (ST), moving from the section denoting them as a criminal tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act of the British time. The above description illustrates that these *gaurav gathas* or history booklets are not fixed but change according to time and economic-political conditions.

In summing up, I should emphasize here that Gujjars in Khanpur and the city of Meerut generally do not need historical evidence to believe that they descend from Brahma (Vishnu) and Gayatri. In their eyes, the religious shrines (like Pushkar) are not false, even if they are not historically proved. In everyday talk, Gujjars provide accounts of their past which are at once historical, ahistorical and imbued with a mythological aura to which religious meanings are attached. These accounts are passed through generations and across places by people telling and re-telling them. Thus, they are part of the living memory and the tradition of storytelling rather claiming the truth.

Similarly, other caste groups within the OBCs—such as Gaderiya, Sainis or Kumhars—ferociously write and re-write their *gaurav gathas* in the light of the events of 1857. For instance, at the 2017 Meerut meeting, All India Saini-Kushwaha Mahasabha demanded a fair share in national resources, such as public sector jobs and representation in political parties.⁸ These writings are not meant only for politico-economic gain but also for creating confidence

among community members about their rich culture. There is an emerging political culture among the low castes such as OBCs and Dalits. These groups, by relating themselves to the 1857 rebellion, reinterpret it and show their contribution to the struggle for freedom.

What emerges from these texts is a desire for self-respect and recognition and a search for identity. These histories also redefine the notion of nation and secularism which has larger implications. Here it is important to draw upon what Guru (2005) stressed: that 'the Dalit and marginalized should claim the categories of secularism and nationalism'. This claiming of categories such as secular, social justice and recognition, has a profound impact on the political and the way notions of 'secularism' and 'nation' have been defined by the elite in modern India. Ordinary people have their imagination and sense of living together, and they practice categories of 'secularism' and 'nation' in ways which might be different from European modern thinkers or Indian scholars who are deeply influenced by them. The quest of these caste groups is influenced by the contemporary political, social and economic changes and discourse around them. Economically and educationally, middle-class individuals of caste(s) under *jati samajs* or caste associations are indirectly or directly involved in the writing and rewriting of caste(s) histories to contest local hegemonies and caste structures. Caste associations run monthly journals and publish directories of their caste members. All writings are published in Hindi.

As shown earlier, these histories and other literature are published in cities like Meerut, Ghaziabad and Delhi, where the district and headquarter offices of these caste associations are located. It is purely an urban-educated middle class that is engaged in writing these alternative histories of lower castes. These histories are circulated through the village caste leaders and youths who are being educated outside the village and who often attend caste meetings and rallies in towns and cities. These histories give alternative surnames or caste names, which provide a sense of pride for lower-caste people who had been called by their traditional caste names, which are sometimes derogatory and humiliating, such as Chuhra or Gaderiya. These histories are mobilising people and bringing them closer in forming larger federations of castes or sub-castes to gain political representation and access to public resources. These caste histories offer counter-discourses to caste oppression and hierarchy.

The heroes in these histories have helped to create caste consciousness among the members of castes and sub-castes, and this is leading to the formation of a *samaj* or community without internal inequalities/differences. Political parties are using local heroes such as Dhan Singh Kotwal and reshaping them according to their political agendas, thus impacting the cultures of political participation in democratic politics in India.

While the writing of these histories partly relates to the state development schemes and classification (for example—the Mandal Commission report), in turn they resist state rationalities of classification and create an alternative identity and complex cultural past for the concerned group. For example,

Gujjars have been demanding inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list. Moreover, these histories help the subversion of the dominant discourse and provide a strong basis for alternative discourses. But there are contradictions. While this process leads to the decolonization of these state-created categories (such as OBCs), the homogenous approach adopted by Gujjar caste politicians who combine different lower caste communities belonging to a single category is contradicted by the history of specific lower caste communities.

Moreover, these histories produce alternative national cultures. In the same way, the discourse of egalitarianism and the notion of equality are appropriated from global universalist language and the Indian Constitution, being deployed and used in multiple contradictory ways. While caste associations seek economic equality among castes, they do not do so within the caste, especially with the economically lower members or between genders.

Postcolonial Aspirations: *Samajikaran* of Caste

For almost the last two decades, the Gujjars have been demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status across north India.⁹ However, they face the challenge of how to unify different tribes and sub-castes of the Gujjars together to form a pan-Indian Gujjar caste-community in order to strengthen their claims. In the previous sections, I have shown the ways in which different caste associations, along with political parties, are trying to create a homogenous Gujjar community. Such attempts were also made in 2003 and 2007, when the Gujjars in Rajasthan protested for inclusion in the ST category. Gujjars across north India showed their support for their brethren in Rajasthan. The agitation found an echo in other parts of India. Gujjars from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi launched violent protests in support of their Rajasthan brothers. Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) along with other caste associations called on its members to join the protest and support the Gujjar *samaj*. In western Uttar Pradesh, Gujjar protesters blocked rail tracks and disrupted traffic in several places such as Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur, and NCR. During the 2007 protests, when Gujjar agitation was on its peak, ABGM held a meeting in Civil Lines Meerut and issued a handbill. In the handbill (as well as in the press release), Gujjar *samaj* sought to embed themselves into the narrative of nation-building:

Gujjar *samaj* is a big community, which has always made sacrifices to safeguard the *Desh* (Nation). The Gujjar *samaj* has contributed to India by making it prosperous through trade and agriculture. The Gujjars have played an important role in the freedom struggle. After Independence, it was expected that Gujjars would receive justice and equal opportunities to develop, but this did not happen. Our sons are roaming around without jobs and education. Inclusion of the Gujjars into the OBCs has created discrimination as the Gujjars are unable to

compete with upwardly mobile OBCs like the Yadavs, the Kurmis, the Jats (in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh). Gujjars should be included in the ST, and the Gujjar *samaj* deserves this. The government should treat all *samajs* equally but otherwise.¹⁰

In Meerut, meetings of the Gujjar caste associations and the production of printed material such as the above is a regular affair. Caste associations continue to issue press releases and handbills. In this handbill, the Gujjar community is written into the spatial, political and symbolic structures of the national state. Having established their loyalty to the nation-state—as participating in a shared Indian history and the struggle against colonial oppression—the Gujjar *samaj* inveighs against the failure of the state to deliver on its promises of just and democratic rule. By invoking discrimination—being sidelined and mistreated by the government (*sarkar*), which favours the other *samajs*—Gujjars seek to differentiate themselves from the other caste groups (Yadavs, Jats and Kurmis) which are still part of the Shudra or ‘backward classes’, but which have now become increasingly prosperous by accruing benefits meant for the all OBCs. The handbill continues to specify a list of the Gujjar’s demands from the government. The Gujjar mobilization of June 2007 was multi-faceted. These demands are designed to establish their democratic aspirations and their constitutional right to be treated equally.

During these mobilizations and protest movements, different Gujjar caste associations came together and presented a picture of a pan-Indian Gujjar Samaj. In fact, there were also attempts to forge an International Gujjar Samaj. These mobilizations were a show of strength—the demonstration of numbers in order to bargain with the state. In these articulations, *samaj* is imagined as one cultural unit and a sense of solidarity is shown. In these articulations the Gujjars are fascinated with blood and divine kinship (Michelutti, 2008).

This shows how *jati* are transforming into, and acting as, *samaj* thereby coming closer to a cultural community. Not only did the Gujjars of north India (including western UP) support their brethren in the 2007 protests but the caste associations also created a sense of homogenous community by organizing collective wedding programs and projecting Devnarayan as the pan-Gujjar deity. The caste elites take the lead in forming *samaj* through the logic of blood (birth and descent) or in other words ‘culturalization of caste’, a process that socially constructs caste as a cultural community. This is done by producing, organizing, instituting, and disciplining the ‘culture’ of a caste group and representing caste officially as cultural difference or ethnicity (Natrajan 2011). In this process, attempts are made to codify the ‘culture’ of *samaj*, that is community customs and so called ‘traditions’. Caste associations present these customs and traditions not only to the members but also to the state, which confers legitimacy to *samaj* under democracy. *Samaj* exists alongside *jati*, in ideological conflict, because these are qualitatively different ways of enjoining group ‘belonging’. Despite attempts by elites to homogenize its internal structure,

samaj does not always imply a shared cultural identity or common interest among members. Intra-caste (*jati*) economic inequalities and class differences are well documented and keep surfacing during caste meetings and caste ritual-festivals. The claims of *samaj* to transform caste into cultural identity is, therefore, at best tenuous and unstable, due to internal contestations of ‘culture’ and also since *jati* ultimately comes back to define *samaj*.

Thus, this refashioning of self by caste/associations is being articulated through the notion of social equality with upper castes and within sub-castes and clans (which had been part of hierarchical structures in recent past) and not with lower castes. For instance, while Gujjars demand equality with the upper caste, they do not treat lower OBCs such as Kumhar or Dalits as their equals. Demands for a proportional share in public resources and collective identity (respect) are based on communitarian claims rather the notion of citizenship or individual identity. Attempts to form *samajs* or cultural communities seem to ignore these contradictions.

In this chapter, I attempted to illustrate the relation between the socio-political conditions of identity formation and the production of culturally viable pasts. Gujjar leaders, activists, and historians interpreted and manipulated the colonial and post-colonial past through the lens of historically familiar cultural resources and the practices of caste. These interpretations helped them to ‘define’ and ‘re-define’ their community according to their political aspirations. This material suggests that the past is always practiced in the present, not because the past imposes itself, but because subjects (Gujjars) in the present fashion the past in the practice of their social identity. Throughout the chapter, I have shown how the caste system has been changing, and the ways in which a caste is morphing into a *samaj* or cultural community. Gujjar caste associations have successfully deployed folk and religious understanding to project *samaj* as a ‘natural’ community that has emerged from the same descent and blood. Thus, the result is *samajikaran* of caste. This discussion further reveals the ways in which Gujjar self-fashioning is shaped by democratic politics and contemporary concerns.

Gujjars, by re-interpreting the 1857 and re-writing history, demonstrate the desire to achieve dignity and social mobility alongside caste solidarity—that is, to preserve the unity of the caste by investing in novel organisational forms. Caste organisations/associations gain visibility through performances that serve as platforms for positive engagement with caste (see also Arun, 2007; Mines, 1996). The story has a particular twist in the Gujjar case. Gujjars start from a position as ‘downtrodden’, and while the majority of Gujjars remain disadvantaged this need not undermine the desire to value caste traditions and caste solidarity. Public displays of caste pride are engineered by caste elites, whose experience of caste inequality and the harshness of caste hierarchy has been substantially cushioned by affirmative action and career success.

While emphasising cultural identity, my argument does not deny the persistent significance of caste as a hierarchy. I also acknowledge that political mobilisation is a major unifying force that shapes castes as identity groups in contemporary India. While these two positions are well explored in the literature, I aim to draw

attention to the fact that caste is not exhausted in its political dimension. Gujjars readily admit that, today, caste relations do not structure everyday life in the either village or in the city (Meerut). Yet they also affirm that the caste community offers emotional support and has symbolic functions, demonstrated in the collective celebration of life cycle rituals such as funerals and marriages along with new rituals such as Devnarayan Jayati. I will discuss in details the rise of the god, Devenaran, in Chapter 4.

It has long been argued that caste shares traits with ethnicity (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994). The similarities certainly increase when—under the pressures of globalisation, de-territorialisation, urbanisation—caste and ethnicity undergo reification (Michelutti, 2008). In this process, symbolic markers become paramount for articulating collective identity (Kapferer, 1988). These identity markers draw on a wide range of resources, practices, and sentiments that nurture a sense of belonging, for example, through a festival culture and descent theories of origin produce a ‘community of feeling’. Caste demands affirmation in a context that threatens to dilute it. It finds new existence in a cultural formation that emphasizes ritual union and divine kinship in the wake of economic and socio-political transformation in post-economic reforms in the 1990s. The emerging new global, economic, and political conditions reaffirm caste and its new avatar *samaj* as a cultural community without insisting on economic homogeneity, ideological conformity, or spatial proximity. However, the production of this cultural community as *samaj* is closely connected with political projects which define how the past has to be represented. Thus, symbolic, emotional, and political are intertwined in the process of identity formation.

Self-fashioning and re-construction of the past is not confined just to Gujjars but any community or group which feels outside of the history/national history. However, these narratives of the past that are freed from the constraint of the archive and discipline of evidence that is not history in the modern sense. However, we cannot dismiss these narratives and constructions of the past. These narratives pose a challenge for professional historians in how to deal with them. While the immediate repercussions of the controversy over caste histories relate to debates about the past and identity, there are broader implications for historical anthropology in general: how can a multiplicity of constructions of the past and modes of constructing the past be acknowledged without lapsing into an uncritical relativism? This also has to be answered by professional historians. The following chapter takes this debate further and explores the religious aspects of local Gujjar processes of *samajikaran* (substantialisation) and political uprising.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the chapter I use caste and *jati* interchangeably.
- 2 Om ‘Gumi’ was a landowner farmer from the Gumi village adjoining the Meerut city. In the early 1990s, his farmland was taken over by the UP government to build

a bypass in Meerut. He became a millionaire through the compensation he received from the government. In 1996 he joined the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and simultaneously also launched Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Vikas Manch (ABGVM). He regularly organized meetings of the Manch in the city of Meerut. He declared himself a social worker who had been working for his Gujjar *samaj*. Gumi built a farmhouse at the outskirts of the city along with an auditorium, which he named after Dhan Singh Kotwal. From 1996 to 2012 Gumi served the BSP and remained with the party while expanding membership and activities of the ABGVM. In 2013, he quitted the BSP and joined the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) that supported Gumi's efforts to highlight Dhan Singh Kotwal's role in 1857-the First War of Independence. Gumi patronized and promoted writers like Rushil Bhati to write Gujjar history which had been neglected by both nationalist and Marxist historians. He advised Rushil to focus on the 1857 rebellion and to highlight the important role the Gujjar revolutionaries played in the freedom struggle. In the early 1990s, Gumi and his followers, first time, raised the name of Dhan Singh Kotwal and his role in the 1857 Meerut rebellion. Gradually, Gumi gathered around and connected lots of young men like Rushil with the ABGVM, and caught the attention of media and Gujjar politicians including the RSS and BJP activists.

- 3 In colonial discourse, occupation and caste often conflated, so that even though not all Gujjars were agriculturist and pastoralist they were commonly registered as such.
- 4 www.facebook.com/pages/Akhil-Bhartiya-Yuva-Gujjar-Mahasabha/181822215247152
- 5 The source of this quotation is not mentioned in the text.
- 6 This was the first time (in 1908) that the Jats and Gujjars parted ways at this Muzaffarnagar Urs (fair) annual meeting. Up to this point, Jats and Gujjars would meet jointly in Muzaffarnagar every year on the same march under the Jat association/*samaj*. However, in 1908 they both agreed to separate their manches and the Gujjars announced the formation of Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha (Verma, R L, 1908: 11). The separation was not caused by any acrimony or dispute. In fact, Jat leaders facilitated the Gujjars' quest for separate identity.
- 7 Risely, H.H. (1891). *Tribe and Caste of Bengal*, Calcutta; Risely, H.H. (1908). *The People of India*, Calcutta.
- 8 Field notes, 27 August 2017, Meerut.
- 9 The Gujjar agitation and their demand for the ST status not only challenge the state categorization and colonial and postcolonial continuity but also add confusion whether groups such as these constitute a tribe or a caste. While Xaxa (2003) emphasizes that tribe is a colonial construction, other view 'tribes in transition' (Beteille, 1991) and sustain the distinction between caste and tribe. However, Sundar critiques the tribe-caste distinction (1998).
- 10 Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha, Handbill, Meerut, 2007. Also field notes, Meerut, 29 May 2007.

THE RISE OF SHRI DEVNARAYAN BHAGVAN

From Lineage Deities to Caste Deity

In Mawana and its neighbouring villages, the worship of local male lineage deities (*kuldevtas*) has been gradually substituted with Bhagvan Devnarayan—the Gujjar caste deity. Similarly, the village ‘female’ lineage deities (*kuldevis*) have been renamed and transmuted into vegetarian *vaishno devi*, whose foundation myths are now deeply linked with the mythology of Radha. Gujjars in Meerut district believe that Radha (wife of the god Krishna) was a Gujjar. Thus, in popular and everyday discourse, Gujjars also trace their association with Radha and Shri Krishna. Today, Devnarayan has emerged as the deity of the Gujjars (Aradhya Dev) in UP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana. The transformation of local lineage deities is accompanied by ‘sanskritization’ and a strengthening of the pollution barrier which separates the clean castes from the unclean (i.e., untouchable), though in new ways.

This chapter explores these entangled phenomena, and, focuses on how lineage and agrarian deities have been superseded by Bhagvan Devenarayan. I believe that the study of the processes of transformation of Gujjar *kuldevtas* helps us to understand the ongoing processes of caste substantialization and its interlinkages with democratic politics (Harlan 1992: 12). More importantly, it offers a valid window in exploring how ‘democracy’ has become embedded into the realm of popular religion and caste bodies (Michelutti 2008: 2019).

The Arya Samaj and Religious Reforms

In the previous chapter I showed how the re-writing of caste hi(stories) has been shaped by the nationalist narratives. These Gujjar writings contribute further to re-shaping Devnarayan as the ‘historical’ ancestor of the Gujjars. The Arya Samaj movement has been instrumental in re-shaping the religious practices and imagination of the Gujjars in late 19th and early 20th century in UP, Haryana, Delhi, and Punjab (Saxena 1990).¹ Arya Samaj challenged Hindu orthodoxy, particularly the caste system, untouchability, infant marriages, forced widowhood, ‘*sati*’, infanticide, and numerous other superstitions degenerating Hinduism in social life (Rai 1967). The Arya Samaj deeply influenced

and transformed Hinduism in the 1920s and 1930s (Dalmia 1997). The Arya Samaj developed its organizations at different levels—village, district, province and even international. In the major Uttar Pradesh cities, the Arya Samaj movement attracted and recruited several influential individuals from different caste groups. Cities like Meerut, Agra, and Kanpur emerged as sites for increasingly militant and public expressions of Hinduism. Trading communities played an important role in these transformations through the patronage of religious festivals and temple construction and sponsoring festivals. Economic mobility helped these caste groups to assert their status and culture. In so doing, many of the Shudra or Other Backward caste groups re-fashioned their status as Kshatriyas and ancient kings who fought against invaders who had played crucial role in history as protectors of Hinduism (Bhati 2008: 36).

As discussed in Chapter 3, Gujjars had particular cultural resources which helped them to claim and assert themselves as Kshatriyas. The emphasis on the Kshatriyas and martial essence of Devnarayan was concomitant with sanskritization. Hindu reformist organizations like the Arya Samaj provided a language and platform for sanskritization and the purification of castes such as Jats and Gujjars. By propagating vegetarianism, non-violence, and asceticism, the Arya Samaj brought these Shudra castes closer to Brahminical Hinduism. Gradually, vegetarianism has become one of the markers of Brahminical Hinduism in attaining higher caste status. The Arya Samaj campaigned strongly to eradicate the animal sacrifice which was associated with impurity and low status. It underlined in its preaching that animal sacrifice was inferior to vegetarian worship (Saxena 1990).

The Arya Samaj reinforced, vegetarianism which found resonance with the Vaishnava devotional movements and, in more recent times, with Hindu reformist movements and Hindu nationalism. The Vaishnava religious tradition prohibited animal sacrifice and the consumption of meat. Such has been the influence of the Vaishnava tradition pushed by Arya Samaj in western UP, that deities like Bhadra Kali have gradually given meat and become vegetarian (Saxena 1990).

Arya Samaj in Meerut and Khanpur

In the 1920s, attempts were made to spread the Arya Samaj organizations in the Meerut villages through inter-caste committees and *kirtan mandalis* (devotional music bands) which included members from the SCs and backward castes (Shivadayalu 1963. Vishnu Sharan Dublsh of Mawana and Pt. Tulsi Ram of Parikshatgarh were at the front of this mobilization and influenced a large number of villagers in northern rural Meerut (Prakash 1978). Many influential Jat, Gujjar, Rajput, and Bania (Vaishya caste) people were inspired by the Arya Samaj teachings, such as the abolition of untouchability, the caste system, ritual, and idol worship (Saxena 1990). These Arya Samaj understandings of ‘Hinduism’ have easily found acceptance in Khanpur village and its neighbourhood where these trends are historically present in people’s everyday lives.

Sevaram (67) (from the Mukhia family) told me that, “My grandfather, Mangat Ram Gujjar came in contact with Dublsh and Tulsi Ram who motivated him to start a *kirtan mandali*, which would go *mohalla* to *mohalla* and village to village to perform devotional musical evenings”. After the musical performance, the members of the *mandali* would preach about unity of Hindus, the greatness of Vedas, higher value of vegetarianism and non-violence, the sickness of the caste system and the evils of alcohol etc. (Saxena 1990).

Over the last three decades, a number of local Gujjars have become followers of devotional sects like the Radha Swami, Mohan Baba (Kali Kholi wale) and Anandpur Sahib which propagate vegetarianism and non-violence. However, the Khanpur Gujjars have been greatly influenced by the vegetarian and non-sacrifice ethos of the Arya Samaj. A legacy of this is that, today, older Gujjar informants often point out that ‘the Arya Samaj’ demanded that they abandon animal sacrifice.² During my fieldwork, when I asked informants if they performed animal sacrifice, they responded, “No. It is a lower caste practice”. Many villagers, in particular agrarian castes such as Jat, Gujjar, Ahir and Rajput, followed the Arya Samaj rules about animal sacrifice and vegetarianism in Meerut. Thus, Gujjar informants explicitly acknowledged the influence of the Arya Samaj in their religious practices and identity. However, Gujjars also explicitly said that they had never abandoned the cult of their deities, as the Arya Samaj asked, since their deities are part of their cultural cosmology. While Gujjars have adopted the social reforms propagated by the Arya Samaj, they continue to adhere to their deities and continue to claim *kshatriyaness*. It thus became an Arya Samaji form of Hinduism; their assertion of Gujjar identity and following the cult deities does not challenge Hinduism—they are complementary to each other.

Gradually, the Arya Samaj movement got weaker and was taken over by the Sangh Parivar across western UP. Initially, the Sangh Parivar joined Arya Samaj temples but later on totally took them over in the 1980s and 1990s. The Arya Samaj gave the Sangh Parivar readymade grounds for religious mobilization rather than religious reform. The Sangh Parivar and its associate Hindu nationalists promote ‘Hindu’ as an homogenous and uniform religion encoded in texts. As we have seen, this legacy comes from the Arya Samaj which condemned sacrifice and valued vegetarianism, following the Vedas. Hinduism considers Sanskritic vegetarianism, and the deities whose ‘substantial’ nature tends to display ‘relational divinities’, as superior (Fuller 1992). The Arya Samaj had attempted to project all gods and goddesses as vegetarians, and dissociated gods with blood sacrifices and meat eating. Gradually, all local female deities converted into ‘Santoshi Mata’ or ‘Vaishno Devi’, pure vegetarian goddesses. This sort of uniformity and relationship with the superior gods appealed to the Gujjars who had aspired to be a part of mainstream Hindu society and middle-class culture. The Gujjar utilized these reformist practices and ideologies to claim *kshatriya* status on the one hand and to relate with the nationalist discourse on the other.

In response to the reforms initiated by the ABGM and other Gujjar caste associations, along with Arya Samaj Hindu reformist movements of the last 100 years, the Gujjars of Meerut and Khanpur have been influenced by the ideology of vegetarianism and unified Hinduism. Consequently, they have given up the cults of ‘blood demanding’ gods and goddesses. Thus, Gujjars have gradually transformed their lineage and village deities into vegetarians like their devotees. Over the last three generations, Gujjars have given up sacrificial practices and they are now seen as a ‘low’ ritual—a ritual that ‘backward castes’ perform.

Culture and Politics of Food

In Khanpur, more and more Gujjar households are claiming to be vegetarian which is seen as a higher value. As I mentioned in the previous section, the sects of Radha Swami and Mohan Baba are quite popular among villagers in Meerut. The followers of these sects have also increased in Khanpur over the last three decades, since these sects preach vegetarianism and non-alcoholism is the same way as the Arya Samaj. These sects also connect villagers with the higher values of Sangh Parivar’s Hinduism, such as vegetarianism.

During my fieldwork, I was often invited to meat-whisky parties organized either in male *baithaks* or in fields (outside village) by the younger Gujjar men. Sometimes older men and members of other castes were also seen at these parties. These parties in Khanpur were normal and a monthly event. These events were described to me as a way of socializing and as a male-bonding activity. I realized, eventually, that eating meat was common among young male Gujjars. However, non-vegetarian food items were not cooked inside the home/kitchen as Gujjar women considered it a low caste value. Eating meat (and drinking liquor) were thus day-to-day leisure activities for men and considered a part of masculine culture. The meat-whisky parties were an open secret, not discussed in the presence of vegetarians (mostly women, elders and devotees of the Radha Swami and Mohan Baba sects). While wrestling has been common among young men for a few years, going to the gym is a new trend. Cricket as a sport is very popular among young Gujjars. Often winning a cricket match leads to a drink (liquor) party. This is also a part of emerging masculine culture.

In everyday Gujjar conversations, two legitimate reasons were given for the consumption of meat.³ Some Gujjars think that it is acceptable for a warrior to eat meat as *kshatriya* life allows it and, second, in cases of medical necessity meat, because of its high protein value, helps strengthen immunity. These two exceptions overlap with Ayurvedic medicine practices and Hindu political-religious traditions. Often, I found men discussing how mutton broth was good for bone-related diseases or the medicinal value of the pigeon’s meat for elders during the winter season.

In Khanpur and its vicinity, there are no pubs or bars. However, in Mawana, which is not very far from Khanpur, Model Liquor Shops have acquired the status of pubs. Sometimes, during the day, the young men of Khanpur are seen

in these shops for their parties and picnics. However, these shops are totally masculine spaces and no woman is seen around them. In fact, not only these shops but their surroundings are considered ‘prohibited’ places for women. A typical thing to observe is that many young Gujjars only drink beer, which they do not consider as alcohol. However, alcohol is now an everyday part of male Gujjar leisure activities.

Despite the increasing consumption of alcohol, Khanpur’s Gujjars romanticized and believed that the consumption of milk and *ghee* (purified butter) gives them strength. According to common understanding, a diet rich in fat strengthens body and also functions to cool down a body of a young man. It seems young Gujjar men need meat and liquor to project their masculinity. Thus, eating meat is justified in order to enhance masculine characteristics and aggression.

In discussions, Gujjar participants in these parties would always say that they were *kshatriyas*—since time immemorial they have eaten meat and drunk alcohol as this is a natural diet for *kshatriyas* who have to fight wars. In this context, ideas of dharma and of *artha* are brought together with warfare, hunting, and the necessities of medicine (Zimmermann 1987: 184–85). Eating pork (especially wild from pigs), I was told very confidentially, was a good source of building muscles. Many elder informants also shared that eating partridge is good for the aged. Similarly, eggs are considered good for young children along with milk. Eating meat is therefore locally and culturally legitimated in the similar ways as the violence and immorality shape politics. In everyday Gujjar discourse on politics and power, *saam* (request/begging), *daam* (price), *danda* (fear/force) and *bhed* (blackmail/treachery) are legitimized. This has a resonance in the Hindu political philosophy of *dandaniti* which legitimizes force (Dumont 1980: 302). Recent political ethnographies have highlighted that force, flexibility, and alliances are the essential building blocks of political positions and power (Ruud 2000: 134; Michelutti 2008: 147).

I participated in the meat-liquor parties regularly and this participation offered me the opportunity to attend formal and informal political meetings, too, particularly during elections time. Gujjars would make political alliances with different caste groups at different times. Commensality is a key strategy in constructing political alliances and holds true in Khanpur (Mayer 1960; Michelutti 2008; Kumar 2019). Sharing drink and smoking (*hookah*) with similar castes such as Jats or Ahirs contributed towards Gujjars gaining power and position. Eating, drinking, and smoking together are social mechanisms that achieve closeness and political support in Khanpur (Kumar 2019: 49). It is the commensality among castes which creates the political patronage and power equations for the Gujjars. As a Gujjar political leader mentioned several times, a clever politician needs to compromise and needs to be friends with everybody. Hence, eating and drinking (meat and liquor) with other castes is acceptable for Gujjar politicians and is a political strategy.

However, practices of purity and pollution still guide everyday interactions between Gujjars and Dalits over the practices of commensality. In Khanpur, the

pollution barrier between clean castes and unclean castes is a lively social reality. Khanpur Gujjars do not allow Jatavs (traditionally leather-workers) and Valmikis (sweepers) into their kitchen spaces. Gujjar women consistently told me that the worst violation of their sacred kitchen would be the presence of an SC or a Muslim. They could tolerate other presences but even the more broad-minded could not conceive of having a low-caste person in their kitchen. Jatavs cannot sit in the Gujjar's chairs or beds but on plastic chairs. The arrival of plastic chairs and cups has changed certain behavioural practices. However, they have not ended the ideology of purity.

One important change in the last decade has been that Jatavs no longer remove dead animals such as cows and buffaloes. The removal of dead animals has been taken over by a contractor, a Khatik man (SC) who works with the Mawana Block office. This Khatik man is a BJP supporter and had contested municipal councillor elections on the BJP ticket. Most of the Jatavs in Khanpur are BSP supporters. In the early 1990s, Gujjars from Khanpur and Hasitanpur started supporting the BSP, having realized they have a better political future. The BSP attracted Gujjars by giving them representation in the party organization as well as in ticket distribution. This Gujjar-Jatav alliance was short-lived and ended after the Bhikund incident in Parikshatgarh in which Gujjars and Jatavs killed each other. Gradually, the Gujjars shifted to the SP and divided between the SP and BJP after 2014. There are still some Gujjars who are closely associated with the BSP. In Meerut and western UP, the BJP has been quite successful wooing Gujjars by giving them organizational positions in the party at district and divisional levels, along with honouring Gujjar icons and legends in public places.

Divine Relationships

Among Gujjars, prominence is given to exogamous patrilineal kin groups such as lineages and clans. Only males are recognized as members of the lineage.⁴ However, only married male heads of households can exercise the full rights and obligations of lineage membership. Members of the same lineage are supposed to share three attributes: claims of descent from a common ancestor, residential territory (place of origin), and a tutelary deity (*kuldevta*). This sharing of territory, tutelaries, and especially blood is crucial for their identification of themselves. For each lineage, their tutelary deity is their first and foremost god. Gradually, over some time, this primacy of the lineage tutelary deity has changed. In this section, I look at what is behind this ongoing transformation. I look at how 'religion' is contributing to the creation of a united and larger Gujjar community. I unravel the relationships between lineage deity cults and local Gujjars and their assimilation into the mythology of Devnarayan.

The religious cosmology of Gujjars is composed of gods and goddesses who are also ancestors. In each household, one can see that gods and ancestors are

placed at different locations. For instance, in Sevaram's home his *kuldevtas* are placed in the corner of the courtyard next to the *Tulsi* plant. Earlier his lineage, *kuldevats* were placed in the field next to the tube-well. Inside the house, pictures of Vaishno Devi and Shakumbhari Mata (an incarnation of Durga) are placed in the main bedroom. "All members of the Achauhan clan are Shakumbhari Mata's children", and "all Gujjars are related to Devnarayan Bhagvan". These are common statements which blur the relation between human beings and gods. Today, Gujjars trace a direct line of descent from the Bhagvan Devnarayan who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. This is a common belief. Devnarayan was both a Gujjar (and king) as well as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Therefore, gods and ancestors are related. Thus, ancestors can become gods and gods become ancestors (Michelutti 2014: 297; 2019: 202).

All Gujjar clans in Meerut and western UP claim their origin in Rajasthan (of course, some of them also link their origin to Central Asia) from where they migrated to different districts of Haryana, Delhi, and western UP (Bhati 2008). Thus, the sacred places of Rajasthan are closely interwoven in Gujjar's stories of origin and associated legends. The Gujjar's gods and lineage deities (from Rajasthan) are often glorified cow herders.

Among the pastoral communities, defending and rescuing cattle was a successful way to begin a dynasty. Such a feat would make the defender a hero and secure him prosperity or, if he was killed in battle, bring renown to him and his descendants.

(Sontheimer 1993: 101)

Worship of hero-gods is common among rural castes across north India. Members of lower and middle-ranking rural castes (such as the Ahirs, the Gaderiyas, the Kumbars, the Malis, the Pais, and the Jatavs) constitute most of their followers (Amin 2015). In the folklore of pastoral communities, any person can become a 'deified hero'. However, in northern India, the members of communities such as the Gujjars and Ahirs are considered to be more likely to attain the status of hero-gods than members of other castes (Michelutti 2008). The Gujjars are said to have 'heroic substance' (Verma 1987). Gujjars project themselves as fighters and leaders. The Hindi oral epic of Allaha and Udal, understood by many Gujjars as their oral history, highlights the heroism of their ancestors and provides 'proof of Gujjar bravery' by claiming themselves as the descendants of Pratihars and Chauhans. The Yadvas of Mathura also claim this oral epic as their history (Michelutti 2008).

Gujjars connect with their hero-gods by building memorials. Tradition holds that the hero-gods were human in the past and that they died in extraordinary events such as a battle or a fight with *zamindars*, or with the Muslim kings. These battles usually revolved around the protection of 'cows' and 'Hindus'. Several folk songs (*raganis*) were composed narrating the story of the hero-gods. These hero-gods are called Pir Babas. Memorial shrines of these Pir Babas

are found across western UP. One such Pir Baba, popularly known Jahar Veer⁵ (or Goga Pir), is worshipped by agrarian castes, including Gujjars, across Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana and western UP. In Khanpur, the *pirs* are worshipped on Sunday/Thursday. The same day is devoted to the *puja* of the family deity/*kuldevtas*. Also, special *pujas* for family *devtas* are offered on Dussara, Diwali, and Holi. Most of my informants identified their present lineage/family deities with their ancestral place, the place from where their family members migrated. The younger generation is losing knowledge of the songs and epics connected to their worship. However, a new genre of popular songs/*ragni* is emerging in which these heroes are valued and praised.

In the following section, I describe the worship of Jahar Vir or Goga Pir (the snake-god), a hero-god and lineage deity whose main shrine is in Gogamedi, in the Hanumangarh district, in Rajasthan. The cult of Jahar has evolved over a period of time. It has experienced particularly great transformation over the last 50 years. Colonial records of the 19th century portrayed Jahar Vir as a 'hero-god', oral tales about whose magical powers spread through all the Rajasthan, Punjab and North-Western Provinces and Oudh (today Uttar Pradesh) (Crooke 1926). While talking and conversing with local Gujjar historians in Khanpur and Mawana, I found that, by the early 1920s, Jahar Vir had achieved a status as the guardian protector of the local agrarian castes, including Rajputs, Jats, Ahirs, and Gujjars. In the 1990s, two noticeable changes occurred. First, Jahar Vir appeared in the Gujjar (hi)stories and caste writings as a Gujjar deity (Verma, 1998; Bhati 2005). Second, initiated by the ABGM under the leadership of Dr Sanjay Chauhan Gujjar, a BJP political leader and incumbent MP, the Jahar *medi* in Parikshatgarh was refurbished, putting up a Shiva lingam next to Jahar.⁶ Four years ago, Jahar's *medi* was further converted into a Devnarayan temple by placing a big statue of the God Vishnu within it. Now, the Jahar *medi* and Shiv temple exist side by side with the Devarayan temple. However, both have a minor presence.

Emergence of Bhagvan Devnarayan

According to the villagers, the Mukhia and Ganje Parivars are believed to be the founders of Khanpur. They are both originally from Bhilwara, Rajasthan and have agnatic relations with the Gujjars of Tonk and Malwa Gujjars, where the shrine of Devnarayan lies.⁷ The same agnate group also reside in some of the villages of Bijnor district, around Parikshatgarh. Memories and oral hi (stories) establish that members of the same exogamous clusters moved together from Bhilwara and while a part settled down in Meerut, the rest settled down in the Parikshatgarh district of Bijnor. Devnarayan acquired both territory as well as a clan character. In rural Meerut and Khanpur, deities are largely divided into 'caste deities' and 'non-caste deities'. The caste deities belong to a particular caste. Devnarayan is a strictly Gujjar deity, both in Parikshatgarh and Asind (Bhilwara). Members of the Mukhia family of the Achauhan clan, in

various conversations, told me that Devnarayan was supposed to help them because he was their ancestor and, therefore, cared for them. The prevalent stories of Devnarayan in Khanpur and its vicinity were quite diverse and had emerged in different versions.

Sevaram (of the Mukhia family), belonging to the Achuhan gotra, told me that Devnarayan was his ancestor. He was an avatar and his main shrine is to be found in Asind, Bhilwara. He could not visit Asind despite his wishes. As mentioned before, in the 1990s the ABGM built a small temple in Parikshatgarh next to Jahar Vir *medi*. Sevaram visited Parikshatgarh a couple of times. The ABGM also appointed a Gujjar priest to the Devnarayan shrine while Jahar *medi* was taken care by a Mali/Saini family, a low caste family. In the early 1980s, the entire premises of the temple were taken over the ABGM, along with a so-called 'temple committee' dominated the Gujjars.

In the family of Sevaram (Mukhia), *puja* to Devnarayan is performed on Sunday by men or by married women. On Diwali and Holi, a special *puja* is performed by the headwoman of the family. Sevaram does not recall anyone from his family having sacrificed an animal to tutelary deities. Coconut, *kheer* (rice cooked in milk) and *puri* (fried *chapatti*) are offered as *prasad*. His father was greatly influenced by the Arya Samaj and Sevaram is a devotee of Radha Swami.

Gujjars in Khanpur and its vicinity narrate several stories about Devnarayan and his *chamatkars* (divine powers). These stories contained different versions of the hero-god legend. Devnarayan is said to be a Gujjar and a cow-protector.

Mahkar (68), the head of one of the Nagadi clan households of Khanpur narrated a story:

Devnarayan was a cow herder. He used to serve hundreds of cows. One day, he was attacked by the 'Muslims' in the jungle. He was killed. In the absence of their care provider the cows of Devnarayan were left starving. Devnarayan appeared in the dreams of the village headman and told him to look after his cows.

A different version, in which a Rajput Rana king is represented as a bad character in the folk tales in contemporary Khanpur and its region, is as follows:

Like the Lord Shri Krishna, Shri Devnarayan Bhagvan was also the protector of cows. Devnarayan used to see the cow Saremata as soon as he woke up in the morning. This cow was given to Sawai Bhoj by Rupnath, the Guru of Baghdawats. Devnarayan had 98,000 animal wealth. When the Rana (Rajput king) of Bhiyan seized the Devnarayan's cows, he fought with the Rana for the protection of the cows and liberated the cows from this Rajput king. The army of Devnarayan was outnumbered by cow herders. In this army, 1,444 were said to be cow herders, whose job was to graze the cows and protect the cows. Devnarayan gave his followers the message of protecting cows and being vegetarian.

The contrast between landed castes and pastoral ones is a common theme in historical anthropology. Rich comparative ethnographic materials from South India show disputes between pastoral castes and landed castes, and these are usually related to the protection of cows and the territory of pasture (Hiltebeitel, 1989). Other versions of Devnarayan's stories were told in Mawana and its neighbourhood; these, too, identify the enemies of the Gujjar cow herder Devnarayan with the Muslims or *zaminders*.

Gujjars, as a regional community, may belong to different religions like the Hindu, Muslim or Sikhs as seen in the western UP. However, Gujjar claims single identity of belonging to the fighters—the warrior or martial race. Gujjars also claim to be a branch of Rajputs. Thus, the matter is more complicated than appears in these narratives. Two contradictory processes are underway: while there is an attempt to integrate Gujjar identity into popular Hinduism, there are also ideologies of casteism and tribalism working simultaneously. This does not fit neatly with the thesis of ethnicization of caste (Dumont 1980; Fuller 1996; Michelutti 2008; 2019).

The Jahar Vir *medi* used to be for everyone, and agrarian lower caste devotees, in particular, would visit it in Parikshatgarh in the month of Savan (August-September) and offer *puja*.⁸ Jahar Vir is particularly popular among those engaged in agrarian pursuits, amongst whom the fear of snakebites is common. Legend has it that childless couples are blessed with children when they pray to Jahar Vir Goga Ji with true hearts. Jahar was born in 900 AD to Queen Bachchal (the daughter of a Rajput ruler, Kanwarpala who in 1173 AD ruled over Sirsa in present-day Haryana) and King Zewar of Dadrewa of the Chauhan Clan in the Churu district of Rajasthan (Gupta 1991: 29). However, as mentioned before, the Nagari (Nagar) Gujjars of Khanpur and Parikshatgarh claim that Jahar was a Gujjar king who had a close connection with Bijnor and Parikshatgarh. Ramlal Gujjar (66), the priest at the Jahar *medi*, Parikshatgarh told me that “Goga alias Jahar Veer’s maternal home is in Rehar village of Bijnor district. Jahar was married to a queen of Nagar clan, who reside around Parikshatgarh town and in Bijnor district in 24 villages”.

Several Gujjar and other informants from Khanpur agreed that there were few Jahar *medis* until early in the 1990s. However, the number of these *medis* has increased across the region over the last three decades. Two changes are visible across villages. Villagers have set up new *medis* and these *medis* have grown into Shiva temples. Suresh Saini (56), a devotee of Jahar Vir, who would visit Parikshatgarh every year in the month of *Saavan* (monsoon) to offer him *Dhwaja* (flag) and perform *puja* told me, “Since the Gujjars and Jats started capturing/claiming the Jahar Vir *medis* in Parikshatgarh and Niloha (a Jat dominated village), other caste people began setting up their own Jahar Vir’s *medis* in their villages”. Further, he said, “In my childhood, my father told me that Jahar Vir belonged to everyone who was associated with agriculture but these days Gujjar and Jat are calling him their caste deity”.

In the mid-1990s, the ABGM, along with the temple committee headed by a Gujjar leader, then a MP from Bijnor, renovated and enlarged the Jahar *medi*

and converted it into a Shiva temple while appointing a Brahmin priest. In 1998, another Gujjar politician donated a big statue of Bhagvan Devnaryan to the temple. This donation led to the construction of a new temple next to the Shiva temple. In 1999, a Bhagvan Devnarayan statue was unveiled by Rama Pilot, wife of Rajesh Pilot, in the presence of Thakur Amarpal (BJP MP from Meerut) and the RSS activists, mostly Gujjars. This is how, gradually, Devnarayan took over Jahar Vir, though both exist side by side. In this way a caste deity has taken over from the agrarian deity.

Nowadays, Devnarayan is described as a glorified cow herder who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Devnarayan as a Gujjar hero, whose life moved between his herd and the fights with Rajput/Muslims, is emerging with the cult and the mythology of Vishnu. Several Gujjar informants told me that possession sessions are becoming rarer at the Jahar *medi*. Moreover, Devnarayan is seen to have more powers than Jahar Vir,⁹ who some decades ago was considered a localized deity. The physical juxtaposition of the two shrines—of Jahar Vir and the god Vishnu—is emblematic of the tension between greater deities and local deities, as well as of the reformative attempts of the Gujjar community and their creation of a perfect descent through their ancestor Devnarayan.

In Khanpur and its neighbourhood, Gujjars who historically used to worship Jahar Vir, now consider Devnarayan as their *kuldevta* and protector. In the descriptions of young people, the figure of Devnarayan relates to the god Vishnu mythology and also to the epic Krishna. During my fieldwork, Sevaram Gujjar told me several times that “the King of Parikshatgarh was the last descendants of Pandava. Thus, Nagadi Gujjars are suryavanshi and directly related to the god Vishnu”. In Khanpur, many of the Gujjars believe that Radha was Gujjar woman. Different people, at different stages of my fieldwork, repeated this statement. Here, the tutelary function of Devnarayan as a *kuldevta* is justified and proved by the popularly narrated mythological stories from Bagdavat Bharat and Katha. Increasingly, popular songs (*ragnis*) and *katha* booklets/CDs are being produced about the life and *chamatkars* of Devnarayan. Several films and movies have also depicted the life and actions of Devnarayan.

Devnarayan Jayanti: Emergence of New Rituals of Unity

The Gujjar caste associations such as ABGM, Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Veer Mahasabha (ABGVM), and the Gujjar Youth Association (GYA) got together to organize the Sri Devnarayan Jayanti. Since 2009, the Jayanti has become a regular public spectacle in the city of Meerut. A procession with music bands and deejay is conducted, starting from Civil Lines, going through Abu Lanes and coming back to the Sri Devnarayan temple in Civil Lines. From 2010, the Meerut city administration, along with the police, makes arrangements for the procession and several Gujjar politicians across political parties and middle-class professional along with villagers participate in the procession. Jayanti celebrations are also spreading to nearby towns such as Parikshatgarh and

Mawana, where Gujjars reside in large numbers. Sri Devnarayan has emerged as a new god in Meerut for the Gujjars and replaced old deities such as Kul-devata (a lineage deity). The date of Jayanti usually falls in the last week of January or in February.

The popularity of Devnarayan as the Gujjar deity increased tremendously outside of Rajasthan during the 2000s when Gujjars mobilized their brethren across north India to assert their claim to be included in the ST list. As mentioned earlier, the 2007 Gujjar protest had resonance throughout north India. In western UP, the Gujjars supported the protests of their brethren in Rajasthan. Through caste association meetings, Gujjars from north Indian states met formally, on one platform, and projected Gujjar solidarity through the language of *samaj*. The Mr. Gumi told me in one of our conversations, slowly

Gujjar volunteers of these associations collected donations from the Gujjars across rural and urban Meerut, and built a temple of God Devnarayan in Civil Lines next to the statue of Dhan Singh Kotwal. The first Jayanti of the Gujjar deity Devnarayan was celebrated on January 18, 2009, and a procession was taken out.¹⁰

Conclusion

In Chapter 3, I showed how Gujjar caste associations deployed (hi)stories and myths to form an all India Gujjar community. This chapter has shown how the process of amalgamation has been gradually accompanied by a parallel homogenization of the Gujjar Hindu pantheon: the god Vishnu/Devnarayan has gradually become the main god and the main ancestor. Local clan deities are losing their functions and powers (Arumugam 2015). By focusing on a set of deities and their transmutations or substitution by other deities (Ghurye 1962), I have attempted to show the empirical construction of the Gujjar caste-community and the formulation of a Gujjar ‘folk understanding of democracy’ (Michelutti 2008). The god Vishnu, and its incarnation Devnarayan, legitimizes the equality between different clans and lineages within the Gujjar community. Different clans and lineages of the Gujjar community continue to worship their *kuldevtas/kuldevies*.

The connection between the different Hindu gods and goddesses and the structures of Hindu society is widely documented (Dumont 1980; Srinivas 1952). Hinduism is a collection of caste groups arranged in a hierarchal manner and this arrangement shapes Hindu social structure. This ethnography shows that the Gujjar community is closely intertwined with Hinduism and higher Hindu religion. The decline of the purity-pollution separation does not indicate the demise of the religious aspects of caste. The substantive nature of the Gujjar community, which is linked to Devnarayan and the god Vishnu, helped Gujjars from different parts of the country to interact with one another, on a horizontal platform, while claiming equality with each other. Such interactions are permeated by, and shape, a religious ethos (Michelutti 2008: 159).

This religious connection also sheds light on the recent, growing communalism among Gujjars. The growing communalism is connected to the modern religious and caste reforms introduced by the Arya Samaj, later on used strategically by the Sangh Parivar and its organizations. The historical structure of the caste system might have declined but this does not mean the socio-religious content has disappeared from the 'new' substantialized Gujjar community. Thus, I suggest that the caste system, while ritually weakened, has not been secularized. It is very much embedded into the Hindu religion.

This chapter shows contemporary Gujjars are trying to portray themselves as a homogenous category, shaped by relating the sacred origins and common lineage of kinship. This construction shapes their relations with low caste groups. Thus, the relationship between Gujjars and Dalits is still regulated by the idioms and practices of purity-pollution, both in the private and public spheres. This picture displays two contradictory, and at the same time complementary, processes. There is a transition from 'structure to substance' (Dumont 1980: 227) in the sphere of caste but the religious ideology of purity and pollution is still shaping relations between clean and unclean castes and shapes ideas of 'low' and 'high' castes in everyday life. The idea of 'purity' and 'pollution' continues to shape urban as well as rural life.

The Gujjars' socio-political life depicted in this chapter shows the ways in which democratic politics has become embedded in the idioms of caste and in the religious sphere and affects to some degree the relations between ordinary people and their deities and ways of worship. Democratic deepening and changes of power structures helped local Gujjars remake local religious practices and view themselves as the Hindus. Hindu nationalism, which is also an outcome of democratic politics, had an equally important effect on Gujjar religious life. Araya Samaj, and later on association with the RSS, affected the way deities are represented as well as the way they should be worshipped. The RSS and Sangh Parivar have successfully portrayed 'the Muslims' as enemies of the Gujjar. Today, local Gujjars are divided between the SP, BSP, Congress, and BJP. However, sometimes Gujjars consider Muslims to be their important political allies. This paradox can be explained by the ways in which ordinary Gujjars reinterpret the cultural and religious idioms and have localized their understanding of 'the political' in different ways, in accordance with their interests. In the next chapter, I will show how Gujjar caste understanding of democracy shapes their political performances and participation in Mawana and its rural neighbourhood in the western UP region.

Notes

- 1 Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj visited Meerut on the 26 August, 1878 and lectured on the importance of religious reforms. His preaching deeply influenced the public of Meerut, and as a result the Arya Samaj (Budhana Gate) came to be established on 29 September, 1878. Dayanand visited Meerut eight

- times between 1878 and 1883. Meerut emerged and remained the centre of Arya Samaj activities in UP for couple of decades in the twentieth century, and the impact of social reforms in this region was felt deeply across caste groups (Saxena 1990: 115).
- 2 In the 1910s, the Arya Samaj was instrumental in eradicating goat and animal sacrifice in the name of the Goddess in Kanhar (Meerut district) on the occasion of a Devi fair. Similar attempts were made to ban animal sacrifice at the Bhadhra Kali temple in Muzffarnagar where such was practiced. The Arya Samaj worked ceaselessly at convincing people for almost five years before the evil practice was eradicated (Saxena 1990: 130).
 - 3 Michelutti has pointed to similar reasons for the consumption of meat among the Yadavs of Mathura (2008:146).
 - 4 Women are given and married following exogamous practices. Any rights they may have are only through their husbands and sons. Women also have certain direct and inalienable rights with respect to their natal lineage cult, albeit not equal to those of their male brethren.
 - 5 Jahar Vir or Gogaji's story is told as an oral epic performed by *jogi*. Jahar is believed to be the son of a Chauhan Rajput Ruler named Jewar, whose wife Bachal was from Tuar clan. Gogaji was born after blessings were given to Queen Bachal by Guru Gorakhnathji, who gave a 'Gugal' or 'Guggul' as *prasad* to Goga's mother Queen Bachhal. Since the fruit of 'Gugal' was the reason behind his birth, he was referred to as Goga. Another popular legend that is associated with his name has to do with his love for cows, also called 'Gau' in Sanskrit. It is said that Goga Ji served and looked after cows with a lot of devotion. He built seven big cowsheds in his kingdom and those cowsheds housed over seven thousand cows, which earned him the name Goga Ji. CDs of songs on Goga, lockets, and religious books about him are available for purchase near Goga *medi*. The books include Goga Purana. Local Brahmins wrote most of these books—this is also one of the reasons for the Brahminization of the legend of Goga. At the same time, most of the devotees visiting the *medi* are either Dalits or OBCs. Many past priests/*mahants* of the *medi* were Dalit-OBCs.
 - 6 Field notes, September 2012; and interview with Ramsakal Saini, former priest at the Jahar *medi*, Parikshatgarh.
 - 7 Devnarayan was a Gujjar warrior from Rajasthan. Mythology has it that he was an incarnation of the god Vishnu and is worshipped as a folk deity, mostly in Rajasthan and north-western Madhya Pradesh. According to tradition, he was born to Sri Savai Bhoj and Sadu mata Gujjari on the seventh day of the bright half (*shukla saptami*) of the month of Maagh in the Hindu Calendar in Vikram Samvat 968 (911 AD). According to one view, Devnarayan historically belonged to the 10th century of Vikram Samvat; according to another view, he lived in between 1200–1400 (Vikram Samvat era). The first view is endorsed by many scholars. The epic of Devnarayan has been classified under the category of 'martial epics' and is one of the longest and most popular religious oral narratives of Rajasthan (Chundawat 1977; Borana 2004).
 - 8 The cult of Goga falls within folk religion and therefore his followers include people from all faiths. Goga is popular as a Devta who protects his followers from snakes and other evils. He has been deified as a snake demigod and is a prominent figure among those who follow the Nāga cult in what is now Rajasthan and since the seventeenth century has been worshipped in the Western Himalayas also, possibly as a consequence of migration there from Rajasthan. Although a Hindu, he has many Muslim devotees and is chiefly considered to be a saint (*pir*) who had the power to cure the effects of poison (*jahar*). The cult is prevalent in Rajasthan and other states

of northern India, including Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and the north western districts of Uttar Pradesh. His followers can also be found in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh (Crooke 1926).

- 9 However, Jahar Vir's *medis* are being converted into Lord Shiva temples, or they coexist.
- 10 Field notes, 9 March 2010, Meerut.

HERO-GODS, KINGS, AND ‘REBELS’ IN THE MAKING OF GUJJAR POLITICAL CULTURE

In Meerut and its rural neighbourhood, Gujjar social and political activists present themselves as the leaders of the underprivileged and their struggle for social justice. They don't just confine their political activities to a caste (Gujjar) activity. Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) presents itself as an umbrella organization for pastoral and OBC caste groups. The Mahasabha invites the leaders and representatives of nomad groups such as Gaderiya, Van Gujjars (including Muslim Gujjars from Kashmir) and other caste-tribes to its caste association meetings and shares the *manch* (platform) with them. On 24 August 2013, a similar representation was made in a two-day event organized by the Gujjar Vikas Manch (GVM) and ABGM to celebrate the newly constructed Gujjar Bhavan at Partapur. The Bhavan's facilities include a guest room, a big hall with an open-air auditorium for 500 persons, and a Varaha temple with the Mihir Bhoj and Lord Vishnu statues. Gujjar political leaders were present, including Kirori Bainsla, Avatar Singh Bhadana, and Hukum Singh Gujjar.¹ During the event, Gujjar politicians from different political parties and different regions addressed an audience of hundreds of people. A large number of Gujjar young men from different organization such as the Gurjar Parivar and Akhil Bhartiya Veer Gurjar Mahasabha² from National Capital Region (NCR) attended the event. The one-day event was dedicated to Mihir Bhoj Jayanti and Sarva Samaj and included a second for the Other Backward Classes. Gujjar caste associations attempt to portray themselves as part of the larger OBC movement and inclusive of other OBCs. However, in practice they are the Gujjar caste associations and represent the Gujjar *samaj*.

Over the last 15 years I have been told by some of my Gujjar friends that they do not believe in caste and do not support casteism. When I had a chat with politicians at Gujjar caste association meetings, they also expressed negative views about the relationship between caste, caste associations and politics. However, at the end of the day, I found that Gujjar politicians do support the caste associations and that they trust Gujjar voters the most. Thus, the main purpose for politicians in attending and organizing caste association meetings is

to cultivate votes. Of course, caste leaders were more interested in generating a sense of community among the Gujjars, which is also useful for political leaders. While caste interests are supreme, the interests and demands of marginalized caste groups are supposed also to be supported in order to develop a bigger vote bank.

Winning an election is tricky and Gujjar politicians know that well. To become successful, Gujjar politicians present themselves both as committed to the Gujjar cause and social servants of the *serva samaj* (across castes), which generally means the Other Backward Classes and marginalized groups, and supportive of their struggles. This, however, is still not enough to be competitive in electoral game. Gujjar politicians also know well that they need to present themselves as well-connected as well as efficient and able to get things done at *mandis*, the sugar mill, police stations, government offices, and hospitals. They need to have ties with extra-state networks such as with the 'criminals' and musclemen, not just with other politicians. Reflecting on the relationship between a political leader and their people, anthropological studies identify this phenomenon as persistent models of kingship. Price (1989: 567) points out how the king 'symbolized the potentialities of wealth for the community as a whole'. Further commenting on it, Michelutti shows the ways in which local politicians boast about their relationships with big politicians/SP MLAs and MPs and paste pictures with Mulayam Singh in their drawing rooms (2008). In the context of contemporary UP politics, I would say that it is the *dabang* reputation of a political leader which symbolizes the potential of power and wealth for his caste as a whole and more so for his followers. Strongmen or *dabang* culture is very pervasive and common.

Against this background, this chapter explores how day-to-day discourses of commitment to caste and ideas of leadership are addressed by a political language which revolves around Shri Bhagwan Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj who are muscular, protective, and lovers of justice. Ideologies of caste and substance (blood), together with martial heroic caste narratives, are used by Gujjar political leaders to mobilize their caste members and by ordinary Gujjars to legitimize their way of 'doing' and 'participating' in democratic politics.

The Warrior Devenarayan and Mihir Bhoj as 'Timeless' Political Figures

In the previous chapters I have shown the genealogical connections between Gujjars and Bhagwan Devenarayan, their caste deity, and how these connections have been reconstructed by Gujjar scholars for contemporary use. I also discussed how, in recent times, the revival of *kshatriyanness* (notion of martial caste) by Hindu nationalists and the spread of Arya Samaj Hinduism have helped Khanpur and Meerut Gujjars reinforce their local sense of commonality with the wider Gujjar community, as well as to change the gods they worship. However, this constructed social unity does mean that all Gujjars are politically

united and all vote for one political party. Gujjars in Khanpur and the neighbouring villages are divided across the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress Party. Further, I show that while the Gujjar Kshatriya and divine genealogies have been revived by Arya Samaj (Saxena 1999), it seems these genealogies have acquired multiple meanings over a period of time. These genealogies have been reinterpreted both in terms of 'backward politics' as well as in terms of caste populism along with the rhetoric of nationalism, and have been used by political parties like the BJP and SP very differently from each other in UP politics.

I begin with the ABGM annual conference of 2013, when the former president of the ABGM reminds audiences of particular virtues of their mythical ancestors, and by extension, of the Gujjar community and refers to the 'Bagdawatbharat and Mahabharata period' as being characterized by a 'democratic time' when the 'democratic Gujjars' ruled 'Aryavart' (the land of Aryas and Hasitanapur).

Bhagavan Devnarayan (incarnation of Lord Vishnu) fought for the upliftment of the poor and marginalized, and he protected them. He served the poor and helped the marginalized and the victim of the system. From all over country ... the ABGM has achieved the object of bringing all the Gujjars (Devnarayan's descendants) of the country to the Gujjar platform. It was the Gujjar Mahasabha which spread the spirit of unity within the community in the collective attempt to develop India. In the great Indian History during the Vedic Period onwards, the Gujjars had a great past and were known for their bravery and administrative acumen. The Bagdawatbharat period and Mihir Bhoj time which was the period of Gujjars is known for 'social justice' and government for the poor.

(R. Bhati, Presidential Address, ABGM Convention, Partapur-Meerut, 25 August 2013).

These speeches are listened to with a great attention. The Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj's connection is a common theme in all Gujjar caste association meetings, as well as at political rallies, and, on these occasions, I heard the above remarks over and over again. Gujjar political leaders keep repeating caste (hi)stories while making links between the past and present. The excerpt of the presidential addresses cited here was followed by other speeches from leading Gujjar political leaders. Hukum Singh Gujjar, a popular figure in western UP across castes stressed how it is impossible to talk about Bagdawatbharat without Bhagavan Devnarayan. He emphasized it is like addressing Mahabharata without Krishna. While Krishna was the Dwayparyug incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj were the Kalki *avatars* (incarnation) of Vishnu. Hukum Singh stressed:

Like Lord Vishnu, Devnarayan challenged the evils and protected the poor and the marginalized. In Mahabharata, Gujjars were led by

Krishna but in Bagdawatbharat time (*kalki yug*) Gujjars were led by Devnarayan. In each *yug* [epoch], Gujjars have fought for justice and against any kind of exploitation. Similarly, the great King Mihir Bhoj fought and defended the Hindu Dharma from the Arab marauders. Mihir Bhoj was also the incarnation of Lord Vishnu that is why he took the title of Varaha (the wild boar) and has been famous as Varahamir. Mihir Bhoj commanded an army of 36 lakhs which represented 36 caste groups. This shows that Mihir Bhoj was not only a king of administrative acumen but also democratic and inclusive. Bhoj should be worshipped and respected by all caste groups among the Hindu. He represented the *sarujan* (all caste groups including Dalits and OBCs) *samaj*. Thus, since ages, the Gujjars have been at the front to saving and protecting the Hindu Dharma and Brahmins but also delivering justice to the poor and marginalized.

(Hukum Singh Gujjar, ABGM Convention, Partapur, Meerut, 26 August 2013)

The use of Devnarayan and Miher Bhoj in political speeches relates humans to gods through the 'epical' connection by which great god Vishnu is projected—a 'martial' race worrier who takes incarnation in forms of human on earth to defend the weaker, poor, and marginalized.

The ABGM constitution says that one of the primary aims of the caste association is 'to devise ways and means to improve socio-educational life of the Gujjars to achieve ancestral fame and propagate the teaching of Bhagavan Devnarayan'.³ Local Gujjar caste associations take this goal very seriously. For example, Suresh Bhati,⁴ an executive member of the Meerut Gujjar Sammelan and the BJP activist, pointed out to me many times how he must spread the message of Devnarayan among the local Gujjar community. During caste association meetings explicit parallels are drawn between history and the present-day political success of the Gujjars and the history of Devnarayan in the Bagdawatbharat, and Mihir Bhoj and his period.

This is our public memory that since the days of Bhagavan Devnarayan Gujjars has fought for their rights. Similarly, today we face difficulties while demanding our share (right) to be included in the ST list. Ordinary people were doubtful and not sure that Narayan could beat Rana Vishal Dev and fight against injustice. Nobody could believe that at very young age Narayan would defeat such a powerful king. Similarly, when Krishan (also Narayan) defeated Kamsa, people could not believe such an amazing outcome. The same circumstances are prevailing today ... nobody thinks that Gujjar would be successful to get the status of ST.

(Kirori Bainsla, ABGM Convention, Partapur, Meerut, 26 August 2013, President, Gujjar Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti)

Another important Gujjar leader addressed in the following manner:

Devnarayan Bhagavan and great King Mihir Bhoj have shown us the way to fight for our rights. The Bagdawatbharat and Mahabharat guide us in through our struggles and fights and should be our source of inspiration; they both have the same message that is to fight against injustice and atrocities. We should follow the teachings of Bagdawatbharat

(A.K. Bhadana, ABGM Convention, Partapur, Meerut, 26 August 2013).

Thus, many of the Gujjars and their great leaders, such as Bhadana, believed that the Bagdawatbharat and the Mahabharata are the source of inspiration for today's political struggle. In the association meetings I repeatedly heard that the Mahabharata is a text about the fight between good and evil. In Mawana and Khanpur, Gujjar men often say that King Nayan Singh Gujjar of Parikshatgarh is the last descendant of Pandava King Janmayjay (see Chapter 4). The Gujjar emphasis on Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj is also reflected in the iconographic images that adorn Gujjar caste literature and the banners and symbols portrayed in Gujjar caste meetings. These images depict Devnarayan as the warrior and protector deity, or as the universal Lord Vishnu. Other images depict Devnarayan, with a muscular body and moustache, holding a spear and sword while riding on a white horse. Generally these are representations of episodes of the Bagdawatbharat.

Caste associations like the ABGM claim, in general, that they are social organizations which are not concerned with religious matters. However, in reality religious symbols and language are integral parts of these caste associations. The result is that caste association meetings often resemble religious ceremonies. The ABGM meetings start with *yagya-havan* (Vedic sacrifice), the chanting of the *gayatri mantra* and the reciting of episodes from the Bagdawatbharat. The association hoists the Kesariya (saffron) flag. Gujjars claim that saffron is the warrior colour and belongs to them. During the ABGM processions, the president and other eminent members of the Mahasabha, especially politicians, often sit in a decorated SUV chariot.

The processions led by horses are enactments of Devnarayan's battle scenes. The person who enacts Devnarayan sits on a white horse and moves in the middle of procession. Devnarayan images articulate religious meanings and emotions and, at the same time, they are a politically effective form of communication which conveys the life of Bhagvan Devnarayan. These processions transform gods into humans and vice-versa, and, most importantly, bring life to the images. These processions, in the form of carnivals, make possible these transformations of humans and non-humans into each other.

The Construction of the 'Martial' and 'Rebellion' Essences

Along with Bhagwan Devnarayan and the god Vishnu, Gujjar politicians also use a set of cultural and historical resources to show contemporary Gujjars as a

caste historically committed to fighting to protect marginalized people against injustices. For instance, in recent times, historical figures like Kotwal Dhan Singh Gujjar (see Chapter 2), Rao Kadam Singh, Vijay Singh 'Pathik', Pratap Rao Gujjar and Sardar Patel have been portrayed by Gujjar caste literature and the political speeches of Gujjar politicians as modern Gujjar heroes who challenged 'British imperialism' in the same way that 'Devnarayan' fought against 'the imperialist Vishal Dev'. These modern and epic Gujjar heroes inspire ordinary Gujjars and provide them confidence in their fight against injustices. These epical figures also provide a thread uniting Gujjar communities across India.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Gujjar caste associations and political leaders have successfully established Kotwal Dhan Singh as the hero of the Meerut rebellion of 1857 instead of Mangal Pandey. Another important freedom fighter who has been gaining public visibility is Rao Kadam Singh Gujjar—the former king of Parikshatgarh and Mawana. He is said to have fought bravely against the British during the first War of Independence. The following are extracts from popular Gujjar caste literature widely distributed during caste meetings which show how the two men, Kotwal Dhan Singh and Rao Kadam Singh, are rhetorically described as the heroes of the first War of Independence.

Rao Kadam Singh, a scion of the historic ruling house of Parikshatgarh (Meerut, UP), is one of the greatest freedom fighters of India. Kadam Singh was elected by his clansmen as their leader to fight against the British during the Indian rebellion of 1857. When towards the end of June, Major Williams and Dunlop led the Khaki Risala and attacked Parikshatgarh, the Gujjars in the leadership of Kadam Singh dug up the old guns which were buried at Parikshatgarh during the reign of Gujjar King Nain Singh, half a century ago and destroyed the British army posts and police station of that territory. Gujjars of Behssuma and Enchi village played a major role with Rao Kadam Singh. The story this great of Gujjar is that of heroism, valour, patriotism and self-sacrifice of the great order. With ten thousand Gujjars, Jats and Rajputs, he struggled hard against the superior British forces in 1857 ... he was among the first Indians to plan to overthrow the British rule.⁵

P.S. Verma (1992) was the first Gujjar historian to write about Rao Kadam Singh. In 2007, revised edition of P.S. Verma's book on Kadam Singh was published by Sushil Bhati under the Jan Itihas (People's History) Committee which was set up by RSS workers in Meerut in 2005. The Jan Itihas Committee has published several books on Gujjar freedom fighters, including the life and role of Kotwal Dhan Singh Gujjar in the 1857 rebellion. The book on Kadam Singh and Kotwal Dhan Singh was presented to the public by Sachin Pilot during a commemorative ceremony dedicated to the 'hero of 1857'.

More recently, the ABGM has promoted the publication of a book on 'the martyr' Vijay Singh Pathik. His real name was Bhoop Singh Gujjar. Pathik's grandfather fought against the British in the 1857 revolt. Pathik followed the path of his grandfather and joined the great revolutionary Ras Bihari in raising the banner of the revolt against the British in 1914. Sushil Bhati, the scholar who is now working on the book, told me (in a personal communication) that he collected lots of historical evidence to reconstruct the deeds of this Rajasthani Gujjar hero, though he was originally from western UP.

There are lots of stories in Bijoliya (Rajasthan) about the heroic deeds of Pathik Ji. He was a brave warrior, a prophetic caption and an ardent patriot. He joined the revolutionaries in 1914 and threw bombs on the British officers. He was jailed but escaped. He changed his style of working. He lived with peasants and saw their sufferings. He organized peasants against their exploitation by the landlord class and led a peasant *satyagraha*. He was popularly called 'Bijoliya ka Gandhi', and Gandhi Ji deeply respected Pathik. Pathik Ji set up 'Rajasthan Seva Sangh' and severed people across caste-communities.

(Bhati 2009, originally in Hindi)

The Rajasthan government decorated Pathik with the titles of 'Rajasthan Kesari' and 'Rashtriya Pathik'. The Indian government issued a postal stamp in 1992 on his birth centenary. A statue has been installed in Bijoliya where people across castes come to pay tribute.

The martial qualities and sacrifices of Gujjars are further supported by the portrayal of other famous Gujjars who died in defence of their community or *desb*. For example, Dhola Gujjari, the hero of the 1947 Gulban village incident, is often remembered and commemorated in Gujjar journals, magazines as well as at Gujjar caste meetings. The so-called Gulban village episode saw violent clashes between Muslims and Gujjars in the district of Palwal in Haryana (then in Punjab). The woman hero of 'the battle', Dhola Gujjari, has been depicted as a *sherani* (lioness). During my fieldwork I found that a large number of Gujjars in Meerut city and its rural neighbourhood, including in Khanpur, had known about and memorized the episode and the heroic protagonist, Dhola Gujjari. Ordinary Gujjars narrate her story to emphasize the bravery and strength of their community and their commitment to combating invaders and 'evil forces'. This event as a memory is part of the (hi)storiical imagination of Gujjars and has therefore been successfully appropriated by the Gujjar caste politicians who use it to prove first, the success of the community, and second, the heroic nature and bravery of the Gujjars. Dhola Gujjari has emerged as a legend and unites Gujjar communities across north India.

The clash between the Gujjars and the Muslims is described as an epic battle. Just before Independence in June 1947, when riots between Hindus and Muslims broke out, a group of Muslim men with guns and swords attacked Gulban.

The Gujjar men tried to defend the village but felt weak in front of armed, Muslim attackers. Dhola climbed on the roof of her house and hit the attackers with stones and successfully broke the head of the leader. This boosted the morale of the Gujjar men. Then, Dhola also joined the fight with a sword and killed many of the attackers. Along with handful men she fought the hundreds of attackers like a lioness and slaughtered them.

To add to this memory and the myth-making of *sherani* is a prevalent proverb which says: *jisne Gujjari ka dudh nahi piya, vah sahas aur virta main bade piche hai* [A man who could get a chance to have the Gujjar woman milk cannot be brave and courageous enough]. In the last decade, a school was established in her honour in Palwal. Several *ragni* (songs) about Dhola Gujjari have been composed and are sung as well, and a small shrine of Dhola Mata (deity) has been established in the Gulban village. Dhola Gujjari's story illustrates a process whereby an individual becomes glorified and defied Gujjar or attain divinity.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Gujjars never let any opportunity pass to depict themselves as brave and courageous. The stories published in Gujjar caste literature, as well as the episodes repeated again and again at caste meetings, emphasize the bravery of Gujjars. They fought in the army of ancient kings. Gujjars fought in the Mahabharata, and later with the Arabs and the Central Asian invaders, and against the British and exemplify bravery in the army of their country. Contemporary Gujjars also view a number of their political leaders as founders of a long tradition of Gujjar heroism. They view Avatar Singh Bhadana and Kirori Bainsla as their heroes. In the eyes of ordinary Gujjars, they have heroic status because they fought against the enemies of their community and for the community's social well-being. Thus, Gujjar heroes can be kings, freedom fighters, soldiers, and democratic politicians who share Devanarayan's essence. They are descendants of Mihir Bhoj and Kanishka the great and know how to 'do politics' from birth.

Bhagwan Devanarayan in Meerut Politics

I attended regional and national Gujjar caste association meetings by following Gujjar social and political leaders from Khanpur village. When these village leaders returned from their trips, they provided their own interpretations of the meetings and events, including speeches. The leaders would bring back pamphlets, books, periodicals, and magazines which described the roots of Gujjar caste, about their ancestors, hero-gods, and Gujjars' natural leadership qualities. Here is an extract from one of the publications widely distributed in Khanpur and in Mawana.

The Gujjars are democratic since they believe in social justice and 'secularism'. They are not orthodox. The Gujjar's history is full of stories which highlight their ideas of justice and freedom. The Gujjars stress qualities on which high value is set at the present day

(Satayveer 1974: 11, originally in Hindi).

This is a typical description, commonly found in books and booklets published by the Gujjar caste historians and intellectuals whose aim is to portray the glorious and noble Gujjar political and democratic past. Similar kinds of messages are also found in the yearly and monthly publications run by Gujjar Vikas Manch and other organizations. Below are examples of the literature circulating in the Mawana neighbourhood where I lived:

Bagh Singh was a great king (grandfather of Devnarayan). He was a great ruler with having keen interests in the system of governance. His ruling styled matched with democracy and *ramrajya* since he ruled with the consent of his people. He worked day and night for the people's welfare. Thus, we can say that he was the first one to set up a democratic state. After him, Mihir Bhoj also ruled democratically and cared for the poor and weaker sections of the society.

Bhagvan Devnarayan was a great democratic king and the Gujjar community should fellow his path. Bhagavan Devnarayan propagated and practised social justice and shown his commitment to equality. These are the basics of democratic governance. In a very short period of his rule, Devnarayan showed that he respected the views of his citizens. He used to believe that the person who is elected by the citizens has the right to rule

(Hari Singh Gujjar 2013: 56–57).

While it is hard to agree with these kinds of statements, a large number of my Gujjar friends and informants believed that Gujjars were born to be politicians. This image of Gujjars was also strengthened by the local perception that “Gujjar eat and drink politics”, as put it by Mahesh Gaderiaya. Gujjar leaders in Khanpur often use episodes from the life of Devnarayan, Mihir Bhoj and Sundar *daku* [rebel] as metaphors which symbolize the god's heroism and the rebels' commitment to fight for the poor and social justice. A section of the speeches were delivered on the occasion of the *arakshan* protest organized in the summer of 2007. By portraying Bainsla as a kinsman of Devnarayan, the Gujjars in western UP joined the protest in Meerut and other places. As Surendra Tomar, a BJP activist and Gujjar leader said:

Devnarayan Bhagavan destroyed the army of the king Vishal Dev and released cows from his prison, and gave them their rightful place. Likewise, Bainsla who has the blood of Devnarayan, will bring down this BJP government and protect our Gujjar brethren. Bainsla is following the footsteps of Bhagavan Devnarayan and god Krishna.

The caste association meetings were full of speeches that invited ordinary Gujjars to ‘do politics’, which Gujjar leaders understood as the most effective vehicle for socio-economic mobility. Caste leaders always see politics as a

vehicle for upward mobility. These speeches are closely connected to political performance. Rhetoric is one of the most effective ways Gujjar leaders mobilize their caste members. However, many of the Jatavs and members of other castes also joke about Gujjars that young Gujjars create an atmosphere of fake fear.

Culture and Politics: Performance of the Bagdawatbharat

Over the last 15 years, the Meerut Gujjar caste associations have organized many religious celebrations which have also percolated down to the local level in Mawana and Khanpur. The Gujjar Vikas Manch and ABGM began celebrating Devnarayan's life in its performance every year since 2005.⁶ The Devnarayan story narrates how hundreds of years ago Vishal Dev killed Bagdawats and captured their kingdom, and how the grown-up Devnarayan killed Vishal Dev to liberate his people from an invader. The Devnarayan Lila or cultural performance is portrayed as the celebration of the victory of the justice-loving and democratic Gujjars over an oppressive king.

Initially, the Devnarayan Lila was organized at Yogi Farmhouse (an extension of the Gujjar Bhavan) in Partapur Meerut. Artists from the local Ram Lila group were hired. However, a dispute emerged between the actors who played the roles of Devnarayan and Vishal Dev. Gujjars objected to the Jatav actor who played Devnarayan. How could a Jatav play the role of Devnarayan—who is the god of Gujjars? Eventually, a Gujjar was found to play this role and Devnarayan Lila performance shifted from Partapur to Shastri Nagar-L Block, a locality of Gujjars. One of the promoters of the Devnarayan Lila pointed out to me that with the Lila, Gujjars wished to assert that Devnarayan was and is a Gujjar god. And, when they perform in the drama, they are not merely 'actors' but become the divine persons. Following this incident, in 2013 youth wing of the ABGM also began organizing a Devnarayan Lila performance as an extension of the Ram Lila in October/ November at Mihir Bhoj Gujjar Chowk, Mawana. The Devnarayan Lila was attended by a large group of audiences from Khanpur and it also gave a platform to several Gujjar political leaders. Before the performance began, a group of Gujjar political leaders addressed the audience.

The ABGM youth wing President Rahul Gujjar and Vice-president Neeraj Chaudhary said, "Bhagavan Devnarayan lived a very short life of 31 years on earth. However, he established a kingdom where everybody was happy and felt safe. He protected the poor". Kairana Lok Sabha Member (elected M.P.) Mr. Chaudhary said that, "Men of 36 caste groups worked in the army of Bhagavan Devnarayan and his regime was very much loved due to its inclusive and democratic nature. Today, by following the path shown by Devnarayan, youth can improve the governance of the government wherever and whichever level they have been working". Mayor Sanjeev Achuhan said that today the country is breathing in the open air due to kings like Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj who fought for the nation.

Following the addresses, a drama performance was organized to show the fight between Bhagavan Devnarayan and Vishal Dev, where the former killed the latter. Through this act Devnarayan not only defended his country (*desh*) but also the Gujjars, his community. At the end of the performance, Devnarayan was shown in the costume of Lord Vishnu, indicating that Lord Vishnu came in the body of Devnarayan. In August 2013, during the Devnarayan Lila performance, multiple associations were made between the actors, the story they were acting out and the genealogical pedigree of the audience, which was largely Gujjar. The Devnarayan Lilas was seen not only as the history of Devnarayan but also as the history of Gujjars, and, more specifically, of Achauhan Gujjars. In the performance, references were regularly made to places close to Khanpur and Achauhan Gujjars.⁷ These made the performance highly realistic and almost historical. Conversations with spectators about these performances support this impression. Many of the audience claimed that Devnarayan was justice-loving and a great king.

Linkages between God and Humans: Caste Ideologies

Gujjar caste associations connect their leaders to deified caste heroes and Devnarayan, which means contemporary that the Gujjar leadership has inherited particular qualities and statecraft abilities from Bhagwan Devnarayan. This is neither a unique phenomenon nor specific to Gujjars. Anthropological studies have indicated the reworking of Hindu models of divine kingship and its association with modern politics (Price 1989; Ikegame 2012). Somewhat differently, in the Gujjar case, such a phenomenon is reinforced by continuous references to the inherited substance or sharing the same blood as the basis of gaining divine and political skills. This stresses that local Gujjar concepts of personhood are important. In particular, caste hi(stories) are crucial to understand how local Gujjars link themselves to a 'political past'. Gujjar political discourse and rhetoric focus on descent and flow of the same blood across generations. Thus, 'essences' and 'qualities' flow and are thereby transferred from previous generations, which, at some point, originated from the divine. Gujjars, as descendants of Devnarayan, portray the members of their community as privileged carriers of political knowledge by virtue of their ancestry and community culture.

In Khanpur and its neighbourhood, it is common knowledge that one is born Gujjar and the skills of his/her ancestors are passed in the blood on to next generation. My Gujjar friends often explained they were born to be politicians. Young Gujjars told me that they learn using guns and jumping walls from their mother's womb.

In Meerut and its rural area, I constantly learned during my fieldwork that Gujjars are proud of being 'a caste of rebels' and of having an 'innate fighting spirit'. They often explained their 'martial' qualities and their successful employment in the army and the police in the same fashion. They constantly discussed that how the British feared them and categorized Gujjars as one of

the 'criminal' tribes. Gujjar men often would tell that they had defended the borders of India from the ancient times. They also fought against the Muslim invaders.

Among Gujjars, fighting abilities are considered to be inherited skills and run in the blood. Hence, my Gujjar informants and friends described to me their 'political' ability which is transferred from generation to generation. According to this, the skill of 'doing politics' was passed on 'in the blood' from Gujjar ancestors such as Mihir Bhoj and Bhagavan Devnarayan to present-day Gujjars.

This sort of skill transfer needs to be understood within the ideological framework of the caste system, in which the members of each caste are usually believed to have a special aptitude for their caste occupation and this propensity is thought to be transmitted 'in the blood' (Michelutti 2008). Anthropological writings suggest that inherited 'substance' provides propensity for certain kinds of actions and occupations (Marriott and Inden 1977). This everyday cultural understanding of skill transmission is linked to the strong lineage ideology which shapes the Gujjar kinship system. These are the ways in which Gujjar caste associations assert commonalities among Gujjars across time and space. All Gujjars have the same blood and the Gujjar essence, while there may be different physical features due to environment and geography. In the next chapter I will show how Gujjars become involved in politics because of their early socialization in the art of politics. Gujjars' rebellious nature and their political skills are understood and talked about using a discourse which emphasizes family, kinship, blood-line and ancestral linkages, and continuity in terms of ancestors.

***Dabang* Politicians: Local Authoritarianism**

In the everyday life of Khanpur, Gujjars express their opinions about political leaders in two different ways. Often a *dabang* from the Gujjar caste is considered to be a figure who protects and helps poor and weaker, like Sundar Gujjar 'daku'⁸; however, if they are from another caste, *dabang* is used as a criticism. Very few people criticize a criminal from their own caste-community. More specifically, Gujjars relate their own caste leaders and their 'powers' to gods and divine ancestors. This is how the everyday popular image and charisma of a caste leader is constructed. Popular understandings of the relationship between divines and humans, as well as caste theories of knowledge transfer, are important in understanding how ordinary people understand concepts like political efficacy and legitimize political styles such as authoritarian politics. The phenomenon of viewing caste politicians as 'hero gods' or 'divine kings' has grown and contrasts with the ethnographies which show Indians' negative views of their politicians (Ruud 2000).

In Khanpur and Mawana, while people are critical of politics and politicians, every household has a person who behaves like a leader or boasts about being associated with a politician. Thus, political leaders are an intimate 'enemy';

they are liked and disliked at the same time. Discussing this with my friend Sanjeev Gujjar, from Mawana, he told me that he does not like politics. He explained it further, "I don't like the roughness and corruption of politics". He often told me that he was only able to attend the best public school in Meerut because his father and uncle threatened and bribed the school's principal. He felt that that was the only way to enter into a system which is controlled by the local upper caste elites and rich people. He is aware that he obtained his job because of political contacts. He justified the wealth of his family, which comes from extortion and exploitation. Sanjeev knew these practices are illegitimate and illegal, and, in our conversations, he accepted this. He understood that Gujjars need to regain a clean and respectable image and overcome the unfortunate but popular *dabang* stereotype. Gujjar *dabangs* keep trying to make their image clean by using the rhetoric of politeness, honesty, and respect for women. However, they simultaneously engage in muscular and *dabang* politics.

At the local level, however, being a *dabang* is a matter of pride. Thus, dissenting voices like Sanjeev's remain very weak and are barely noticed by the majority of people, for whom having a *dabang* reputation and being actively involved in 'politics' is a matter of pride. Hence, the majority of my informants strongly valued their ability to make 'political' contacts, and often proudly emphasized how in Khanpur and Meerut people prefer to approach Gujjar *dabangs* to get their work done—Gujjar *dabangs* are efficient and known to get work done. Gujjar *dabangs* and their followers highlight their ability to 'do politics', and they do not attempt to hide their allegedly 'illegal' activities. By showing and narrating their ability to resist, challenge or bypass the bureaucratic procedures, the Gujjar *dabangs* attract clients and followers. To have influential political contacts, as well as access to the local state, is locally considered a source of prestige. This is not only the case amongst members of the Gujjar community, but is also common among the other castes as well (Michelutti 2008). Posters and pictures which show family connections with powerful political leaders can be seen throughout Gujjar rural and urban households in western UP.

While talking with my Gujjar friends they are not critical of A. Bhadana, Pilot or H. Singh. Moreover, when they refer to their politicians as *dabang*, their use of the word does not necessarily imply a negative moral judgement. In fact, it reflects their pride. For example, during a discussion with a group of Gujjars about the forthcoming village panchayat elections in Khanpur, my three Gujjar informants, as well as friends, expressed their views with a surety that Ramkaran would win since he has a *dabang* look—which implies a strong muscular physique, a gold chain round the neck, a big gold bangle on the right hand along with sun glasses over white shoes and pants. *Dabang* qualities and skills are considered attractive characteristics and almost a necessity for a leader who operates in regional and local politics. The *dabang* persona has become an integral part of north Indian political culture.

Often ordinary Gujjars told me that it is precisely through 'politics' *dabangai* help that they get 'dignity', 'power' and importantly, wealth.

“Who cares for the poor and marginalized in this country”, said one of my Gujjar friends.

At the same time when poor and marginalized Gujjars suffer at the hands of the police or the state, some of them are not victims of ‘corruption’, but the perpetrators.⁹ Often a group of Gujjars will view their strongmen and allegedly corrupt politicians as ‘heroes’ of their community and as role models for their sons and community boys. Thus, the corruption or violent or illegal acts of Gujjar politicians are not criticized or judged as bad as long as they are able to get work done. Most importantly, in Mawana and Khanpur, whenever politicians are criticized, they are not accused for misusing public money but for not being faithful to their caste or to individual promises they made behind closed doors. Caste betrayal is more serious than betrayal of voters.

On some occasions, the village level political leaders were strongly criticized and accused of allegedly receiving money from H. Singh and the BJP, keeping the money for themselves (and their families) instead of redistributing it to Gujjar voters. Particularly, during the 2012 assembly election campaign, many of the Khanpuriya Gujjars told me that Ramkaran Gujjar, a local leader kept all the money which he received from H. Singh, who gave it for the daily payment of village level workers/campaigners.

This highlights how people at local level use their logic to make their political leaders accountable or connect to their political leaders and the state. It also suggests that, locally, people take corruption for granted and are fully aware of the merits and demerits of it. Corrupt practices do not provoke strong outrage, or at least not enough outrage to push people onto the streets in protest. People take a pragmatic approach. They use bribes and caste networks to deal with the state or as a conduit to get work done. Thus, it is clear that politicians generally are not openly criticized because, in part, they operate in the same social system or social conditions and norms which generate these ‘corrupt’ practices. In other words, politicians and people share almost the same worldview, operating in a similar context.

However, there are occasions when people protest against the excess. There are also some dissenting voices, like that of Sanjeev. These voices, however, remain marginal. People like Sanjeev may criticize the dirtiness of politics, but their behaviour is not always consistent with their words. They remain embedded into the same world. Sanjeev was fully aware that he got a job after paying a bribe. Sanjeev’s behaviour clearly shows how politics operates in a contradictory world which does not give rise to ‘moral’ values. Though criticising corruption and politics, people find ways to participate in it and also use their politicians. A lack of resources and an alternative worldview force people to create this contradictory game.

This Gujjar political ethnography suggests that not all Indians think politicians are *dabangs* and, as such, ‘bad’ characters. People also look them as saviours and ‘gods’. Paying close attention to the ways in which politicians are considered peoples’ saviours may help to shed some light on the phenomena of

the 'criminalization of politics' as well as the 'politicization of criminals' in northern India. More importantly, it helps us understand local authoritarianism across India, not just in north Indian states like UP. A large number of MLAs and MPs in Uttar Pradesh have criminal charges against them or are under investigation.¹⁰ This raises the question of why do people vote for *dabang* politicians? During my study, I learned that local Gujjars support allegedly corrupt and criminal politicians because of caste-community bonding and kin identification with them. Gujjars can also obtain economic gains from them. This is not merely a matter of political representation. This shows how democracy is internalized in the caste body and this should not be underestimated. The political in contemporary India is generated by the mythical and a divine construct of the caste body and human life.

Ordinary Gujjars, when I talked with them, often stressed Avatar Singh Bhadana's and Rajesh Pilot's heroic achievements, and they associate them with local Gujjar hero-gods while portraying them as divine. They praise Rajesh Pilot ceaselessly. These associations connect the community together. In Gujjar local popular understanding, hero-gods possess extraordinary power and can protect weaker people and the cattle. These extraordinary personalities are linked to the Gujjar pastoral-martial past and to cow protector-kings who are today worshipped as local lineage deities. These kings (like Mihir Bhoj) who protected cows or some of the village strongmen who gradually become deified as hero-gods are often interpreted as protectors of the weak, and today their cult has been mixed with the cult of the hero-god Devenarayan (see Chapter 4). These emerging connections between the past and present are crucial in understanding contemporary Indian politics, particularly as it sheds light on the rising totalitarian Hindutva.

It emerges from this description that displays of physical strength find expression in the local figure of the *dabang* as protector of the village and caste, while other castes and the police describe them as 'criminals'. However, often they are popular and respected as community leaders. This is an emerging phenomenon across north India. Gujjars view their leaders as divine or heroic 'incarnations' of Devnarayan who defended the weaker sections of society. In the eyes of ordinary Gujjars, they have heroic status because they fight against the enemies of Gujjars. It shows how humans attain the divine status.

In this chapter I have shown the ways in which by linking Devnarayan and Lord Vishnu with the modern democratic political world, Gujjar political rhetoric appeals to contemporary Gujjar political interests such as the fight for ST status. It also helps in the construction of a larger Gujjar community across India. Gujjars across clans are believed to share the same substance, the 'same' blood. In the next chapter, I will show how the language of 'ancient' and pre-modern can become extremely dynamic when mixed with the active political representations of the Gujjars (Michelutti 2008: 185) and also show how the popular Gujjar understanding of democracy has become visible and effective in neighbourhoods of Mawana and Khanpur through their political acts.

Notes

- 1 Janwani, 26 August 2013. 'Mahan Gujjar Samrat, Mihir Bhoj Jayanti Samaroh', pp. 1–2.
- 2 Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) was founded in 1908 in Muzaffarnagar, UP. Recently, in 2012, some Gujjar young men founded Akhil Bharatiya Veer Gurjar Mahasabha (ABVGM) by alleging that the ABGM is an elite caste association and gives little space to young Gujjar men.
- 3 ABGM Constitution, Resolution 5.
- 4 Suresh Bhati is also a member of Jan Itihas Simiti which was founded by the RSS in 2005 in Meerut.
- 5 Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) Platinum Jubilee Year Souvenir (2008: 18), originally in Hindi.
- 6 The oral epic of Devnarayan (Bagdavatbharat) consists of a number of episodes related to the narrative of Bhagvan Devnarayan. This epic is sung by the Bhopas, the traditional priest-singers of Devnarayan, during the nights of the months, November to July in the villages of Rajasthan and Malwa.
- 7 It is accepted that Devnarayan belonged to the Achauhan clan.
- 8 Sundar Gujjar, a rebel during the Indira Gandhi time, gained a mythical status in UP since after he looted the rich and helped the poor while resisting the Indian Government.
- 9 For comparative ethnography, see the case study of the Yadavs (Michelutti 2008) and the Jats (Jeffrey and Lerche 2000).
- 10 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bjp-has-37-criminal-mas-in-up-assembly/articleshow/74130439.cms>; <https://adrindia.org/media/adr-in-news/has-maximum-mas-facing-charges-crimes-against-women>

‘WE ARE A MARTIAL CASTE’

Gujjars’ Understanding of Democracy

In the previous chapter, I showed how a caste view of ‘democracy’ is demonstrated in local politics and simultaneously used to reinforce a sense of Gujjar community. In the caste political imagination of Gujjars, ‘democracy’ is presented as a set of political skills and ruling traits passed through the family blood-line of their ancestor, Mihir Bhoj (a divine king), to contemporary Gujjars. Most importantly, ‘democracy’ is also seen from the perspective of ‘numerical strength’—Gujjars are not only a pan-Indian community but also spread across the globe. Finally, ‘democracy’ is viewed as a vehicle for upward mobility, a promoter of social justice and a way to assert Gujjar caste power and identity. These are the multiple ways in which the language of democracy is employed, Gujjar political imagination depicting ‘democracy’, ultimately, as an instrument as well as an institution that works for the Gujjars to regain their past glory, *kshatriya* status, fulfil the Gujjars’ interests, and establish the Gujjar state which promotes social justice, equality, and nation building.

This chapter describes how caste is riven with factionalism at the local level. I show the ways in which factions and personal interests are integral parts of local politics. In order to understand the relationship between caste and politics, I argue special attention should be paid to the ways in which democracy is internalized in the caste body through popular understanding, which is an amalgam of caste cosmology, political economy, and democratic ideas and institutions. Most importantly, the Gujjar process of community formation and politicisation are the effective ways in which popular descent theories are strategically deployed and used in local and regional politics. Such strategic deployments are closely used to the process of defining ‘we’ (Gujjars) in opposition to ‘they’ (for instance, the Muslims and Jatavs), and simultaneously to local perceptions of *rajniti* and ‘the political’ and of what it means ‘to do politics’, and further what *loktantra* [democracy] means.

In sum, this chapter describes and analyses Gujjar political participation at local and regional levels. I begin this chapter by describing Gujjar political participation in the Khanpur *panchayat*. I explore how caste, clan, faction, and party attachments manifest themselves in different political processes. At regional level the Mawana and Hastinapur protest *bandhs* organized by the Gujjar

caste associations and leaders at the beginning of the election campaign for the 2012 Assembly elections, and the village panchayat elections held in Khanpur in December 2015 are demonstration of such processes.

‘We are a Caste of Protectors’: Gujjars’ Political Imagination

In Khanpur and its neighbouring villages Gujjars often describe themselves as *shatru nashak* [enemy destroyer] by which they mean ‘defenders’ of the community and nation. On 10 May 2012, Ramkaran, under the banner of Gujjar Vikas Manch, organized the martyr day of Kotawal Dhan Singh at the Khanpur village. Madhu Gujjar, Mayor of Meerut addressed the gathering.

“We have defended the boundaries of India since ancient times”, said Madhu Gujjar. “Gujjars lived at frontiers and borders and fought against the invaders”, Ms. Gujjar emphasized.

By saying this she not only referred to Gujjars’ contributions to the nation but also their past importance. Her statement also signifies that they have been a ruling caste since the ancient time when Gujjar kings (such as Mihir Bhoj and Kanishka) ruled and defended *desh* [nation]. This also means that Gujjars are a caste of politicians and their descendants like Avatar Singh Bhadana, Sachin Pilot and Sardar Patel are still doing politics. In this way Gujjars attempt to assert that they have an ability, along with a historical heritage, to do politics. One can infer that by politics they refer to their ability to make political connections and to benefit from state resources, and to get work/decisions done in their favour. The data on political behaviour collected in a survey of Khanpur confirms such a picture. This is supported by the Block and District Panchayat level data on elections. Table 6.1 shows that 41% of the Gujjars in the survey have a family member in politics; for example, a ward or *panchayat* representative or sugarcane cooperative committee member, MLA or MP.¹ The *Pradhan* (village *panchayat* head) of the Khanpur panchayat and the Block

Table 6.1 Political connections in Khanpur

<i>Castel/ community</i>	<i>Family mem- bers in politics</i>	<i>Personally know a politician</i>	<i>Personally con- tacted a politician</i>	<i>Number</i>
Upper Castes	24%	62%	19%	73
Gujjars	41%	77%	37%	68
Other OBCs	9%	78%	21%	11
Scheduled Castes	15%	62%	25%	23
Muslims	10%	50%	11%	42
Other	9%	30%	10%	10
All	18%	60%	21%	227

Source: Field data (village household survey, 2012).

Pramukh (block head) of Mawana along with block sugarcane cooperative president are Gujjars.² A very high proportion of the Gujjars (80%) personally know someone in politics, and 30% had recently visited and met a politician in their constituency, which meant a block chairman, or an MLA or MP. Gujjars have more political connections than other caste-communities in Khanpur. Often, local politicians are brokers and most of these men have established their reputation through caste and extended kinship structures and by arranging marriage alliances. Their abilities to get work done by any means inform their positions. They act as brokers for all communities and provide their services across caste groups who come to them. I found that often Gujjars were referred to as *dabangs* but honest and capable of getting work done. In property disputes, the reputation of Gujjar brokers is well established in the NCR and western UP region.

In Khanpur, Gujjars are not only ‘politically’ well connected, but are also highly active.

“Gujjars live by politics in this region/area. Politics is their main activity”, a Gaderiya man (57) of Khanpur said.

Khanpuriya Gujjars participate in voting, they are members of political parties, they actively participate during election campaigns and are obsessed with politics. Politics is fun and entertainment for them. In Table 6.2 I show that voter turnout is high for all the castes in Khanpur. However, the Gujjars are significantly more ‘politically’ involved than average if we look at their activism during the election campaign (pasting posters, churning rumours, attending political rallies, collecting money, canvassing door to door), and their party membership (40%). My survey data and ethnographic observations both confirm the existence of a strong culture of political participation among Gujjars. Over the last decades, the culture of political participation has been shaped both by the activities of the Gujjar caste associations and by the ‘local political’ battle for the pursuit of power, particularly after the 1990s. In the next section,

Table 6.2 Political participation in Khanpur

<i>Castel/Community</i>	<i>Voted in 2012 Assembly Election</i>	<i>Participated in election campaign</i>	<i>Member of a political party</i>	<i>Number</i>
Upper Castes	70%	20%	21%	73
Gujjars	84%	41%	40%	68
Other OBCs	72%	23%	29%	11
Scheduled Castes	78%	17%	35%	23
Muslim	86%	13%	7%	42
Other	80%	8%	-	10
All	79%	20%	26%	227

Source: Field data (village survey during the 2012 Assembly Election)

I explore the relationship between ordinary Gujjars, different political parties and Gujjar caste associations.

Ideas of Representation beyond Electoral Politics

Epic-mythical and medieval kings such as Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj or modern great men such as Dhan Singh Kotwal, Sardar Patel and Rajesh Pilot are often referred by Gujjar political leaders. As illustrated during the Devnarayan Lila performance (see Chapter 5), the participants made explicit links between themselves and their ancestor Devnarayan, and between the latter and modern Gujjar politicians such as Kirori Bainsla and Avatar Singh Bhadana. Likewise, in 2007, when Bainsla launched another round of Gujjar protest in Rajasthan in support of gaining ST status, Gujjars in Khanpur and Mawana rallied announcing in the streets ‘I support Bainsla’ and saying ‘I am Bainsla’. Many of them responded to Bainsla’s call by participating in *dharnas* [sit-ins] and roadblocks organized by ABGM (Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha) and Gujjar Vikas Manch in Mawana, Parikshatgarh, and Meerut. In this context, what we have is a kind of politics in which the idea of ‘representation’ had connected it to other areas of life, such as popular culture which is shaped by myths and popular beliefs. Gujjar political leaders assume that they are the ‘natural’ representatives of their community since Gujjars have the same essence and common ancestors.

In Khanpur, such ideas are connected to the local understanding of the relationship between Devnarayan and Gujjar political icons, and between local hero cults and contemporary hero-politicians (see Chapter 5). Gujjars narrate their hi (story) in such a way that valorizes the Gujjar heroes and divine gods who protect and defend weaker people and, thereby, represent them. This idea of ‘representation’ has been locally reinterpreted in a language which has roots in ‘democratic’ political traditions that Gujjars have re-invented. In the similar way, as a symbol of the Gujjar community, Bainsla or Bhadana embodies those they represent and, at the same time, those they represent embody them since representation is also defined by blood and kin relations having the same essence. This kind of ‘representation’ goes beyond elections and electoral democracy. Gujjar representatives represent Gujjars primarily because they are ‘Gujjar’ and not solely because they are elected to do so.³ Winning votes is not necessarily important in representing a community—birth or having blood relations can qualify someone to represent a community. Thus, the prevailing idea is that only a Gujjar can represent other Gujjars or the Gujjar community. This is one of the important claims of identity politics in our contemporary world and is not unique to the Gujjars.

Gujjar ethnography of Khanpur throws light on to such ideas of representation. In Khanpur, the Gujjars were divided into the two political parties: Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, some of the Gujjars also claim an association with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the

Congress Party. Gujjars change their political loyalties according to their leaders. Since Gujjars do not have a caste-based political party like the Yadavs, Jatavs or Jats, they stand behind their caste leaders. I observed this in Khanpur and the neighbouring areas such as Mawana and Meerut. The Gujjar political leadership does, however, keep suggesting that Gujjars should also have their own caste party.

Despite having the aspiration for a caste party, Gujjars are divided into factions. The ethnography of the village and assembly elections show that caste/party attachment is fluid (Gupta 2000; Michelutti 2008; Kumar 2013). Rivalry and competition between different families, clans and factions are pervasive. I discuss this in the section that follows. Amongst Khanpur Gujjars, therefore, ongoing tension between the unity of the community and its endemic factionalism and heterogeneous interests is reflected in their voting behaviour and party affiliations. Inter-family and inter-clan disputes, along with the pursuit of power, play important roles in dividing and uniting Gujjars in local and regional politics.

Enemies and Rivals

Politics and men’s social lives in Khanpur revolve around factionalism, which is known as *partibazi* in popular village parlance. There are two factions, which are usually defined by clan/kinship: the ‘Mukhia Party’, and the ‘Ganje Party’. Generally, members of a faction are not defined by households but by minimal or maximal lineage. Over the years, the Khanpur Gujjars were divided into two stable factions: the members of the Mukhia Party and their allies, and the members of the Ganje Party and their allies. The allied castes were composed of other Gujjar clans and other castes which were linked with the main factions through patron-client relations. As will become clear in the following sections, the neat divide between the Mukhia Party and Ganje Party was determined by the battle for the pursuit of local power, as well as old enmities. Although active faction membership is confined to men, women are not completely excluded. Women also participate directly or indirectly in village factions by following their husband’s affiliations. However, there are exceptions always. In the long term, factions and alliances are fluid (Brass 1985: 207–280; Rao 1970: 167–215; Kumar 2013: 121–123).

Each faction has its own worldview and seeks to promote its own interests. In the name of community, a faction serves its members. Within each faction, members have close interactions. They go to the same *baithak* to play cards, the same wedding parties and the same grocery stores. Members consult each other on matters related to business, children’s education and marriage. They borrow agricultural implements from each other and help each other during the peak seasons of harvest. Members of a faction suggest and arrange marriage alliances of children of their friends/allies and kinsmen. It is common that the most prominent men of a faction visit the family of the ‘prospective’ bride/bridegroom ‘to check’

their background. Often hostile factions try to spoil an upcoming marriage alliance by creating false rumours or divulging ‘true’ information about the prospective bride/bridegroom. Gossiping about members of rival factions is a part of village entertainment.

For example, during fieldwork, my camera was stolen when sitting at the *baithak* of the leader of the Ganje Party. Members of the Mukhia Party immediately blamed the members of the Ganje Party as being thieves. Rajveer (29), a supporter of the Mukhia party said that this incident should warn me about the bad nature of the Ganjes. Similarly, members of the Ganje Party told me that this episode should teach me a lesson about the ‘criminal’ nature of the Mukhia Party. According to them, nobody in Khanpur would have the courage to steal from the *baithak* of a powerful Gujjar man. In their opinion, only a member of Mukhia Party could have done it. The camera incident is one of many disputes which, most of the time, were created ‘out of nothing’ to maintain and feed hostilities and rivalries between the different factions. Many times, these sorts of small incidents would take the form of violent confrontations in which the young men would come out with sticks, rifles would be fired in the air and we would be warned about dire consequences.

Increasingly, every young Gujjar man behaves like a leader and claims to be a leader. This has further increased competition within caste. Further competition and rivalry do not only grow between different factions but also within factions. This internal competition is expressed daily by gossiping about everyone who is perceived as a competitor or rival. Non-Gujjar informants often talked about such internal conflicts. They told me that amongst Khanpur Gujjars there was no recognized leader because every Gujjar wants to be the leader: *har ghar main neta hai* [every household has a leader]. On several occasions, local Brahmins and Gaderiays made fun of their Gujjar neighbours’ endless rivalry. They said that each Gujjar believes he is Avatar Singh Badana or Kirori Bainsla and wants to be the boss.⁴ However, this internal competition and rivalry does not weaken their pride, as the Gujjars are a martial caste and a race of fighters. In the following section, I move from village to region and show the ways in which Gujjars and their caste associations mobilized their members before the assembly elections and how they influence regional politics.

Gujjar-Jatav Dispute: The Opening of the Election Campaign, Vidhan Sabha Elections 2012

At the beginning of the election campaign for the 2012 Vidhan Sabha elections, the Gujjar leadership and caste associations mobilized ordinary Gujjars by protesting against a killing in Hasitanapur. This section sheds light on how caste consciousness shapes active political mobilization and how active politics informs a sense of commonality amongst the Gujjars. It shows the different connections and motives that influence individual’s decision-making and participation in protest rallies. Honour [*izzat*] and considerations of material

interests are both intertwined. Ideas of caste honour and power guide the battle against the administration and state.

This section attempts to explore how competition and rivalries coexist but at the same time reinforce Gujjars’ sense of unity and commonality. The protest rally and call for a closedown is the event in which the local Gujjars came together and acted as a united community. They put aside their internal differences—like lineages, clans, economic and political affiliations. During the protest, members of the Gujjar community found it ‘natural’ to join hands with their brethren in Parikshatgarh where the massacre took place.

Gujjar Regional Politics: The Organization of the Protest

In Khanpur and the villages nearby, everyday relations between the Gujjars and Jatavs have been in turmoil since the political rise of the BSP in UP in 1995. Between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, over a dozen violent fights and skirmishes took place between Gujjars and Jatavs over small issues such as delayed payments of wages by a Gujjar farmer, refusal to work by Jatav labourers on a Gujjar farm, or non-compliant behaviour by Jatav youth. This increased violence against the Jatavs was not an isolated case, but a common occurrence in rural western UP in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the wake of the BSP’s rise, as well as assertions of Jatavs’ rights and dignity. This violence slowed down to some extent in the mid and late 2000s.

The situation changed drastically in 2007 when the BSP returned to power for the fourth time and pushed for firmer action against such cases of violence. Consequently, since then, the Gujjar and other dominant castes have avoided open confrontation with the Jatavs. On the other hand, the Jatavs have, to some extent, become more aggressive and have tried to pick fights when slightly provoked. In many instances they have misused the SC & ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against the lower OBCs, particularly Sainis in Khanpur. The confrontations were over the non-acceptance of the newly acquired status and power of the Jatavs by Sainis or other lower-caste groups. A complex picture of relations between the Jatavs and other castes emerged. Some Jatavs have benefited from the reservation policy and they are better off than lower OBCs/Most Backward Castes such as Sainis and Gaderiyas (shepherds). Furthermore, this newly acquired power also aggravated tension between Gujjars and Jatavs.

In the last week of October 2010, two rival groups of *dacoits*—Karodi Gujjar and Sri Ram Jatav—killed innocent people from opposing groups in Bhikund village of Parikshatgarh. This massacre is known as the Bhikund incident. This was reported on the front pages of the national and local dailies. This incident became a crucial event in determining the relationship between Gujjars and Jatavs in Meerut and Bijnor Districts. The Gujjars of the region took it as a challenge to their *izzat* and dominance and decided to teach the Jatav leadership a lesson by throwing them out of formal political power. In the reserved Mawana-Hastinapur assembly elections of 2012 and 2017, the Gujjars were

successful in their attempts to defeat the Jatav candidates and succeeded in electing a Valmiki and a Khatik, respectively. The Gujjars used powerful rhetoric around Gujjar identity and honour for the first time in modern Indian history. The Gujjars wanted to make sure that anyone, from any political party, would win the election except a Jatav candidate. In the village *panchayat* elections of 2010, the Gujjar successfully got a Valmiki elected on the reserved *Pradhan* seat, replacing a Jatav.

During the 2012 assembly elections, the ABGM, All India Gujjar Vikas Munch (AIGVM) and Uttar Pradesh Gujjar Samaj organized several rallies and political gatherings in Meerut, Mawana and Hastinapur, in which they exhorted their fellow caste members to vote against the Jatav political leaders who they thought were behind the emerging Jatav political power, particularly the BSP and its incumbent MLA from Mawana, Mr. Verma (a Jatav). In the first week of November 2011, ABGM, with the support of the Samajwadi Party, organized a protest rally followed by a Gujjar *Mahapanchayat*. Thousands of Gujjars from across western UP attended the *Mahapanchayat* in Mihir Bhoj College, Mawana. Gujjar politicians asked their caste to assert themselves and be proud of being Gujjar. To save honour [*izzat*] and dignity [*man-samman*] is their motto, and this is utterly important for them. In their speeches, local Gujjar leaders of the Samajwadi Party emphasized the party’s opposition to the ‘casteist’ BSP and the ‘communalist’ BJP. Attention was focused on how these parties betray the ‘ordinary’ and poor people. Gujjars and the Samajwadi Party together presented themselves as a collaboration that defends the honour and interests of the poor and weak and helps them gain self-respect.

Ramkaran, ex-village *Pradhan* and one of the prominent Gujjar political leaders of Khanpur, oversaw the organization of the protest strike to close down the markets and shops in Mawana. He was then a prominent member of the Samajwadi Party unit in Mawana and the Uttar Pradesh Gujjar Mahasabha (UP unit of the ABGM). At the main entrance of his house, there is a big picture of him with Bhadana, a former Samajwadi Party MP. He depicts himself as very close to Bhadana, and many consider his friendship with the former MP his primary source of power and wealth. Ramkaran one of the local ‘strongmen’.

Ramkaran was a former *dacoit* and had been in prison for his illegal activities. Several cases of loot, theft, ransom threats, and murders had been registered against him in the local police station. He was jailed for some of these cases but later released. The Khanpur Gujjars feel very proud of him since the mere mention of his name sends shivers down the spines of many lower caste people in the village and region.

As mentioned before, the Khanpuriya Gujjars were divided not only politically but socially also. In 2012, even though in Khanpur the majority of Gujjars were with the Samajwadi Party, substantial numbers were also supporters of the BJP, Congress and Rashtriya Lok Dal.

The protest strike was undoubtedly a Samajwadi Party political mobilization of a Gujjar issue and, at the local level, the Mukhia Party was at the helm of

organizing the protest. On the day of the protest I met Ramkaran in front of the SDM’s office in Mawana. He was surrounded by his supporters and waiting to obtain permission to organize a protest rally against the killing of innocent Gujjars. The BSP government along with police and *dacoits* had been persecuting the poor villagers. He told me that the party high command had asked local political leaders in Meerut and Bijnor and district units to intensify their agitation against the UP ‘casteist’ government. According to Ramkaran, at the direction of the BSP government the police had not yet arrested the Jatav dacoits who killed the innocent Gujjars. He said, on the contrary, policemen were harassing Gujjar villagers in Bhikund and nearby villages. Several Gujjar boys had been picked up by a police party from the Hasitanapur police station.

Ramkaran alleged that the BSP MLA Mr. Verma has actively manipulated the local police in favour of the Jatav killers. He said that unlike an MLA who represents all communities in his constituency, being a Jatav he is favouring the Jatav criminals. This casteist MLA and the government are unacceptable. The Assembly elections were very close and this protest was a good way of starting the election campaign; “this issue will help the SP to consolidate the Gujjar votes in its favour”. He added that support of the killers was a BSP leadership strategy to insult the Gujjars in this area and put them down.

He said, “Verma is very corrupt and making huge money by cheating people in land deals. He has emerged as a land mafia in Mawana, Parikshatgarh and Meerut”.

It was common knowledge that before the rise of the BSP, Gujjars were the only players in the land business (real estate). However, thanks to the BSP, some of the Jatavs like Verma have been promoted and they have emerged as new entrepreneurs. The entry of newcomers has intensified the competition.

The same evening, I went around the Mihir Bhoj Gujjar *chowk* and later on to Khanpur and saw the local shop keepers (especially Gujjars) keeping their shops open. However, they informed me they supported the protest strike.

One of them (who had been running a beer store/shop) told, “Yes, we are firmly behind the strike and close down but we will be able to sell things for an expensive price on the black market, particularly liquor during the protest. We can make a little more money”.

This made it clear to me that Gujjars were supporting the protest strike and lockdown because they wished to support their caste members from the Parikshatgarh where the violence took place. But they were not compromising their economic interests. In fact, they were using the lockdown to earn more money through black marketing.

After the strike event, some of the Gujjar activists gathered in the courtyard of Ramkaran’s house. The purpose of the meeting was to organize and coordinate the protest to be held on the Meerut-Mawana-Bijnor Highway. The protest aimed to stop traffic and create a roadblock. The local SP party workers and activists and three leaders from the nearby villages were present at the gathering. Fifteen young Gujjar men, who belonged to the youth branch of the

Gujjar Vahini (a youth outfit formed by Ramkaran Gujjar), joined the meeting and enthusiastically signalled their availability to participate in the demonstrations planned for the next day. Mahkar Gujjar, one of their leaders and an active member of the BJP, emphasized that what was at stake for him was the *izzat* of his community. He added that the demonstration would remind the allegedly anti-Gujjar government that the Gujjars were not to be scared and that the authorities should not think that Gujjars were a pushover. Creating a public nuisance, moving together aggressively and displaying their militancy in public spaces is one of the ways in which Gujjars show and assert their power and strength. By these actions Gujjars expressed commitment to defend the weaker Gujjar villagers from the injustices of the BSP government, the Jatav political leaders and the police. The meeting and protest-strike was an anti-Jatav action and therefore only indirectly an anti-BSP one.

This event united the Mukhia Party and Ganje Party, despite their disputes and rivalry. During the gathering Nabab Gujjar, a leading member of the Ganje Party, improvised a speech. He said:

The protest-strike is a Gujjar issue. We all are united to save Gujjar’s *izzat*; political differences and personal quarrels do not count at this moment. We all descend from Devnarayan Bhagvan and Mihir Bhoj, and our *dharma* is to protect the weaker sections of the society and our brethren who are suffering.

The audience cheered the speech and all participants, irrespective of their backgrounds, agreed that the killing of poor Gujjar villagers was a conspiracy against the Gujjars. It was an issue of caste honour and identity, and they had to support it.

On 11 November, people assembled at Gujjar Chowk (in Mawana) to start the procession to the SDM’s house. Khanpur Gujjars arrived at Gujjar Chowk in different groups. Members of all the two main factions were present. Gujjars from other nearby villages and neighbourhoods of Mawana joined the procession as well. The music of popular Hindi movies was played and accompanied by songs which glorified Dhan Singh Kotwal, Dhola Gujjari and the great king Mihir Bhoj.

Ramkaran mobilized the gathering by saying that Devnarayan Bhagavan successfully fought for justice by killing Vishal Dev. Our ancestors fought against all kind of injustices. Mihir Bhoj defeated Mughal invaders and defended India’s borders. Our leader, Kirori Bainsla, the direct descendent of Devnarayan, launched a movement for social justice by demanding separate reservation for the Gujjars, and local Gujjars should be proud of following the deeds of their ancestors. During the procession to the SDM’s office, the participants shouted out SP party slogans and chants of ‘Jai Bhagavan Devnarayan!’, ‘Jai Gujjar!’, ‘Jai Mihir Bhoj’. As I was going along with the protesters, I could observe how the Gujjars had taken over the main road and all public spaces with their aggressive walk.

A *Bania* man in his 40s told a friend who was accompanying him that when he was at A.S. Degree College in Mawana. One of his companions slapped a Gujjar and the day after all of the Khanpur and Sakoti villages waited for him outside the college and beat him up. “They base their strength on muscle power, they use violence. They had been thugs and dacoits in the past”, he said.

I observed that the Gujjars were carrying guns. They appeared very ‘intimidating’ and ‘violent’. The procession walked for one kilometre and a delegation met the SDM. They demanded immediate arrest of the Jatav criminals as well as the incumbent MLA who had fuelled the dispute between the Gujjars and Jatavs. They also demanded security cover for the poor Gujjar villagers in Bhikund. The administration agreed to the demands and gave an assurance to arrest the killers. Ramkaran and the local SP leadership, on assurances from the SDM, called off their protest strike on 11 November, and the Gujjars of Khanpur and nearby villages claimed to have defended their community.

In following sections, I attempt to analyse the local antagonism between the Gujjar and the Jatav community and, finally, the Gujjars’ understanding of what ‘the political’ means.

The Solidarity of the Gujjars

In this section, I explore why the issue of the killing of Gujjars in Bhikund managed to successfully mobilize Gujjars who were not directly related to the Bhikund Gujjars. The claim to descent from Devnarayan, ‘the cow herder god’ and Mihir Bhoj, the divine king, justify the creation of fictive kinship relations between different clans of Gujjars and legitimizes the process of Gujjar community formation. In the constitution of the ABGM, it is specified that ‘the word Gujjar includes those who claim their descent from Devnarayan and those who had been the protectors of country (Bharat) [*shatru nashak*]’ (ABGM 1996: 8). Hence, Devnarayan, the cow protector, is still present in Gujjar caste imagination and hi(story). Not only has Shri Devnarayan been guiding their cultural world but also their day-to-day rituals.

Political leaders such as Malook Nagar, Avatar Singh Bhadana and Sachin Pilot, along with rich Gujjar businessmen in Delhi and Meerut, keep buffaloes and cows in both their homes and countryside farms. Gujjars everywhere are not only proud of their genealogical link with Devnarayan, but also of the animals that they rear.

They proudly say, “We are a caste of rebels who were nomads”.

They consider that being rebels is in their blood (see Chapter 4). Khanpur Gujjars who are not involved in the animal husbandry profession say that they were born knowing how to deal with the herd and domestic animals. The pastoral profession is perceived by members of the Gujjar community as one of the symbols of Gujjar cultural distinctiveness. This association between Gujjars and the herd is considered an integral part of Gujjar culture.

The unity of all of the ‘descendants of Devnarayan’, with a similar traditional pastoral occupation, aims to defend the interests of pastoral and agricultural

people. The Gujjar caste meetings held in Meerut, Mawana and Khanpur a month before the protest strike illustrate how the pastoral rhetoric of the ABGM is deployed and assimilated in Khanpur and Mawana and how it influenced the dynamics of the protest strike. Moreover, it shows how Gujjar caste association meetings successfully enhance the unity of the community.

Furthermore, members of both the Ganje and Mukhiya Parties went to the Meerut meeting in September 2011. When dealing with outsiders or other factions, the Gujjars try to unify, if not at the village level then at the regional. While village/neighbourhood politics often divides Gujjars, regional politics unite them. Hence, in Meerut and in other regional meetings, members of the different factions interact. Regional meetings contribute, therefore, to creating a sense of commonality and solidarity between the different Gujjar subdivisions and factions. During the Meerut regional meeting, different social and political leaders emphasized how it was important to act like a united community. It is well known that internal rivalries are endemic and ancestral amongst the Gujjars. As Ramkaran said to me, politics, after all, is about competitions and fights and Gujjars are undoubtedly experts of that because they spend their lives competing with their brothers and kinsmen. Caste leaders know about these divisions and that is why they try to encourage external unity.

The discussions in regional caste meetings revolved mainly around social and political issues, since most of the participant had no direct confrontation with the Jatavs. Not surprisingly, what caught the attention of the participants was harassment of the Gujjars by the police. Ramkaran dramatically expressed his grievances by saying how the BSP government and police were anti-SP and anti-Gujjar.

The casteist BSP is afraid of the confrontation with the SP in the next elections ... they are afraid of Gujjars. We have to stand united and protect our brothers who are prevented from working and put in jail by the BSP government.

And they further added:

We are the followers of Devnarayan Bhagavan who made impossible tasks possible. His deeds in his days made the Gujjar community respectable across the world. The Gujjar community should follow him and the path shown by him. Devnarayan had shown us path to reinforce our power. He killed many bad kings including Vishal Dev and often took their kingdoms and gave them to good kings. Thus, Gujjars are pro-poor but don't tolerate injustices and corrupt government such as the BSP.

In local SP party rhetoric I often observed an anti-BSP and anti-Jatav stance which, from time to time, was also followed by the ABGM. In doing so, the mobilization to protest strike used themes directed by an immediate enemy/

other but also subscribed to the so-called ‘Gujjar heritage’ or constructed memory. The use of Devnarayan suggests to the audience that generations of Gujjars have been fighting against injustice across time and space, and similarly against the present killing. Moreover, the multivocal symbolism of Devnarayan is also used to deploy violence in a manner which has religious legitimacy: fight against the evil or bad kings.

However, during the protest strike, ‘the enemy’ was the Jatav political leaders, new businessmen including real estate agents who were locally associated with the BSP government and the local police. The conflict between Gujjars and the Jatav community expressed during the caste meetings, as well as during the protest strike, is rooted in the social and economic transformations that have occurred in Khanpur and western UP over the last 30 years. As mentioned previously, local Jatavs had improved their economic status by changing occupation as well as through alleged illegal activities, such as the real estate business (Kumar 2018). With the support of the BSP, along with the neo-liberal reforms, the local political and economic upsurge of the Jatavs had challenged the Gujjars’ position in the local power structure. Jatavs are no longer available as agricultural labourers for Gujjar farmers. Moreover, Jatavs have started new businesses such as vegetable outlets, general stores and saloons. In Khanpur, the Jatavs have become moneylenders and shopkeepers. This is a new development and the Gujjars could not imagine that the Jatavs would demand equality in village affairs and public spaces. Social mobility and the acquisition of power have intensified conflicts between Gujjars and Jatavs.

So far, I have tried to describe the ways in which caste leaders use deep-rooted feelings of solidarity by using the symbolism of Devnarayan and ideologies of blood line and essence. The protest strike hinted at themes that are inscribed in the Gujjar epics and the mythological past. The mytho-stories or hi (stories) connect ordinary people in participating in forms of action that they know through public and religious discourses, actions which can make or remake their cosmology in day-to-day life. However, these ideologies of community unity can also run dry. In Khanpur and Mawana, the Gujjar shopkeepers seemed more driven by profit and market opportunities than the need to defend some idea of Gujjars’ *izzat*. Some of the participants, on the other hand, felt that what was at stake was the reputation of the community. Some of my respondents alleged that the Gujjars’ involvement in criminal activities and their reputation for violence surely gave many of them a chance to assert themselves by using this protest strike as a way to negotiate with the local police who are quite aware of the Gujjars’ illegal activities. Thus, it can be argued, many of them were driven by ‘gang solidarity’ instead of caste solidarity.

This emerging ‘gang solidarity’ is locally constructed and portrayed as being based on the Gujjars’ ‘ascribed’ capability to ‘do politics’, which runs in their blood. The speeches and statements of several Gujjars and their caste leaders suggest that even their divine ancestors were trained to ‘do politics’, since these ancestors were kings/divine kings and had a duty to rule and deliver justice for

their subjects (*praja*). The Gujjar case reveals that material interests are framed within the emotional appeal of the ideology of descent and caste identity. This overlap of identity (emotionality) and materiality shows a powerful basis for political mobilization and for reinforcing Gujjar community solidarity. In the next section, I further explore how such intertwining of identity and materiality work when played out in other political acts and how they influence Gujjar political behaviour at village level.

Village *Panchayat* Elections: Money, Muscle, and Violence

Village *panchayat* elections are the arena in which factionalism, personal issues and economic interests are fought intensely. Village elections are more vibrant than assembly and Lok Sabha elections. Village politics and elections touch people’s life closely. The pursuit of power in the village is not only driven by the urge to obtain a share of state resources, but family and clan honour are also equally important. To be the village *Pradhan* or a block chairperson has practical advantages. A certain budget is assigned yearly to the *panchayat* for the development of the village. Allegedly, part of this money usually ends up directly in the *Pradhan* and village secretary’s pocket. Often during my fieldwork, I overheard that *Pradhans* are not interested in the development of villages but earning money, and *panchayat* development funds have become a source of corruption. That is why powerful and influential villagers preferred to elect a *Pradhan* who is resourceful—one who could manipulate and mis(use) the funds. Many villagers also said they would prefer to elect a *gram panchayat Pradhan* who would have money, resources, and politico-bureaucratic links outside the village. However, it is not money alone that goes into the selection of a candidate. The numerical strength of a caste in a locality, wealth (not land ownership alone but the availability of cash), and size of kinship and family can play a very important role in the selection of a candidate capable of winning.

In 2010, four candidates (Ramkaran Gujjar, Puran Saini, Bhopal Jatav and Jituu Jatav) contested for the post of *Pradhan*. Ramkaran Gujjar was supported by the Mukhia Party and a section of landless and labourer Jatavs. A few Jatavs supported Puran, who is a Saini and a lower OBC. Bhopal Jatav mostly received support and votes from landowning Jatavs, a section of Yadavs and Ganje Party. Jittu Jatav took a section of Jatav votes and emerged as a cause of Bhopal’s defeat. Ramkaran Gujjar won this four-cornered fight, garnering the votes of the majority of Gujjars (except some, who were aligned with the Ganje Party), Gaderiyas, Dhimvars and most of the Jatavs.

Ramkaran manipulated the election process by supporting a dummy Jatav candidate. On the day of nomination, four aspirants fielded their paperwork instead of three. In the village, only three aspirants (Ramkaran, Puran Saini and Bhopal Jatav) were known but suddenly fourth one, a young Jatav man (Jittu) emerged out from nowhere. The political pundits of the village immediately announced that Gujjars had done ‘politics’. Jittu’s candidacy would weaken the

position of Bhopal Jatav, a strong contender to the Gujjars. Some villagers alleged that he was a dummy candidate and was put up by the Gujjars to cut Jatav votes. Villagers alleged that Ramkaran paid Jittu Rs.50,000 for his help and this electoral performance. This was understood as a service fee since this Jatav man helped Ramkaran.

“This is how Gujjars eat and drink politics. Politics is their bread and butter in this village and its area”, Sukbeer Gaderiya expressed in frustration. Gujjars in Khanpur and its neighbourhood manipulate electoral processes and procedures in their favour.

On election day, a dozen Gujjar young men under the leadership of Ramkaran opened fire with guns and threw homemade bombs, disrupting polling for an hour as Jatavs and others fled for their lives away from the polling station. Gujjar youth used this time to push the buttons of the voting machines while police and electoral officers ran to save their lives.

Ramkaran justified his acts by saying, “In Bhikund some Jatavs wanted to insult the Gujjars with the help of the current Jatav MLA and Mayavati government. It was a political conspiracy hatched by the Jatav politicians to insult Gujjars and corner the Gujjar political leaders”. He further added that, “The Jatavs were trying to be equal in every domain of life. We fought against this *goondagardi* (thuggish act) and taught a tough lesson to the Jatav leaders. We did not allow anyone of them to win village panchayat elections in Khanpur and nearby villages in 2010”.

In the similar manner, Gujjar leadership in the 2012 Assembly elections, campaigned for a Valmiki and got him elected, thus abandoning other candidates.

In the 2010 village *panchayat* elections, Ramkaran was portrayed as one who knew how to treat villagers and care for the poor, and he was well connected with the world outside the village. He was believed to be very close to the former MP. That is part of why Ramkaran was viewed as a much better candidate than an honest, simple Saini man and he was elected village *Pradhan*. For many Gujjars, as *kashtriyas*, it is their moral duty to engage in politics and defend their territory. However, in private conversations, many of the Gujjar men were critical of Ramkaran and did not want to live under his reign of terror. But in the name of protection from the Jatavs they were ready to bear with him.

As one of them told me, “He is the only one who can defend the Gujjar community and its honour and can create fear among the belligerent Jatavs”.

The political understanding of Gujjars revolves around the idea of representation and identity. It is important for them to have political power as this is their arena and they believe themselves to be the best at it. Also, they believe, negotiations of all kinds can only happen if a Gujjar is in power.

Conclusion: Elections and Democracy

The political ethnography of the Gujjars shows how Indian elections can be described as multivocal mechanisms which not only introduce political changes

but also reproduce the dominance and power relationships at local and regional levels (Kumar 2018). While it is true that the Gujjars’ high levels of political participation are related to their pursuit of economic goals, their pursuit of power is also intertwined with ideas of honour or caste *izzat*. Thus, I argue that the concept of ‘patronage democracy’ developed by Kanchan Chandra (2004) is not enough to analyse and to understand Gujjar’s high levels of political participation. Chandra looks at state dominance and ethnic politics as two interconnected phenomena and shows why voters in ‘patronage-democracies’ choose between parties by conducting ethnic headcounts rather than by comparing policy practices or ideological positions (Chandra 2004). It may be true that in a ‘patronage democracy’ as defined by Chandra, caste identities are used to take power over the state, both at the regional and national level. However, at the local level it may unfold differently. There are many other factors—such as rivalries between different caste groups and the inter-related structures of the regional political economy—which may decide the ways in which a caste group participates in local and regional politics. This combination of factors also opens up possibilities for permutations and combinations and allows changes to occur in local power structures as we have seen in UP over the last three decades. Thus, in order to understand caste politics at the regional level, this ethnography suggests paying close attention to the combination of cultural and economic factors together.

In Mawana, Khanpur and nearby villages, the concept of ‘representation’ has been locally reinterpreted in a way which has its roots in a reinvented the Gujjar ‘democratic’ political culture and political imagination. We have seen how the embodiment of the Gujjar community in Kirori Bainsla or other leaders, and vice versa, resonates in the political sphere, and this indicates a different idea of, and kind of, ‘representation’ which can be independent of elections. The ideas of representation by blood relationship or community membership or territorial identity have acquired important markers in contemporary identity politics. Thus, while Dalits represents Dalits, Gujjar representatives claim to represent Gujjars primarily because they are Gujjars and have the same essence. Here, elections and voting processes are secondary. More importantly, the actual voting is not always considered necessary. What emerges from this ethnographic material is that ideas of community association are very important. That is why during the Assembly election campaign of 2012 in Khanpur, Gujjars unanimously campaigned for a Valmiki candidate in order to defeat the Jatav incumbent MLA, Verma, who had been instrumental in attacking the *izzat* of the Gujjar community.

This chapter also throws light on the relationships between political parties and caste associations. While political parties have become more and more de-institutionalized, they are still important and provide platforms for individuals and castes to contest elections. Political parties have become ‘business firms’ in which people of different castes are also accommodated, while only caste and family hold most of the shares and the decision-making power. Caste associations play important role in this context and, along with political parties, have

flourished. In fact, caste associations are giving birth to new political parties, and they both have symbiotic and dialectic relationships. Furthermore, caste associations are often the vehicles through which ‘strongmen’ construct their support at the local level. Caste association provide all sorts of legitimacy to strongmen who in the name of community/caste interests and welfare promote their personal wealth and careers. Thus, strongmen have also emerged as key players, between community and political parties, using and harnessing the language of welfare and social service.

Recently, the writing and rewriting of caste (hi)stories has gained currency across caste groups in UP. Each caste is attempting to reinvent its ‘past’ and trying to place/fit it into the larger Hindu cosmology, along with the search of their gods and ancient kingdoms in order to claim ‘respect’ and a ‘dignified’ place in contemporary India. Caste associations are playing important roles by publishing such (hi)stories in the form of magazines, monthly journals, pamphlets and books at the local and regional levels. Caste associations lobby the government and demand their history be updated/changed in the existing books. Most importantly, these caste associations are the locus where the caste sense of commonality is created and consolidated. Meetings of caste associations inculcate the ideas of symbolic representation and the ideas of mythical history by establishing the bloodline between ordinary Gujjars and their divine and royal/martial ancestors. Caste associations make the connections between the past and present in local languages in such a way as to attract the attention of their audiences and members. Furthermore, the interactions between politics, the State, Khanpur Gujjars and Gujjar caste associations show that the relationship between caste and democratic political processes cannot be reduced to linear and simplistic models.

Different castes have different economic and political histories and their cultural constitutions are different as well. This can partly influence the way their members internalize democracy and its values and ideas. To understand the changes that have occurred in Meerut and the western UP region, I suggest that electoral democracy has to be examined within the context of regional power structures and the historical processes that have shaped the larger political economy and culture within which democratic politics have unfolded.

Notes

- 1 In the village household survey questions I asked: Is any member of your family a politician? Do you personally know any party leaders or any candidates in this constituency? Have you ever contacted any political leader (MP, MLA, Block *Pramukh*, party leader; Sugarcane society chairman) for any need or problem?
- 2 Khanpur’s Gujjars have been winning and ruling the village *panchayat* since the first *panchayat* elections in 1951. Gujjars have been playing important role both informally and formally since the 1951. After implementation of reservation in the PRI (Panchayat Raj Institutions), Gujjars have become even more active due to availability of

funds/other resources to the *panchayat*. Gradually, Gujjars have also taken over block and district *panchayat* offices also over the last two decades.

- 3 According to Michelutti, in Mathura representation is defined by the imagination of relationship between the divine Krishna and contemporary hero-politicians (2008: 191).
- 4 Michelutti (2008: 193) describes how amongst the Yadavs of Mathura, every Yadav thinks of himself as a boss.

CONCLUSION

Caste and the Anthropology of Democracy

Through a political ethnography of the Gujjars, this book has attempted to make three broad points about caste politics and popular democracy. First, it has highlighted the ways in which the Gujjars engage themselves with the institutions and ideas of democracy. Second, it has illuminated how the Gujjars employ identity politics and concepts of social justice. Third, it has attempted to understand how the Gujjars reinterpret the category of caste and ideas of democracy and rework them both in the socio-spatial and cultural contexts of the western UP region. Finally, this book has sought to outline some of the ways in which studies of popular democracy and of caste can fruitfully come to bear on each other.

First, the Gujjars engage with the institutions and ideas of democracy through caste associations and leaders that claim to represent the Gujjar *samaj*. Simultaneously, these associations and leaders also claim to be champions of both the OBCs and the poor. While the Constitution recognizes an individual and gives them the right to vote—one person one vote—ordinary Gujjars and their leaders process the right to vote through the lens of family, kinship, community associations, and the ‘past’. This dynamics of the institutions of democracy and community shapes Gujjars’ engagement with, and understanding of, democratic politics. This has produced both hope and despair. The ideology of social justice is not understood by many Gujjars. The Meerut and Saharanpur’s landowning Gujjars from *khad-dar* [low land] repeatedly displayed contrary images by seeking reservation benefits and resisting alliances with other OBC jatis, such as Yadavs and Jats. Most of the Gujjars have a title or surname very similar to Jats, Yadavs and Rajputs but compete with the Jats and Yadavs who have cornered most of the state benefits such as reservations designed for the OBCs. Thus, the Gujjars oscillate between the identities of Shudra and Kshatriya while demanding reservations and asserting their martial caste status and imagination.

Second, historically and sociologically Gujjars share many similarities with Jats, as they are one *hukka* caste, and also used to have a common caste association until the Muzaffarnagar meeting of 1908 when they parted ways. Later on, in the 1960s and 1970s after the economic and political rise of Jats under the leadership of Charan Singh further alienated the Gujjars from the Jats in the

Upper Doab, the Gujjars attempted to assert their separate identity. A feeling of being left behind has grown deeper and, recently, the Gujjars of Meerut have started demanding Scheduled Tribes status following the Gujjars' agitation in Rajasthan. However, they continue to seek the recognition of their martial caste and, thereby, *kshatriya* status.

Within the Gujjar projection of social justice, Dalits/SCs could not associate themselves with the Gujjar leadership because of the contradictory positions taken by it. The Gujjar leadership and caste associations always thought of the Jatavs as a caste pampered by the government and later on by the BSP. In order to side-line the Jatavs, the Gujjars tried to make political alliances with the Valmikis and other Dalit caste groups, such as Khatiks and Dhobis.

Thus, intermediary castes such as the Gujjars have attempted to redefine identity politics through multiple identities. The Gujjars have used resistance as an important strategy in countering the social and political hegemony of Jats in the 1990s and also resisted Jatavs' assertions in the western UP region. Using their economic power, numerical strength, organizational skills, and masculine image, Gujjars have been bargaining with the state to get institutional resources and achieve Scheduled Caste (ST) status, while resisting the Jats' hegemony in the region. In the early 2000s, the Gujjars of Meerut were demanding the status of Most Backward Caste proposed by the Hukum Singh Committee. However, when the Gujjars in Rajasthan began to demand ST status, the Meerut Gujjar then joined them in also demanding ST status. The Gujjars of Meerut also did not hesitate in using right-wing strategies to subordinate the Dalits. The Gujjars have not only deployed caste as a discriminatory category (themselves as victims) but also used caste as a social power in terms of number, organization, and economic-cultural resources.

Third, the findings of this book also indicate that the nexus between caste and politics in Indian society is much deeper in the socio-political and religious realm. When one looks at the rising aspirations of different social groups, caste is increasingly used as a mobilizing strategy. Mobilizing strategies differ among upper, middle, and intermediary castes, and vary across regions and sub-regions. The political class of the Gujjars uses symbols from sacred geography, cosmology, local deities and rituals, ideas of masculinity, myths, and legends and simultaneously draws from ideas of justice and from the Indian institutions of democracy. This process is not unique to the Gujjars. Across India, for example, people share a common popular democratic language which they draw from their socio-cultural, religious, and regional resources as well as from the institutions of democracy.

Broadly, in this book I have discussed the process which democratic politics uses to take socio-cultural roots into the caste body and become a part of people's life. In particular, by unravelling the caste understandings of democracy of Meerut Gujjars I looked at how, through socio-cultural internalization, popular politics thrives in UP. Democracy has become part of the everyday politico-cultural imagination among members of the Gujjar community through idioms

and practices which are the product of the encounter between popular theories of religious descent, kinship structures, marriage patterns, popular religious cults, ideas of masculinity, local notions of personhood on the one hand, and the institutions and the practices of Indian democracy on the other. The dynamics between ‘traditional’, ‘modern’ and further between local and global, have created something we can call the ‘everyday life of the popular’ in which popular democracy thrives.

I argue that the dynamics between indigenous idioms of politics and global democratic discourse and practices have been the key in making democracy part of the Indian political imagination and in informing the political rise of marginalized groups such as the Gujjars. This process is undoubtedly important when considering the success and failure of democracy in taking root in different social-cultural settings. Most of the previous research has emphasized the role that political elites, institutions, and international factors play in democratic transitions and democratic consolidation, but little attention has been paid to the role that socio-religious factors play in helping democracy to be legitimized in the eyes of ordinary people and in influencing the entry of the marginalized sections into politics. The case of the Gujjars—a low caste (historically marginalized both in ritual and economic terms) that through socio-cultural internalization has achieved high levels of politicization and assertiveness—provides an alternative way to look at popular politics. It shows that even when states fail to perform their duties, ordinary people can engage with the state and its institutions. In India, for example, poverty, illiteracy, corruption, disregard for law and order, and political violence coexist with a commitment to the ‘idea of democracy’ among the poor and marginalized. This sounds contradictory to conventional and modern political science wisdom. Often, in common parlance, ‘democracy’ is equated with elections. However, the idea of equal citizenship has permeated all domains of life, even in rural UP, despite everyday hierarchical practices. This idea of equality has questioned many social and cultural institutions, including the state. It is a common observation that people talk about equality and *Janata ka raj* in everyday life settings despite being enveloped by inequalities.

Most importantly, this book has shown the ways in which marginalized communities like Gujjars socio-historically construct democracy and use it to further re-formulate themselves into a *samaj* or an All India Gujjar community (Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Samaj). It follows that, in the 1990s, democracy did not only enter the lives of marginal people as an abrupt response to political parties’ manoeuvres or the implementation of reservation or as a critique of modernity. I argue that popular politics becomes a part of daily life when ideas and practices of democracy have interacted and been transformed by religion and past. The use of historical and anthropological perspectives has shown the ways in which democracy gradually is accepted among the non-elites of society (Michelutti 2008; 2019). Moreover, it is not only institutionally and economically determined but, importantly, socially and culturally shaped. That is why

the study of democracy requires long term or historical understanding, not just a focus on a particular state or village election. Thus, the political landscape of the 1990s and 2000s needs to be connected to the larger political transformation which had taken shape over the previous decades.

For a better understanding of political modernity in India, I suggest that we may need to pay closer attention to the ways in which people, or particular caste groups, uses its memory, myths, or cultural past to re-imagine and re-construct modern institutions, such as democracy, in the context of the local political economy and its institutions. Such a view may unravel the complex, interlocking and layered relationships between local and global institutions and discourses on the one hand, and culture and the political economy on the other. Without paying serious attention to the entanglements of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial histories, it is difficult to discern contemporary concerns, demands, and aspirations. Gujjars' construction of themselves as an All India Gujjar Samaj, as a 'martial' race (of Rajput origin), on the one hand, and, on the other, a construction of a tribal identity for the claims of reservation benefits can only be understood through an exploration of the layered interlinkages between the historical and the contemporary which are located in the regional and global economy simultaneously.

Democratization through *Samajikaran*

The politicization of Gujjars in western UP shows how some socio-cultural structures and political cultures are more amenable for creating space for ambiguity and, in so doing, facilitate the process of caste internalization of democratic politics. Michelutti (2008: 2019) shows, for instance, how the most effective processes of community identity formation usually occur when the constructed identities are in reality extremely 'imprecise'. She argues that 'the politics of identity is generally driven by paradox that no identity and no sense of community ever can be self-evident and stable' (ibid.: 225). Communities which oscillate between two or multiple identities create ambiguous spaces for rivalry and competition. These ambiguous spaces are, in turn, made even more unstable by political democracy and become open to endless permutations and manipulations. For instance, it is not a coincidence that the most visible politically powerful caste-communities—the Gujjars in western Uttar Pradesh, the Yadavs in central Uttar Pradesh, the Jats in Haryana, the Marathas in Maharashtra, and the Patidars in Gujarat—have a strikingly similar kinship organization, regional character, and caste political culture. These communities have been using their kinship structure, leading to horizontal organization. Flexible horizontal organization is accompanied by loose endogamous rules, an emphasis on descent rather than the ideology of purity and pollution. The processes of *samajikaran*, or substantialisation (Barnett 1977), and politicization seem to be facilitated within caste-communities which were traditionally informed by horizontal alliances rather than vertical ones. Today, the horizontal cluster or

samaj type of organization has found a new vitality in a modern caste society that recognizes differences and equality rather than the language of ritual hierarchy as an acceptable manifestation of caste (Fuller 1996: 12; Gupta 2004: 3; Jodhka 2014: 21). In addition, we can see how castes with this type of organization demonstrate a significant amount of economic movement and internal mobility which creates factionalism and contributes to local political socialization and the entrance of political democracy at the localized and regional levels. Horizontal organization also gives space for economic competition and mobility. This has intensified local political competition among caste groups.

Relationships between gods (divine) and humans have played important role in Indian politics since independence. Chapter 4 showed that the logic of descent has intertwined with local ideas about the relationships between gods and ancestors and with related ways of understanding 'the past'. Indigenous notions of identity have been reinforced and enriched by the use of new vocabularies. Gujjar intellectuals have selectively used the language of history, science, and 'democracy' (including equality, social justice, and majoritarianism) to re-fashion their community. Government classifications and policies have certainly been some of the factors which have contributed to the expansion of Gujjar political participation and understanding. But just as politics is not the same for all communities, the way government policies work is not the same for all communities, and this is because different communities not only have different ritual and economic status, but also different cultural resources at hand which might or might not adapt well to the political game. The capacity to use the cultural and religious resources at hand also plays a crucial role in castes engaging in modern and democratic politics.

I have shown that the Gujjar kinship system was traditionally informed by openness and flexibility. Gujjar history (mixed with myths) tries to project Gujjars as an All India caste-community by putting together several sub-divisions and clans. In certain parts of India, Gujjars have a sort of 'tribal-cum-pastoralist' social structure—such as the Van Gujjars from the Shivalik hills in Saharanpur. In these social systems, real and symbolic kinship bonds were informed by descent-centred kinship ideologies. Historically, the Gujjar caste-community also had an ambiguous ritual status in the caste hierarchy. Gujjars are a heterogeneous community containing *rajas*, *zamindars*, cultivators and cowherders (including Gujjars of Islamic faith) who have been understood and categorized as warriors and as belonging to the Kshatriya *varna*, or as lower caste and belonging to the Shudra *varna*, or as belonging to the tribal groups.

I argue that the Gujjars' flexible status, and the fact that members of this large heterogeneous community were (and are) recognized as a Rajput-like community, made it possible for all the Gujjars to see themselves as a martial caste with *kshatriya* status. During colonial times this presumed noble status was instrumentally used by Gujjars so they could be included in the martial caste. For some time, the Gujjars have been demanding the formation of a Gujjar regiment, like the Jat regiment, in the Indian army. In addition, it is usual, in Gujjar political rhetoric, to

depict the Gujjars as natural politicians. Similarly, the fact that part of the community was depicted by colonial ethnographies as low in ritual terms and as having tribal characteristics, provided the Gujjar community with resources to claim Scheduled Caste status in post-colonial India. It became part of the key rhetoric in organizing the Gujjars across north India in the 1997 protest-movement led by Karori Bainsla in Rajasthan.

It was their flexible caste status, together with the strong belief in descent from a common stock, that helped Gujjars to ‘define’ and ‘re-define’ themselves. In addition, the importance of the idiom of kinship over the idiom of purity-pollution in the Gujjars’ understanding of their community has gained extra force in a democratic political world in which political parties collect their support by mobilizing ‘horizontal’ caste blocs. On the religious front, again, the figure of the god Devnarayan offered the Gujjar ideologues and politicians another ambiguous symbol open to be internalized in the caste body through the language of contemporary democracy and political leadership. Chapter 3 showed how Gujjar intellectuals and politicians select and rework specific qualities and skills of the god Devnarayan. Being a martial caste, Gujjars give value to masculinity, bravery, violence, political skills, morality, and statecraft, all of which are qualities that contemporary Gujjar are said to have inherited from their ancestors Devnarayan, *raja* Mihir Bhoj and emperor Kanishka. These mytho-heroic traditions provide local Gujjars not only with a martial and democratic culture but also with ‘gods’ who are linked with ‘mundane affairs’ and whose morality is ambiguous in a similar way to that of their contemporary, strongman politicians. Hence, caste theories of political skills, linked to indigenous conceptions of the relations between human beings (ancestors) and gods, facilitate the process of the legitimization of democracy and of political leaders and help the Gujjars to construct their particular caste understanding of democracy and electoral modern politics.

The Caste View of Democracy: Contemporary Indian Politics

For Kaviraj (1991) the incongruence between the ‘upper discourse’ of modernist elites and ‘lower discourse’ of the indigenous is the key to define the failure of Nehruvian modernity and state. For him, Nehruvian modernist elites articulate a secular and liberal language derived from the west which has no resonance with ordinary people and the ways in which people understand the political in everyday popular culture. Kaviraj highlights the existing disconnect between the elites and ordinary people and, further, the failures of elites to translate ‘western modernity’ to ordinary people. Thus, the emergence of popular politics should be interpreted as an answer to the failure of the state (Nigam 2000; Alam 2004; Michelutti 2008; Witsoe 2013).

The ethnography of the Gujjars presented in this book develops this line of thought. Ordinary Gujjars did not become politicized because they wanted to criticize ‘modernity’ or neo-liberal reforms—they become politicized because of

the material, along with symbolic, gains that they could obtain by entering into politics, using whatever was available to them, such as economic and cultural resources, along with their numbers (votes). Politics opened up opportunities for the Gujjars to not only define who they are but also to claim what they deserve from the national resources. Benefitting from the urbanization of the NCR and Meerut, they were equipped to manoeuvre local and regional politics while the Jats were losing their political edge, suffering from agrarian crises. Political power was, for many Gujjars, the principal path to material improvement, as well as sustaining/expanding the wealth they had acquired through the processes of urbanization when their land was sold. The Gujjars had been fully equipped to understand the language of democracy and community entitlement established by the Constitution and by state governments. Caste leaders and associations played important roles in facilitating the communication between political parties and ordinary Gujjars. The discourses and languages of democracy had already been a part of the lives of ordinary Gujjars for a long time and had begun to shape their ideas and practices of community, and their internal structures. The reshaping of values and practices of democracy in Gujjar social realms increased in the years following independence and peaked in the 1990s and 2000s.

Thus, 'liberal' democracy acquired caste and regional flavour while anchored in the institutions of modern state and shaped by the global discourses of democracy. In many ways, democracy acquired 'indigenous' and popular form in the western UP region. It is true that there are different degrees and ways of indigenization, and consequently different political cultures within the country but, I argue, they all use a basic, common, regional-local vocabulary which is neither 'English' nor 'Hindi' and neither 'Rural' nor 'Urban'. The vocabulary used in political speeches, caste association publications, and petitions by the Gujjars reflects precisely this regional-local or what Michelutti calls 'vernacularisation' (2008: 223). The Gujjars speak neither in Hindi nor in English but 'Hinglish' and concepts such as '*loktastra*', 'public', 'social justice', 'criminalization', 'and constitution' are expressed in both languages. Ordinary people express themselves in *khichdi* [hybrid] language or popular dialect. In the specific Gujjar case, since the movement is distributed across India and the leaders of the All India Gujjar caste association do not speak specifically in Hindi but in 'Hinglish'. Thus, political language of the everyday—which is a mix of 'English', Hindi', 'Urdu', 'Gujjari', 'Rural-folk' and regional dialects—has provided spaces to articulate 'democratic language and ideals' and the political imagination.

Popular Politics and Caste

In recent years, the political profile of marginalized caste groups has risen under a leadership which projects itself as the supporter of poor and ordinary people north India. The politics of the common man has gained currency throughout

north India. The Gujjars and their leadership have shown remarkable skills in grasping the material and political benefits of a democratic political system and wholeheartedly weaving their imagination and cultural resources with it, using the language of social justice and ‘victimhood’. However, socio-cultural internalization of the language of social justice and political equality (I mean here democracy) is by no means confined to the Gujjars. In the post-‘Mandal, Market and Mandir’ phase of politics, caste-based solidarities have revolutionized the ways in which both middle class and middle caste politics operates. In each case, the specific regional, economic, and cultural processes, and electoral engagements, vary but they all ultimately demonstrate the particular processes of socio-cultural internalization and fertilization of democratic aspirations in this setting.

The case of the Gujjars shows that democracy has sunk its socio-material and cultural roots in Meerut and Khanpur over the past three years and has become the medium through which Gujjars express their ideas of ‘the political’. The existing socio-cultural, economic, and numerical resources shape the Gujjars’ political participation and engagement with democratic politics. There is an increasingly mutually constitutive relationship between democratic politics and everyday life since both shape each other. In particular, this mutual relationship explains the acts of violence and higher political participation in political rallies and voting processes, which ordinary Gujjars participate in enthusiastically. These popular forms of political participation are often accompanied by a polarization of opinions and political practices between the so-called ordinary people (marginalized communities) in India. I have shown the ways in which the Hindutva forces discursively localize nativist sentiments through idealistic visions of the ‘past’ and local community—the socialist politics of caste employ the local as a site of mobilization to foster communal alliances and associations.

Thus, this focus on the popular and local shows that in the last three decades democracy in India is no longer an institution left by the British rulers or imposed by western powers. On the contrary, the marginalized and the poor have infused a new energy and hope into democratic politics and democracy. However, simultaneously, democracy has also produced political dynasties, strongman politics, and totalitarian Hindutva. These unpredictable and uncomfortable outcomes of democratic politics in India and elsewhere are closely associated with the idea of popular sovereignty which means government ‘of the people, by the people and for the people’, and makes democracy very dynamic. At the same time, it also reveals the fragile nature of democracy.

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INDEX

- Achauhan clan 43, 69, 70–1, 88
AD (Apana Dal) 21, 25
agriculture 22, 23–4, 26, 29, 33, 35, 38, 40, 72, 104–5
Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) 37, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 58–9, 66, 71, 72–3; 2012 Assembly elections 101; anti-BSP and anti-Jatav stance 105; constitution 81, 104; Devnarayan Lila performance 87–8; pastoral rhetoric 105; Pathik 84; presents itself as umbrella organization for pastoral and OBC caste groups 78; protests (2007) 97; Vedic sacrifice and chanting 82; warrior Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj as ‘timeless’ political figures 79–82
Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Vikas Munch (ABGVM) 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 73
Alam, J. 117
alcohol 45, 66–7, 102
Allaha and Udal, epic of 69
Alter, J.S. 45
Amin, S. 69
animal(s) 104; eating meat 66–7; removal of dead 68; sacrifice 64, 65, 66, 71
Appadurai, A. 6
Arumugam, I. 74
Arun, J.C. 60
Arya Samaj 37, 71, 75, 79, 80; in Meerut and Khanpur 64–6; religious reforms and 63–4
authoritarianism 11; *dabang* politicians: local 89–92; Hindutva 5, 119
Ayodhya and *Ramjanmabhumi* movement 24
Ayurvedic medicine practices 66
Bailey, F.G. 17
Bainsla, K. 78, 81, 85, 86, 97, 103, 109, 117
Banerjee, M. 3
Barnett, S. 8, 115
Bayly, S. 6
Beteille, A. 9, 19
betrayal, caste 91
Bhadana, A.S. 78, 82, 85, 90, 92, 95, 97, 101, 104
Bhati, K. 33–4, 64, 69
Bhati, R. 80
Bhati, S. 51, 55, 70, 81, 83, 84
Bhikund incident (2010) 100; protest strike 101–4, 105–6; solidarity of Gujjars 104–7
BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) 2, 16, 23, 24–5, 29, 38–9, 68, 75, 80, 91, 97, 103; 2012 UP Assembly elections 30, 101; Devnarayan statue 73; Dhan Singh 51; Jats in list of OBCs 27
black market 102
Brahma (Vishnu) and Gayatri 54, 56
Brass, P.R. 7, 18, 21, 22, 23, 33, 98
Breman, J. 18
BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) 5, 6, 21, 25, 38–9, 42, 43, 53, 68, 75, 80, 97, 103, 105; 2012 UP Assembly elections 30, 101; Jatavs 68, 100, 101, 102, 106, 113; public spaces 51–2
bureaucracy, state 23, 90
Byres, T.J. 22
Cavendish, R. 35
Chakrabarty, D. 7
Chandra, K. 6, 18, 109
Chatterjee, P. 5, 7, 10
Chotiner, I. 4
Chowdhury, D.R. 4
Christianity 24

- Ciotti, M. 3, 49
citizenship 60
civil society and political society 7
clans and factions 43, 116; Achauhan clan 43, 69, 70–1, 88; Ganje party (faction) 43, 98–9, 103, 105, 107; intra-faction rivalry 99; Mukhia party (faction) 43, 98–9, 101–2, 103, 105, 107; Rawal clan 43
Cohn, B. 6, 49
colonialism 6–7, 8, 17, 20, 21, 33, 34, 35–6, 37–8, 50, 52, 56, 59, 83, 84, 85, 88–9, 115, 116; ethnographies by administrators 55, 117
Colvin, A. 33
communalism 75
Congress Party 16, 17–18, 19, 21–4, 29, 38, 75, 80, 98; 2012 UP Assembly elections 30; ABGM 37
Constitution 7, 9, 12, 20, 31, 58, 112, 118; 73rd Panchayati Raj Act 18
contradictions 7, 8, 23, 53, 56, 58, 60, 72, 75, 91, 113, 114
corruption 10–11, 12, 22, 23, 90, 91, 92, 102, 107, 114
courts 23
criminals/criminal activities 11, 23, 37, 56, 79, 88, 89, 91–2, 99, 106; from criminals to freedom fighters 50–3; *see also* violence, political
Crooke, W. 55, 70
culturalization of caste 59–60, 61
culture and politics of food 66–8
- Dalits/Scheduled Castes (SCs) 7, 9–10, 12, 19, 43, 53, 81, 109, 113, 117; Arya Samaj 64; BJP's socio-political coalition 25; caste hierarchy 49, 60; commensality 67–8; Congress Party 21, 37; Khanpur 40, 41, 43; Meerut District 39; purity-pollution 9, 63, 67–8, 75; rebellion (1857) 57; secularism and nationalism 57; SP (Samajwadi Party) 29; *see also* Jatavs
Dalmia, V. 64
Datta, N. 33
Davis, R.H. 10
Deliege, R. 49
Devnarayan 6, 9–10, 45, 54, 56, 59, 61, 63, 64, 74, 92, 103, 117; contradictory processes 72, 75; emergence of 70–3; Jayanti: emergence of new rituals of unity 73–4; Lila or cultural performance 87–8, 97; lineage deity cults 68–70; in Meerut politics 85–7; solidarity 104–6; 'timeless' political figures: Mihir Bhoj and 79–82
Dhan Singh, Kotwal 36, 50–2, 55, 57, 74, 83, 95, 97, 103
Dhola Gujjari 84–5, 103
diaspora 34, 54, 94
Dirks, N.B. 49
discrimination, positive 21–2, 60; reservation policies 7, 18, 24, 27, 28, 100, 112
Doron, A. 3
Dumont, L. 8, 49, 67, 72, 74, 75
Duncan, I. 22
- economy 23, 38
Election Commission 5, 11
elections 5, 6, 19–20, 22–3, 24, 44–5, 50, 79, 90, 98, 114; 2010 village *panchayat* 107–8; 2012 Assembly 25, 28–30, 91, 95, 96, 99–104, 108, 109; and democracy 108–10; Lok Sabha 1–2, 11, 21, 25, 33
Elliot, H.M. 35
Emergency 22
epic of Allaha and Udal 69
equality 8, 20, 28, 49, 58, 59, 60, 74, 86, 94, 106, 108, 114, 116, 119; *see also* inequality/ies
ethnicity and caste 59, 61, 72
ethno-history *see* myth, heroes and hi (stories)
- factions *see* clans and factions
films 73
food: culture and politics of 66–8
Fuller, C.J. 7, 8, 65, 72, 116
- Gandhi, I. 22, 23
Gandhi, M. 17, 37, 84
Gandhi, R. 23
gangs and *akhara*: formation of masculinity 43–6
Ganje party (faction) 43, 98, 99, 103, 105, 107
Gellner, D.N. 49
gender 10, 45, 58; lineage membership 68; *see also* masculinity; women
Ghurye, G.S. 74
Gooptu, N. 45
Gorrige, H. 3

- 'Greater Dehli': claiming territory 32–4
 Green Revolution 21–2, 40
 group rights 7
 Gujjar, S. 54
 Gujjar Youth Association (GYA) 53, 73
 Gulban village incident (1947) 84–5
 Gupta, A. 7
 Gupta, C.B. 22
 Gupta, D. 19–20, 49, 98, 116
 Gupta, J.K. 72
 Guru, G. 57
- Hansen, T.B. 3, 11, 16, 20, 37, 45
 Harlan, L. 63
 Hasan, Z. 21, 22, 24
 health: Ayurvedic medicine practices 66
 hero-gods, kings and rebels 78–9, 104;
 Bhagwan Devnarayan in Meerut
 politics 85–7; construction of 'martial'
 and 'rebellion' essences 82–5; culture
 and politics: performance of
 Bagdawatbharat 87–8; *dabang*
 politicians: local authoritarianism
 89–92; linkages between god and
 humans: caste ideologies 88–9; warrior
 Devnarayan and Mihir Bhoj as
 'timeless' political figures 79–82
 heroes *see* myth, heroes and
 hi(stories)
 Hildebeitel, A. 72
 Hindutva 5, 92, 119; politicisation of
 'backward castes' and rise of 21–6
 hi(stories) *see* myth, heroes and hi(stories)
 history 10; formation of Akhil Bharatiya
 Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) and Gujjar
 leadership 37–9; Gujjars of Upper
 Doab: before and during colonial times
 34–6
 honour or *izzat* 2, 6, 21, 99–100, 101, 103,
 106, 107, 108, 109
 hybrid language 118
- Ikegame, A. 88
 individual identity 3, 7, 60, 112
 inequality/ies 18, 49, 57, 60, 114; *see also*
 equality
 International Monetary Fund (IMF) 23
 irrigation 38, 40
 Islam/Muslims 2, 24, 28, 29–30, 37, 68, 71,
 72, 73, 75, 89; ABGM 78; Gulban
 village incident 84–5; Khanpur 41;
 Meerut District 39
- Jaffrelot, C. 5, 16, 21, 22, 25, 26, 33, 56
 Jahar Vir or Goga Pir 70, 71, 72–3
 Janata Coalition 23
 Jatavs 10, 87, 98, 100–4, 105, 106, 109,
 113; BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) 68, 100,
 101, 102, 106, 113; commensality 68;
 fake fear 87; hero-gods 69; Khanpur 40,
 41–2, 43, 44, 107–8; SP (Samajwadi
 Party) 29, 30, 105; village *panchayat*
 elections 107–8
 Jats 19, 20, 21–2, 24, 25–6, 35, 36, 53, 59,
 83, 98, 112–13, 115; Arya Samaj 64, 65;
 commensality 67; Congress Party 37;
 decline in political power 38, 118; Harit
 Pradesh 33; Jahan Vir 70, 72; Meerut
 District 39; OBCs' list 27; SP
 (Samajwadi Party) 29, 30
 JD (Janata Dal Party) 24, 27, 28
 Jodhka, S.S. 3, 49, 116
 journals, monthly 54, 57, 110
- Kapferer, B. 61
 Kaviraj, S. 7, 117
 Khanpur village 95–6, 104–5, 106, 119;
 caste groups in 40, 41; clans and
 factions *see separate entry*; elections,
 money, muscle and violence 44–5,
 107–8; enemies and rivals 98–9; family
 members in politics 95; gangs and
 akhara: formation of masculinity 43–6;
 ideas of representation beyond electoral
 politics 97–8; and Mawana: rural-urban
 linkages 40–3; political connections in
 95–6; protest strike (2010) 101–2; Shiv
 mandir akhara (gymnasium) 45–6
 Khilnani, S. 5, 16, 48
 kings, ancient and medieval 6, 52–3, 54,
 55, 64, 95; hero-gods, rebels and 78–92;
 persistent models of kingship 79
 kinship 9, 10, 13, 54, 59, 61, 75, 89, 92, 96,
 97, 98, 107, 112, 115, 116, 117; fictive 104
 Kolff, D.H.A. 33, 34, 35
kshatriyalkshatriyaness 28, 53, 54, 55, 56, 64,
 65, 66, 67, 79, 80, 94, 108, 112, 113, 116
 Kumar, S. 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16, 19, 24,
 45, 67, 98, 106, 109
 Kurmis 19, 21–2, 25, 26, 38, 59
- Labour Party 43
 land 19, 24, 107, 112; entrepreneurs 102,
 106; landless people 18; reforms 18, 21–2
 Lerche, J. 29

- Linz, J.J. 4
 localization of democratic politics 30
 Lohia, R. 28
- Mahabharata 39, 80–1, 82, 85
 Mandal, B.P. 27, 57
 Marriott, M. 89
 ‘martial’ and ‘rebellion’ essences,
 construction of 82–5; *see also*
 hero-gods, kings and rebels; *kshatriyal*
 kshatriyanness
 Martin, N. 18, 19
 masculinity 10, 20, 66–7, 113, 117; gangs
 and *akbara*: formation of 43–6
 Mawana and Khanpur village: rural-urban
 linkages 40–3
 Mayaram, S. 49
 Mayer, A.C. 8, 17–18, 48, 67
 meat-liquor parties 66–7
 media 23; print 10, 53–9, 85–6, 110; social
 10, 24
 medicine 67; Ayurvedic practices 66
 Meerut District 50, 105, 119; Khanpur
 village and Mawana: rural-urban
 linkages 40–3; Meerwada and Khadir
 regions of 39–40; *see also* Khanpur
 village
 Mendelsohn, O. 18, 19
 methodology 12–13
 Michelutti, L. 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 16, 18,
 19, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27, 45, 59, 61, 63, 67,
 69, 72, 74, 79, 89, 90, 92, 98, 114, 115,
 117, 118
 migration, caste histories of 33–4, 41, 43,
 69, 70
 Mihir Bhoj 79–82, 85, 86, 87, 89, 92, 94,
 95, 103, 104, 117
 Mines, M. 60
 modernization theory 8–9, 54
 Modi, N. 2
 Mohan Baba (or Kali Kholi wale) sect 45,
 65, 66
 movies 73
 Mukhia party (faction) 43, 98, 99, 101–2,
 103, 105, 107
 multinational companies 29
 Muslims *see* Islam/Muslims
 myth, heroes and hi(stories) 10, 48, 106,
 110, 113, 115, 116, 117; caste, hierarchy
 and power 49–50; contradictions 58, 60;
 from criminals to freedom fighters
 50–3; middle class 50, 54, 57; myth of
 origin of Gujjars 54; postcolonial
 aspirations: *samajikaran* of caste 58–61;
 re-writing and re-inventing the past
 53–8; *see also* hero-gods, kings and
 rebels
- Nagar, Malook 5, 104
 names 57
 nationalism, Hindu 3, 10, 16, 21, 56, 64,
 65, 75, 79; Hindutva *see separate entry*
 Natrajan, B. 6, 8, 48, 59
 Navbharat Press 55
 neoliberalism 26, 29, 33, 106
 Nevill, H.R. 33
 NFM (New Farmers’ Movement) 24
 Nigam, A. 117
 non-violence 64, 65; *see also* violence,
 political
- Other Backward Classes (OBCs) 7, 12,
 16–17, 39, 52, 58–9, 60, 64, 79, 100,
 112; ABGM 78, 81; changing power
 structures 17–21; history booklets 56–7,
 58; Khanpur 40–1, 42, 43; political rise
 of 26–7; politicisation of ‘backward
 castes’ and rise of Hindutva 21–6; rise
 of ‘backward’ caste parties 27–31
- Pakistan 34
 Pandey, G. 10
 Patel, S. 95, 97
 Pathik, V.S. 83, 84
 Patnaik, P. 4
 patronage politics 17–18, 19, 20, 37, 67, 109
 Pilot, Rajesh 5, 92, 97
 Pilot, Rama 73
 Pilot, Sachin 5, 83, 95, 104
 police 23, 30, 36, 51, 73, 79, 88, 91, 102,
 103, 105, 106, 108
 political participation 94–5, 116, 119;
 elections and democracy 108–10;
 Gujjar-Jatav dispute 99–104; in
 Khanpur *panchayat* 95–9, 107–8;
 regional level 100–4, 105; solidarity of
 Gujjars 104–7; *see also* elections
- Pollock, S. 10
 pollution line 9, 63, 67–8, 74
 population: of Gujjars 34, 39; of Khanpur
 40; of Meerut city 39; of Meerut Dis-
 trict 39
 power structures, changing 17–21, 25, 75,
 106; organizational ability 19–20;

- vertical to horizontal political mobilization 18, 20, 22
- Pradhan, N. 1–2
- Prakash, R. 64
- Price, P.G. 18, 79, 88
- property disputes 96
- protest strike (2010) 100–4, 105–6
- protests (2007) 58–9, 74, 86, 97
- Quigley, D. 49
- Radha Swami sect 65, 66, 71
- Rai, L. 63
- Ramjanmabhumi* movement 24
- Ramkaran 90, 91, 95, 101–4, 105, 107–8
- Rao, M.S.A. 26, 98
- rational choice theory 10
- Rawal clan 43
- re-imagining of Gujjar Community *see* myth, heroes and hi(stories)
- rebellion (1857) 36, 49–52, 53, 55, 56–7, 60, 83, 84
- rebels *see* hero-gods, kings and rebels
- region and caste: formation of Akhil Bharatiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) and Gujjar leadership 37–9; from Harit Pradesh to ‘Greater Dehli’: claiming territory 32–4; gangs and *akhara*: formation of masculinity 43–6; Gujjars of Upper Doab: before and during colonial times 34–6; Khanpur village and Mawana: rural-urban linkages 40–3; Meerwada and Khadir regions of Meerut District 39–40; *see also* clans and factions
- regional politics: organization of protest 100–4, 105–6
- religion 3, 4–5, 6, 7, 9–10, 13, 24, 56, 63, 74–5; anxieties 24; Arya Samaj *see separate entry*; Brahma (Vishnu) and Gayatri 54, 56; Congress Party 17; culture and politics of food 66–8; Devnarayan *see separate entry*; divine relationships 68–70; gods and ancestors related 69; Islam/Muslims *see separate entry*; Khanpur: Shiv *mandir* complex 45; Radha (wife of god Krishna) 63, 73
- representation beyond electoral politics, ideas of 97–8
- reservation policies 7, 18, 24, 27, 28, 100, 112
- resources, state 6, 12, 18, 21, 24, 25, 42, 49, 54, 56, 57, 60, 95, 107, 113, 118
- right-wing organizations 10
- Risley, H.H. 54–5
- RLD (Rashtriya Lok Dal) 30, 32, 33, 43, 101
- Robinson, M.S. 18
- RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) 24, 50, 73, 75, 83
- Rudolph, L.I. 3, 8, 37, 49
- rule of law 20
- rural-urban linkages: Mawana and Khanpur village 40–3
- Russell, R.V. 52
- Ruud, A.E. 3, 67, 89
- Sahay, G.R. 49
- samajs* 6, 8–9, 20, 48, 49, 51, 52, 57, 74, 78, 112, 114; democratization through *samajikaran* 115–17; postcolonial aspirations: *samajikaran* of caste 58–61
- Samajwadi Party *see* SP (Samajwadi Party)
- Sangh Parivar 65, 66, 75
- Saroja, R. 22
- Saxena, G.S. 63, 64, 65, 80
- SBSP (Apna Dal and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party) 5
- Scheduled Castes (SCs) *see* Dalits/Scheduled Castes (SCs)
- Scheduled Tribes (STs) 1, 7, 26, 52, 56, 58–9, 74, 81, 92, 97, 113
- Schmitter, P.C. 4
- Searle-Chatterjee, M. 48, 49, 61
- self-respect 20–1, 57, 101
- Shah, A. 3
- Sharma, D. 34
- Sheth, D.L. 9
- Singh, Charan 22, 26, 27, 28, 37–8, 112–13
- Singh, G. 11, 33
- Singh, H. 5, 78, 80–1, 90, 91
- Singh, R.K. 83
- Singh, S.B. 18, 19
- Singh, V.P. 23, 27
- small- and medium-scale industry 29
- social justice 4, 5–6, 20–1, 24, 25, 27, 28, 57, 78, 80, 85, 86, 94, 103, 112, 113, 116, 118, 119
- songs 69–70, 73, 85, 103
- Sontheimer, G.D. 69
- SP (Samajwadi Party) 1–2, 5, 21, 23, 25, 27–30, 38–9, 43, 68, 75, 80, 97; 2007 manifesto 28–9; 2012 UP Assembly elections 30, 101, 102; anti-BSP and anti-Jatav stance 105; formation of

INDEX

- 27–8; Muslims 29–30; political coalition of castes 28; protest strike (2010) 101–2, 103; public spaces 51–2; rhetoric of 28
- Spencer, J. 3
- sport 45–6, 66
- Srinivas, M.N. 3, 8, 19, 74
- Stokes, E. 35, 36
- strongmen (*dabang*) politicians 11, 20–1, 37, 79, 89–92, 96, 101, 110, 117, 119
- surnames 57
- Tambiah, S. 6
- theories of democratization 4–5, 7
- Tiwary, S. 52
- urban-rural linkages: Mawana and Khanpur village 40–3
- urbanization 38, 51, 61, 118
- Vaishnav, M. 11
- vegetarianism 64, 65, 66
- Verma, A.K. 26
- Verma, P.S. 26, 37, 38, 53, 56, 83
- Verma, R.L. 54, 55, 56
- Verma, S. 69, 83
- Verniers, G. 21
- VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) 24
- Vikal, R.C. 38
- violence, political 10–11, 12, 20, 37, 38, 67, 91, 99, 104, 105, 106, 114, 119; village *panchayat* elections 108; *see also* non-violence
- Werbner, P. 34
- Witsoe, J. 3, 20, 23, 117
- women 45, 66, 67, 68, 71, 90; village factions 98
- wrestling 45–6, 66
- Yadav, Akhilesh 28, 29–30
- Yadav, Mulayam Singh 24, 27, 28, 29, 79
- Yadav, Y. 16, 25
- Yadavs 2, 3, 6, 11, 19, 20, 21–2, 24, 25–6, 59, 98, 112, 115; All India Backward Classes Federation 26; All Indian Yadav Mahasabha (AIYM) 26, 27; epic of Allaha and Udal 69; Ganje party 43; Khanpur 41, 42, 44, 107; Mandal 27
- Zimmermann, F. 67



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