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Resilient communities: household, state, and ecology in south-eastern Panjab, c. 1750-1880

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Chapter 5. Husbanding households in a transformed landscape, c.1830-1880

This last chapter explores the changes to the structure and function of the husbanding households of south-eastern Panjab wrought by colonization. The evidence presented here suggests a more complex pattern of adjustment and adaptation than the narrative of traditionalization implies. As mentioned in the Introduction, this theory is a way to explain social change in South Asian societies under colonial rule. Its proponents suggest that there is a general increase in the importance of community boundaries during the nineteenth century, whether of 'caste', 'tribe', or village. These were categories privileged by the colonial state, forming the basis of their revenue administration, as well as of their civil codes of law. Each of these units came thereby to occupy a more central socio-political role, shaping inter-community interactions, as well as individual life-worlds.

This chapter suggests a more variegated process of social change, one in which socio-economic class plays an important role in determining the experiences of rural communities. Class influenced which of the state's different policies of sedentarization a household was most affected by, and mediated this effect. Many supra-village elites who had hitherto received tribute from subordinate households and villages, and had served as intermediaries between state or warlord and husbanding household, often found that their tributary rights were not acknowledged by the colonial state. Indeed, the state's equation of the revenue obligation with proprietary rights put several of these former elites upon the same legal footing as their erstwhile tributaries. This dispossession was only worsened by the dismantling of indigenous *riyasats*, as well as the undermining of the military labour market, both of which undercut the coercive regime which had previously buttressed the authority and power of such tributaries. If several of these men eventually found a role in the colonial revenue administration, this was nonetheless a far more streamlined system than the multi-layered patronage networks that they replaced. Moreover, by collapsing all kinds of revenue and tribute obligations into the single category of 'landowner', the British effectively made old elites share their power with a vastly enlarged pool of competitors, some of whom had formerly been their tributaries. It must be emphasised, however, that the creation of new elites through state patronage, and the marginalization of others was in itself not new, as we have seen in Chapter 2. With the coercive regime that had historically been used to extract tribute defunct due to demilitarization, old martial elites used the code of *sharafat* to express their status. Once again, this code was not new, although its value as social capital rose in the vacuum left by the military labour market.

The relative disadvantage of these precolonial elites was theoretically to the advantage of tributary husbanding households, who were now on the same legal footing as their former overlords. Where relations between these two groups had previously been competitive and strained, this theoretical advantage also translated into a practical one. On the other hand, those clients who were not in a position to compete with their overlords and had enjoyed a degree of protection from them, found themselves in a more vulnerable position. This is especially true of landless service groups, who the dwindling opportunities of patronage pushed to the brink of starvation.

If the state's interventions thus created some new elites while dispossessing others, the overarching economic context within which these changes occurred must also be kept in mind. In general, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the state's programme to demilitarize and sedentarize the region had enhanced rural precarity, especially in the fluvial tracts. This in turn meant that the precolonial imperative for rural households to expand their network of kin, clients, and allies, remained an important one. Household-based networks continued to serve as social safety nets. In the absence of raiding and military service, expanding the household through other means—whether marriage, tenancy, or servitude—remained a way for rural populations to consolidate their hold over land. As such, colonial rule did not and could not simply create a flat landscape of 'village-communities', as has been suggested

by some scholars.¹ Intra- and supra-village ties remained important in the protection and consolidation of capital. Moreover, the central role of the husbanding household, as the fundament upon which rural lineages were built, survived the state's legal and administrative innovations. Accumulating human capital remained vital to expanding one's control over land. This feeds into a final important point: that this demand for labour meant that households continued to constitute themselves in myriad ways. Rather than a uniform 'traditionalization', therefore, what we see is the survival of 'heterodox' forms of kinship, shaped by the complex ground realities of the rural economy, as much as by the principles of colonial law or any orthodox code, whether that of *varna* or of *sharafat*.

Rural elites, old and new

Just as the ruling *riyasats* and ascetic estates of south-eastern Panjab found themselves increasingly intruded upon by the colonial state, so, too, did the state's agenda to demilitarize the region, settle its mobile populations, and extend the agrarian frontier, tend to disadvantage incumbent rural elites. In part, this process of dispossession had already begun in the eighteenth century, with Rajput and Afghan warlords and their dependants being evicted from their strongholds by upwardly mobile Jat bands. If these arriviste lineages were already edging out previous elites from their positions of dominance in the countryside, this trend was only accentuated by colonial intervention. There were three components to this, two of which have been discussed previously. The first of these was the damming of the competitive and dispersed processes of state-formation in the region, which drastically reduced the demand for military labour. This meant that martial elites, that had maintained their dominance at local levels, from the village to the *pargana*, by raiding and soldiering, were deprived of this income. The second were the attempts to undermine the pastoral economy, by promoting cultivation, efforts that produced mixed results, as we have seen in Chapter 4.

The third element of this social displacement, which is also the subject of this section, was the state's revenue reforms, which, as we shall see, altered existing obligations within and beyond the village walls. The Company was convinced early on that sedentarization and the creation of rural prosperity could only proceed by securing the title of the cultivator to the land. Alongside curbing the privileges of rentiers and revenue assignees, on the one hand, and putting an end to the culture of raids on the other, the Company was also engaged in differentiating and recording the rights of husbanding households to rural resources. For conservatives amongst the Company's ranks, it was important that the documenting of tenure be an exercise in documentation alone, and that customs surrounding land use remain undisturbed, to the greatest extent possible.² Rather than creating a new class of landowners, as the 'Permanent Settlement' had attempted in Bengal, it was therefore necessary to identify 'hereditary' and 'rightful' landowners, and legally confirm the right to possession that they already effectively held. Despite these conservative intentions, the colonial state's assumptions about what constituted both ownership and rights, nonetheless, altered the structure and nature of landholding in the region.

In Panjab and the Doab, the Company's search for the rightful landowner was deeply influenced by the image of the ancient village community. In his much-cited 'Minute on the Settlement in the Western Provinces', Charles Metcalfe, whose formative years as an administrator were spent in south-eastern Panjab, described the 'typical' rural settlement as a self-sufficient, autarchic, and inward-looking brotherhood, that 'last[s] where nothing else lasts'. Metcalfe suggested that invasions, raids, drought, and upheaval barely produced a ripple inside the village walls; and that if villagers were forced to leave

¹ See Introduction.

² It was, for instance, partly to ascertain local revenue customs in the region that Thomas Fortescue undertook his report of 1819-20. Fortescue, 'Report on the Revenue System of the Delhi Territory, 1820'.

their hamlets, they would inevitably return to them once the storm had passed.³ Independent of the agents of any state, Metcalfe suggested that it was the village elders whose word was law inside the village walls, and that indeed, external governments were largely irrelevant to the lifeworld of the rural settlement. Implicit in Metcalfe's ideas about rural society was the notion that the 'village community' was a largely egalitarian space; a brotherhood, with only subtle differences between those who held land, and a far sharper distinction between this category, and the landless, non-cultivating communities.

It was this egalitarian brotherhood of landholding villagers, therefore, whose right to the soil the Company was eager to secure. In other words, cultivating, and settling on the land, was a prerequisite to being granted its ownership. It must be noted that there were several exceptions to this. Despite its stringent laws of inheritance, there were a large number of *jagirs* that the state was unwilling to revoke, especially when the uprisings of 1857 revealed the measure of discontent with British rule. This played especially to the advantage of the revenue estates in the vicinity of Ludhiana, Ambala, Thanesar, and Ferozepur, which came into the Company's possession in the 1840s. Some 80 *jagirs* held by Sikh dependents of various states were maintained into the late nineteenth century. While paying the colonial state some amount of tribute, which could vary from anywhere between a sixth and a thirtieth of the annual revenue, the title of the land remained in the hands of the original revenue assignees, or of their extended kin.⁴ In Karnal district, the Mandal *jagirdars*, who had been coaxed by the Company to abandon a more lucrative estate in the Doab, and had been granted a tract west of the Yamuna River instead, continued to hold land.⁵ So, too, did the descendants of Col. James Skinner, who held estates in the districts of Hisar and Karnal, and the Ahir Rao Rajas, who held land in the vicinity of Rewari.⁶

Even though *jagirdars* were subject to colonial restrictions, their dispossession was perhaps not quite as marked as that of elites at the level of the locality or *pargana*, who had hitherto served as intermediaries between precolonial administrations and rural populations. As we saw in Chapter 2, several of these groups, with ties to the Mughal administration, were Rajputs and Afghans, although, by the early nineteenth century, many Sikhs and other Jats had joined their ranks as well. They had exacted tribute from ordinary husbanding households on the one hand, and had been rewarded by the state with titles such as *chaudhari*, *sardar*, *malik*, *nawab*, or *rao*, on the other. Not only were these clans no longer able to forcefully extract tribute payments from defiant rural populations post the *Pax Britannica*, their claims to a share of the produce of their former subordinates were not recognized by the colonial state. Thomas Fortescue reported as early as 1818, that 'zumeendars'—which he seems to be using not in the literal sense as 'landholder', but a client/partner of the Mughal state at the local level—were complaining to him of their diminishing authority, as they did not feature in the colonial state's revenue calculations. '[A]mongst the sharers of the territorial assets which did not formerly reach the public treasury, the zumeendar was a principal one.'⁷ Half a century later, Ibbetson was still writing of the 'levelling tendency of our rule, of which the people complain so loudly'.⁸ In Ambala, it was the *sardars* who were clients of the various Sikh states who were dissatisfied. As a settlement officer noted, 'these men were treated with a greater show of liberality than under our rule', being 'fed at the Chief's expense when they went to his headquarters, and presents were sometimes given on the occasion of marriages in their

³ Metcalfe cited in C. Dewey, 'Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology', *Modern Asian Studies* July, no. 3 (1972): 291–328, at 296–7.

⁴ Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sunnuds*, VI, 62.

⁵ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 218–219.

⁷ Fortescue, 'Revenue System', 91.

⁸ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 264.

families'. Receiving none of these special attentions from the colonial state, these *sardars* 'sometimes speak in a tone of regret for the old system'.⁹

This is not to say that the colonial state was insensible to the importance and utility of local elites. Early on, Fortescue advised the Company to cultivate the trust of village headmen (*muqaddams*), counsel that the state took seriously.¹⁰ However, by overlooking the hierarchies between villages, and investing equal legal rights in all landholders, it increased the pool of competitors for positions of authority. The results of this 'levelling' were felt at different rungs of the social ladder. Besides elites of the *pargana*, those at the level of the *thappa* or village cluster also felt themselves wronged. One disgruntled elder lamented the loss of the 'old' custom according to which the 'junior' villages of a *thappa* would pay tribute (*chaudriyat*) to the *thappedari mauzah* at festivals like Diwali.¹¹ Fanshawe likewise noted that the *thappa* divisions of Rohtak district had declined in importance, even though *gota* or clan remained significant.¹² Where the material differences of power between local elites and those over whom they were supposed to rule on behalf of a princely patron were only minor, the effect of the colonial state's levelling policies served to heighten pre-existing tensions, which might be played out in small-scale violence or cattle theft.¹³ Similarly, Ibbetson too, relayed the comments of various Jat informants of his, who assured him 'that they would not dare to go into a Rajput village at night'. Ibbetson dismissed this as hyperbole, but the enmity between Jats and Rajputs was real and historical, as Skinner's *Tashrih* also suggests, and was likely intensified by the equal distribution of state patronage.¹⁴

The Company's system fixed and streamlined the chains of tribute-transmission that had hitherto linked tiller to state. The rights of supra-village elites, that had partially rested upon a coercive regime likewise dismantled by the Company, were thus restricted to the produce of the land which they themselves held and cultivated, and upon which they were obliged to pay revenue to the British. The results of the state's abolition of tributary privileges, its equation of cultivation and physical occupation with possession, and its dismantling of the military labour market are discernible in the changing composition of the landholding population of south-eastern Panjab. By the 1880s, middling husbanding populations, such as Ahirs, Arains, or simply those labelled 'Jats' were classified as *owners* of almost as much, and at times, more land than Rajputs and Afghans (see Table 10). This was also the case even in Sirsa district, where the migrations of Jat families from the Bagar and Thar Desert, as well as from further north and west in Panjab, led increasingly to settlement (compare Table 11). At the risk of repetition, it might be emphasized that the displacement of martial elites by upwardly mobile husbanding communities had already begun in the eighteenth century. The crucial difference with the colonial period was that these erstwhile elites could no longer resort to the large-scale raids or violence with which they would have previously retaliated to such appropriation.

⁹ Douie, *SR Karnal-Ambala*, 11.

¹⁰ Fortescue, *Revenue System*, 79.

¹¹ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 75.

¹² Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 30.

¹³ As David Gilmartin has shown, cattle theft remained common into the twentieth century, and served as a means for communities to express their martial identity and defend their honour. See David Gilmartin, 'Cattle, Crime and Colonialism: Property as Negotiation in North India', *Indian Economic And Social History Review* 40, no. 1 (2003): 33–56.

¹⁴ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 79. For Skinner's comments on the Jats, see Chapter 2.

<i>Qaum</i> (tribe/caste in bureaucratic idiom)	<i>Rohtak</i> ¹⁵		<i>Ludhiana</i> ¹⁶		<i>Karnal</i> ¹⁷	
	Percentage of population	Percentage of landholding	Percentage of population	Percentage of landholding	Percentage of population	Percentage of landholding
Jats	35	67	36	75	16	16
Rors	0.07	0.13	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	5.6	4.6
Gujars	1	0.4	5	7	5.3	7
Rajputs	5	14	5	10	7.6	8
Pathans	1	2	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	0.3	0.7
Baluch	0.7	0.5	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>
Ahirs	3	3	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>
Arain	<i>n.a.</i>	<i>n.a.</i>	4	3	0.4	0.5
‘Chamars’	9	0.02	10	<i>No data</i>	9	<i>No data</i>
‘Chuhras’	3	0	3	<i>No data</i>	5.3	<i>No data</i>

Table 11. Land held by different communities in south-eastern Panjab, 1880

<i>Qaum</i> ¹⁸ (tribe/caste in bureaucratic idiom)	Percentage of Population in 1881	Number of villages owned fully (of total 650 villages in Sirsa)	Numbers of village in which shares held
Jats	25	210 (32%)	118 (18%)
Rajputs (including Bhattis, Mughals, Wattus, Bodlas, Chishtis)	19	138 (21%)	151 (23%)
‘Chamars’	7	<i>No data</i>	<i>No data</i>
‘Chuhras’	6	<i>No data</i>	<i>No data</i>
Kumhars (potters)	6	<i>No data</i>	<i>No data</i>

Table 12. Land held by different communities in Sirsa district, 1880

¹⁵ *Gazetteer of the Rohtak District, 1883-84, 57.*

¹⁶ Walker, *SR Ludhiana, lxxvi-lxxvii; Gazetteer of the Ludhiana District, 1888-89, 78.*

¹⁷ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal, lii, lvii.*

¹⁸ Wilson, *SR Sirsa, 79-80.* Since settlement in the Sirsa district proceeded slower, and with many reversals, the precise extent of shares in acreage was still not calculated by the late nineteenth century.

Notwithstanding the broad similarities between districts, the precise trajectory of the displacement of precolonial elites varied from site to site. In Karnal district, the Mandhar Rajputs, whose fortunes had been declining in the face of competition from the Ghatwal 'Malik' Jats since the eighteenth century, continued to lose influence as the colonial state invested their former tributaries with ownership rights. Ibbetson noted that while the Rors, for example, had been settled as cultivators *by* the Mandhars before colonization, they were made autonomous landholders by colonial bureaucrats who equated physical occupation with proprietorship.¹⁹ Elsewhere, the colonial state found itself arbiter of disputes between the old and new elites. In Ambala district, for instance, there existed an uneasy system of shared *jagirdari* between Rajput and Afghan landholders on the one hand, and Sikh Jats who had forced their way into various pockets in the eighteenth century, on the other. The Sikh *rajahs* appointed new *jagirdars*, but also permitted the incumbent Rajput and Afghan *jagirdars* to maintain a reduced stake in their revenue assignments. The system was a compromise by both sides, neither of which had the means to fully eject the other. In the nineteenth century, when the colonial government sought to clarify matters of ownership, the Sikh Jat *jagirdars* sought to have the shares of the Rajput and Afghan subsidiaries struck from the record, so that they might pocket the entire revenue from their *jagir*. These attempts were not always successful; but because the Afghans and Rajputs were recognized as subordinate *jagirdars*, the legitimacy of their share in a Sikh revenue estate was often made conditional either upon their residence at the site of their revenue assignment; or the continuation of the *jagir*, which was dependent upon the continuation of the family of the *jagirdar*.²⁰

Something similar happened in Ludhiana district, which came piecemeal into colonial possession during the 1840s. Here, in some contrast to Ambala, the colonial state found that the local Rajput population had already been almost entirely edged out of their dominant position by the Sikh *jagirdars* who had conquered the area during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As one of the settlement officers involved in surveying and assessing the tract wrote, the limits of *parganas* were 'determined, merely as the violence or success of each usurping Sikh adventurer, may have secured him the possession of any village'.²¹ Although the Sikhs generally did not disturb the rights of ordinary cultivators already settled at these sites, they did seek to extend the agrarian frontier within their domains at the expense of the large grazing grounds held by resident Rajput pastoralists. At the time of the settlement operations, the latter approached the colonial state 'to [re-]establish their rights against the proprietary rights of the recently founded villages.' To have acknowledged these petitions would, however, have led 'to the most violent quarrels', and these were consequently denied.²² In other words, displacement had already been effected by the time of colonization, and the role of the British was limited to confirming the rights of new colonizers at the expense of previous claimants.

In Sirsa district, quite the reverse was true. Here, the Bhatti *nawabi*, which had continued into the nineteenth century, was built upon the late precolonial model of state formation, namely a combination of livestock rearing, shifting cultivation, raiding, and soldiering. When the Company began to settle the Bhatti lands in earnest in the 1830s, it attracted cultivators from the nearby states of Patiala and Bikaner by levying comparatively low rates of revenue. It settled these immigrants on the lands of the local pastoral populations, carving up 650 *kheras* (villages) in what it deemed 'wasteland'.²³ The former were not evicted, but their movement was restricted to a single *khera*. For instance, in the *pargana* of Sirsa,

¹⁹ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 76.

²⁰ Settlement Report Karnal-Ambala, 64-5.

²¹ H. Davidson, *Report on the Revised Settlement of the District of Ludhiana in the Cis-Satlaj States* (Lahore: Punjabee Press, 1859), 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 22.

²³ Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 318.

the inhabitants of the village of Nathusani Kalan, who cultivated the land adjacent to the site of Nathusani Khurd, were asked to permanently relocate to the latter settlement, in order to maintain their right of access over its grounds. Similar ultimatums were given to the residents of Darba Kalan and Jamal, who were cultivating the soil of Nahranwali and Kutiyana respectively.²⁴

Even as it undermined the tributary privileges of supra-village ‘big men’, the state reinforced the importance of village headmen (*muqaddams*) by making the village the fundamental unit of the revenue administration. This was a coveted post; according to Fanshawe, for instance, attempts were repeatedly made to challenge the incumbent’s legitimacy for the hereditary position. It is likely that the abolition of other official positions between village and state only increased the symbolic value of this post, competition over which sometimes spilled over into bloodshed and feuds.²⁵ For leading families, the position became a form of socio-political capital, which they were reluctant to let go of, and which they managed collectively. Fanshawe reported that it was ‘a common practice to keep boy-headmen in the background for years after they have come of age, and to continue the guardian in his post.’²⁶ The importance of the position derived not from the remuneration which it offered, which was generally modest, even ‘paltry’. Rather, it stemmed from the advisory role of the *muqaddams*, whose counsel the state sought in all manner of disputes, ranging from what might be deemed a moderate revenue assessment, to disputes of custom. As a recognition of their importance, *muqaddams* enjoyed certain privileges, some of which were officially approved by the state. These included their exemption from the payment of certain villages cesses and dues. They also received a ‘Chamar’ as a personal attendant paid for by the state, and ‘the body of Chamars generally have to give a day’s work in the fields of each [*muqaddam*]’, although, ‘as they expect to be feasted on the occasion, the service is more of an honour than a profit to the recipient’.²⁷ In addition to this, Ibbetson suspected that the headmen made some ‘small illegal profits from their office’, using the small surpluses in village funds (*malba*) for their own purposes, a practice that was ‘tacitly recognized as unobjectionable by the people’.²⁸

As we have seen in Chapter 2, however, the representatives of households and settlements, the building blocks of a rural lineage, had always played an important role in rural politics. As such, the state’s incorporation of the *muqaddam* into the fiscal administration was not new. Moreover, the *muqaddami* retained its character as a stepping-stone to greater things—in the colonial context, to the position of an *ala lambardar* (chief headman) or *zaildar*, which was created by the colonial state when the local practice of nominating several headmen per village was found to be too cumbersome. *Ala lambardars* were appointed in settlements with more than three *muqaddams*, while *zaildars* were representative of the *thappa* or village cluster.²⁹ Meanwhile, intra-village allegiances (known variously as *panahs*, *thambas*, and *tholas*) retained their significance into the colonial period and continued to be an important way to organize and represent individual interests within the larger collective. The more the internal divisions within a village, therefore, the greater the number of headmen. Occasionally, the latter were further assisted by yet other subordinates, even though these might not be recognized by the colonial administration. In Karnal, this class of junior headmen were known as *lathaits*, literally, ‘those bearing a staff’, who were nominated by the cluster of households that nominated the headmen.³⁰ The

²⁴ *Correspondence Relating to the Settlement of Sirsa District, 1860* (Lahore: Central Jail Press, 1873), 72.

²⁵ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 153; R. Maconachie, R. Maconachie, *Delhi: Final Report on the Settlement of Land Revenue in the Delhi District, 1872-77*. O Wood & R Maconachie. Lahore, 1882. Lahore: Victoria Press, 1882, 267 (henceforth *SR Delhi*); Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 93-4.

²⁶ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 153.

²⁷ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 95.

²⁸ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 94.

²⁹ For the use of *zaildars* in the Sikh administrations, see Chapter 2.

³⁰ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 92; cf. Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 152-3.

same held true for supra-village allegiances; when the state announced its intention to reintroduce the position of *zaildar*, it was petitioned by communities to follow the boundaries of old *thappas* to the extent possible.³¹ Although Ibbetson had, in the first place, been disinclined to do so, he soon realized how pragmatic the suggestion was, as the *thappas* ‘afforded a ready-made basis’ for governance. When one *thappa* was nonetheless split up and allocated to two separate *zails*, it ‘caused much ill-feeling’.³² Lineages continued to nominate their acknowledged heads to these positions. Wilson noted that the heir of the Bhatti nawabs, even though he was ‘now but an octroi-clerk at Rania, the seat of his ancestors’ power’, had been chosen to serve as *zaildar* by his clan.³³

It is hardly unsurprising that in view of this unequal treatment, elites who experienced a relative decline in their position were often found by the state to be disgruntled. It is equally unsurprising, that when in 1857, it looked as though colonial power was on the brink of collapse, it was the groups worst-hit by the combined effects of the state’s policies of demilitarization, sedentarization, and equal taxation, that took to violence in an attempt to restore their lost privileges. The targets of this violence were not necessarily the British themselves, but rather those indigenous groups who had benefited from the dispossession of the old elites: either colonists, or former tributaries who had turned their backs on their erstwhile overlords. In Karnal district, for example, the Mandhar Rajputs, ‘savaged’ the upwardly mobile Ghatwal Jats, against whom they had long harboured a grudge.³⁴ Similarly, the Bhatti *nawabs* of Rania and Fatahabad had taken the lead in plundering Sirsa town.³⁵ In Ludhiana, the pastoral Gujars of the Satlaj riverain were amongst the first to rise up, which Walker brushed aside as a sign of their innate disaffectedness.³⁶

Despite the widespread conviction amongst colonial officers that the uprisings had been so many Muslim conspiracies, the rebels in Ludhiana were of diverse creedal and ‘caste’ affiliations.³⁷ Due to the intersections of pastoral, martial, and often Muslim communities with high-status groups, it is unsurprising that many of those who rebelled were described as Rajputs, Gujars, and Afghans. However, unrest spread amongst all those dispossessed. In Ludhiana, this included the Sufis of the city, and also the ‘Hindu’ Suds, the latter of whom were bankers who had served as *patwaris* or accountants within the Sikh regimes but had found themselves largely side-lined by the colonial administration.³⁸ In Karnal, too, although rebellion had been preached at the shrine of Bu‘ali Qalandar, it was also joined by those Jat clans that felt their privileges had been unfairly curtailed. Sixteen of the largest villages of *thappa* Naultha, which, according to Fortescue had ‘paid no regular revenue to the former Government [except] when its army was powerful’, refused to pay its taxes once it heard of the widespread rebellion.³⁹ The ‘loyalty’ of many of the Sikh chieftains was equally tactical. The British had dismantled the empire of Raja Ranjit Singh by 1850, leaving the small Sikh chieftains without a powerful protector other than the British. As we have seen, those minor Sikh chiefs who did not pledge allegiance to the Company, found themselves demoted to the status of revenue assignees. A further consideration was who, if not the

³¹ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 264.

³² *Ibid.*, 265.

³³ Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 89.

³⁴ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 79.

³⁵ Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 64-5.

³⁶ T. Gordon Walker, *Final Report On The Revision Of Settlement Of The Ludhiana District In The Punjab* (Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press, 1884), 50 (henceforth *SR Ludhiana*).

³⁷ Cf. Eric Stokes, ‘Traditional elites in the Great Rebellion of 1857: some aspects of rural revolt in the upper and central Doab’, in Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, Cambridge South Asian Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 185-204.

³⁸ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 155 and 267.

³⁹ Fortescue, Revenue System, 87; Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 35-36.

British, would protect these chieftains against local rivals. In the absence of the colonial state, the possibility that the old Afghan and Rajput elites would reassert their privilege against Sikh *jagirdars*, chieftains, and colonists, was very real.

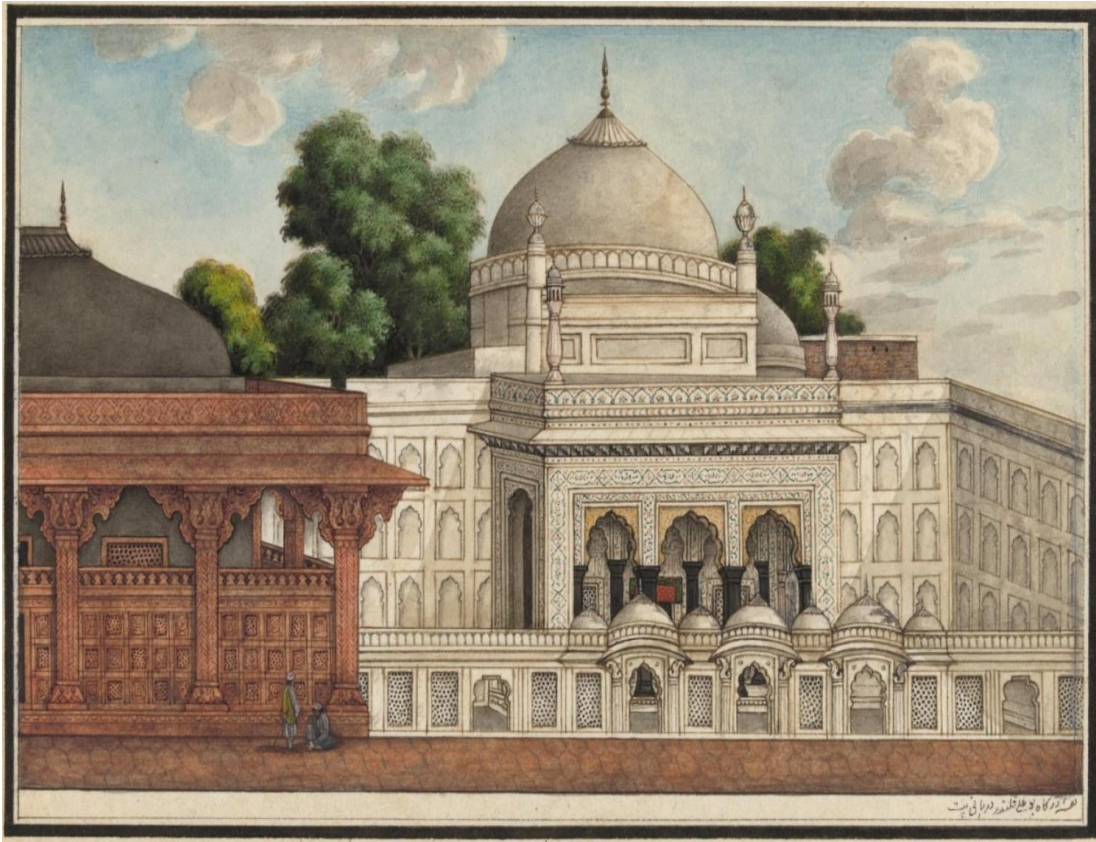


Figure 9. Shrine of Bu'ali Qalandar at Panipat, c.1836. (Part of a series.) Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The shrine was one of the sites of uprising in 1857.

Martial elites of the locality found their old lordly privileges were undermined at the same time as their previous pastoral and soldiering occupations were brought under pressure by the colonial state. Compelled increasingly to take up agrarian occupations, they struggled between the need to earn a living, while also not losing their old prestige. Colonial officers had little patience with such pretensions. From the state's perspective, the unwillingness of status-conscious groups, often Rajputs and Ranghars (the latter being a term to describe Muslim Rajputs—a mixture of Pathans, Balochis, and groups claiming descent from the Prophet, like the Bodlas and Wattus) was illustrative of their innate arrogance and profligacy. As early as 1819, Thomas Fortescue described the Ranghar husbandmen of the region as particularly 'slothful and dissipated'.⁴⁰ Similarly, in a report on Rohtak from the 1830s, M. R. Gubbins wrote that while the local Jat population was industrious, the Rajputs were 'proverbial for their aversion to labour, and their addiction to theft and robbery'.⁴¹ The continued preference for cattle theft amongst these groups only reinforced this impression. As Wilson noted, in Sirsa district there remained 'a lingering feeling that cattle theft is an honourable occupation, so that their leading men, if not ready to engage in it themselves, are always ready to wink at it and help their fellow tribesmen avoid detection.'⁴²

⁴⁰ Thomas Fortescue, 'Report on the Revenue System of the Delhi Territory (1820)' in *Records of the Delhi Residency and Agency*, Punjab Government Records Series, Vol. I., (Lahore, 1911), 87.

⁴¹ Gubbins, *Rohtuc-Beree*, 57.

⁴² Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 208.

By the 1880s, cattle theft on a significant scale as a source of income was no longer viable in much of south-eastern Panjab. If forced to live off agriculture, elites and pastoral communities would often do their best to avoid touching the plough themselves. Roy Maconachie, for example, mentioned that the hitherto pastoral Sheikhs of the Delhi district were ‘willing to eat a little less’ to allow tenants to plough their lands in their stead.⁴³ Similarly, Ibbetson remarked that although the Rajputs of the fluvial plains near Karnal had largely given up pastoralism, they ‘seldom, if ever, [did] the actual work of ploughing with their own hands’.⁴⁴ Moreover, even though their means had been substantially reduced, such elite groups tried to maintain a lordly and respectable (*sharif*) lifestyle as their forefathers had done before colonization. Rajput women, as colonial officers were fond of bemoaning, were maintained in *parda*, rather than helping their menfolk in the fields. The need to keep a distance from physical labour also meant that elite households continued to maintain large retinues of servants and helpers. Moreover, displays of generosity and hospitality continued to be of importance. Writing in the early twentieth century, Malcolm Darling, remarked that while the Rajput love of hospitality was an undeniably ‘pleasant trait’, it was also a source of ‘embarrassment, as it means large houses full of servants and parasite relations, and the most prodigal expenditure on marriages.’ Moreover, the pressure to find a social superior with whom to wed their daughters meant the payment of large dowries, which only added to the financial burden. ‘All roads, therefore, lead a Rajput into debt’.⁴⁵

While such ‘irrational’ behaviour seemed inexplicable to the state in terms other than defects of character, the resistance of martial elites to take up the plough finds echoes in other parts of the subcontinent as well. As Sumit Guha has shown in Central India, ‘if lordship was inaccessible’, status-conscious groups would seek ‘to maintain (even at the cost of considerable hardship) a forager lifestyle—mobile, adaptable, independent.’⁴⁶ In south-eastern Panjab, the need to maintain lordliness, itself a form of cultural capital that enhanced the household’s prestige, must have been especially acute due to the state’s undermining of the old martial-pastoral economy. Moreover, as we shall see, this chivalric code ran deep, and was internalized not only by elite groups such as Rajputs, but also by those who aspired, within the new economy, to lordship. Wealthy Jat *gotas* that held large amounts of land, for instance, would seek to mirror the Rajput’s code of *sharafat*: distancing themselves from agriculture, maintaining large retinues, and engaging in ostentatious displays of hospitality and generosity.

Husbanding households and the narrative of ‘self-sufficiency’

The state’s revenue administration thus dispossessed a range of elites, by rescinding their privileges and undermining the supra-village ties that had hitherto bound households together into rural lineages. Focusing primarily on colonial policy, historians have argued that the colonial state effectively created the village-centric society that it mistook for the historical standard of social life in the subcontinent.⁴⁷ It should be noted, however, that not only did supra-village ties retain some of their importance under colonial rule, but that rural households continued to pursue supra-village lineage-formation. Fundamentally, this was because household ties provided a safety-net in an insecure landscape, one in which the avenues of capital accumulation and redistribution had been considerably narrowed by the colonial state. Despite very moderate population growth during the nineteenth century, the official programme of agrarian expansion, and the active dismantling of the networks of patronage that kept households in non-husbanding work, led to a corresponding rise in the pressure on land. The ecological degradation that often accompanied more intensive land use, combined with revenue obligations to the

⁴³ Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 82.

⁴⁴ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 79.

⁴⁵ Darling, *Punjab Peasant*, 35.

⁴⁶ Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*, 174.

⁴⁷ See Introduction.

state, uneven and unregulated commercialization, and frequent drought, undermined the resilience of rural populations to subsistence crises.⁴⁸ The decennial episodes of famine that punctuated the nineteenth century in south-eastern Panjab were symptomatic of this chronic insecurity, from which the household offered the best chance of relief. Conversely, while households might provide support to their individual members, they were also sustained by them. It was in the interest of a household to expand its ranks, incorporating sons, wives, and servants within its fold. This in turn required maintaining relationships with other rural households, both within, and beyond, the village. A household that was rich in people, as well as in relationships, could use these to consolidate its hold over land. Indeed, rural capitalism tended to intertwine with household relations and follow the fault-lines of kinship, making the rural capitalist a more aggressive competitor, or a more resilient rival, as the case might be. Two examples—of moneylending and tenancy—help illustrate this point.

First, however, we need to consider the framework within which moneylending and tenancy developed in south-eastern Panjab. The colonial consensus on the subject was that neither were widespread in the region. In his classic study of agrarian indebtedness, Malcolm Darling, linked the volume of debt in a village to its prosperity; the more prosperous a husbanding family, the likelier that it would owe substantial money to the village Bania or professional moneylender.⁴⁹ The uncertainty of the agrarian yield in south-eastern Panjab, especially in comparison to the more intensively irrigated ‘canal colonies’, and the relatively low standard of living in the region, each meant that the husbandman could expect to be afforded but little credit. Darling’s was the most celebrated iteration of a longstanding official belief, which seemed to be backed up by numbers. In Rohtak district, for example, Fanshawe reported that only about 5% of the land was mortgaged, most of which was accounted for by ‘improvident’ Rajputs and Afghans.⁵⁰ In Ludhiana, Walker likewise reported that the only class amongst whom debt was high, was the sugarcane cultivating Rajputs of the Satlaj riverain.⁵¹ The same pattern was repeated throughout the region—debt was marginal, except amongst the old, ‘spendthrift’ elites, or the ‘indolent’ pastoralist.⁵²

If the freedom from debt was one indicator of the thrift and industry of the average husbanding household, so too was their self-reliance. Colonial observers consistently portrayed Panjabi cultivators, at least east of the Satlaj River, as proudly *khud-kasht* (self-cultivating). Once again, the degree of *khud-kashti* was thought to be inversely related to the presence of old elites who thought it beneath their dignity to touch the plough; or of pastoralists, who shunned the drudgery of tilling the soil themselves. And, once more, there was abundant data to support this view. In Rohtak district, Fanshawe reported that 82% of the land was ‘*khud-kasht*’, and of the remaining 18%, the lion’s share was cultivated by so-called ‘tenants-at-will’, whose claim to the land did not extend beyond a single season.⁵³ In Delhi district, the percentage of *khud-kasht* land was lower, only 65%, but this was explained by the fact that there were many revenue assignments and large estates in the vicinity of the capital city, where tenants might cultivate up to three-fourths of the land.⁵⁴ In Ludhiana, 79% of the cultivation was cultivated by proprietors themselves.⁵⁵ By contrast, where there were larger concentrations of pastoral or elite populations, such as in the arid south-west of the region, tenants were more numerous. In Sirsa, 73% of

⁴⁸ See Chapter 4.

⁴⁹ Darling, *Punjab Peasant*, 279.

⁵⁰ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 63.

⁵¹ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 233, 237.

⁵² A. Anderson and P. J. Fagan, *Report of the Revised Settlement of the Hissar District, 1887-92* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, n.d.), 18 (henceforth, *SR Hisar*); Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 216; Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 6.

⁵³ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 58-9.

⁵⁴ Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 4, 80.

⁵⁵ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 127.

the land was in the hands of tenants, although, as Wilson explained, this number had been artificially inflated by the state's particular definition of the category 'proprietor'.⁵⁶

The self-reliant and prudent Panjabi husbandman who became a staple of colonial administrative discourse, was equally its product. The data upon which this narrative was based was flawed in two significant ways: first, it was incomplete. As colonial officers frequently admitted, official data pertaining to debt was highly fragmentary, since it drew upon an overview of the books of a few *banias*, and the numbers of mortgages registered, for a general picture of rural debt. However, the moneylender constituted only one source of credit amongst many in the rural population.⁵⁷ Moreover, even statistics pertaining to mortgage were, at best, rough indicators of the true extent of hypothecated land. This was partly because the registration of mortgages in south-eastern Panjab began only in the 1870s. An equally important reason, however, was that, as Ibbetson noted, where there was good faith between the lender and the debtor, a mortgage was likely to go unrecorded. Indeed, it was 'a point of honour not to record a mortgage in the Government papers', and Ibbetson believed that 'the record of a mortgage is the exception'.⁵⁸ Such bonds of trust could not exist between a husbandman and the moneylender in the city; and even the village *bania*, because of the exorbitant rates of interest he charged, was not resorted to as frequently. It was rather the rural household—usually a husbanding family—from whom money could be lent, the bonds of familiarity, and even kinship, between creditor and debtor serving as surety that the sum would be repaid. Even though they most likely underestimate the true extent of hypothecated land, official data on the extent of mortgaged land shows that it was generally the husbandman, rather than the Bania, that lent credit in the countryside (see Table 12).⁵⁹

District	Tract	Period for which transfers recorded	Land sold (acres)	Acres per class of buyer	Land mortgaged (acres)	Acres per class of mortgagee	Ratio of land alienations (acreage to cultivator: acreage to non-cultivator)
Ludhiana	Samrala tehsil	c.1853-1883	3822	Coparceners: 1615 Other cultivators: 311 Others: 1896	10406	Coparceners: 3695 Other cultivators: 889	0.8

⁵⁶ In Sirsa, the state had tended to invest the revenue obligation, as well as the proprietary right, in the headmen who led bands of colonists to settle and till the thinly populated 'waste'. This had created more than a little tension amongst settlers. Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 338-341.

⁵⁷ For an exhaustive treatment of the subject of debt, albeit from a slightly later period, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Lenders and Debtors: Punjab Countryside, 1880-1940', *Studies in History* 1, no. 2 (1 August 1985): 305-42.

⁵⁸ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 287.

⁵⁹ The exception to this rule was the Satlaj riverain. This was one of the few pockets in our region where sugarcane could be grown. Here, professional moneylenders were only too happy to forward the husbandman credit, as it gave them a hold over the valuable crop and ensured them a regular supply thereof. Moreover, the kind of capital that sugarcane required was rarely at the disposal of the average husbanding household.

						Others: 5822	
	Jagraon tehsil		5111	Coparceners: 2220 Other cultivators: 1423 Others: 1468	27264	Coparceners: 11061 Other cultivators: 4960 Others: 11243	1.5
Rohtak	Gohana tehsil	c.1858- 1878	1966	Cultivators: 1304 Non- cultivators: 662	5652	Cultivators: 3945 Non- cultivators: 1707	2.2
	Jhajjar tehsil		4569	Cultivators: 4053 Non- cultivators: 516	10564	Cultivators: 6661 Non- cultivators: 3903	2.4
Karnal	Chak Nardak	c.1842- 1877	2508	Moneylenders: 193 Others, including other cultivators: 2315	892	Coparceners: 268 Other cultivators: 326 Moneylenders: 298	5.9
	Chak Bangar ⁶⁰		4683	Others, including other cultivators: 4123 Moneylenders: 560	736	Coparceners: 318 Other cultivators: 203	6.1

⁶⁰ Excluding Sonipat Bangar—Ibbetson's report contains no data for this *chak*.

						Moneylenders: 215	
Sirsa	Entire district	c.1874-80	27811	Cultivators: 13046 Non-cultivators: 14765	56133	Cultivators: 7457 Non-cultivators: 48676	0.3

Table 13. Land transfers in some parts of south-eastern Panjab as recorded during the survey operations of the 1870s⁶¹

Government statistics on the frequency and extent of tenant cultivation in south-eastern Panjab must likewise be understood in the broader context of their production. It is likely that just as mortgages often went unrecorded, temporary leases of land remained off the colonial state's books as well. This was partly because the distinction between a mortgage and a lease could be difficult to draw, as a husbandman who forwarded credit to another landholder would usually take temporary possession of the latter's land.⁶² A more significant issue was the nature of the revenue survey, a labour- and capital-intensive exercise, that was carried out on a roughly decennial basis. During this survey, the state would draw up the *wajib-ul-arz* ('representation of rights'), a record of the rights held by rural households to the land and water resources held by a particular village. This record would also include the names of all the tenants in a village, and the terms upon which they tilled the land. Some were classified as 'occupancy tenants', that is, they had the right to cultivate the land in perpetuity, a right that was transferable to their next-of-kin. Others were classified as 'tenants-at-will', that is, cultivators whose leases had to be renewed from season to season. Such tenants could be residents of the same village, or of another settlement (*pahi-kasht*). It is of these 'tenants-at-will' that colonial records are likely to provide a particular incomplete picture. As we have seen in Chapter 3, the amount of land that a household might think it worthwhile or feasible to cultivate, could vary sharply from one season to the next. The need for tenants, or extra labour rose and fell correspondingly. Once more, while large landlords or high-status landholders might seek out tenants for a longer period of time, for most middling and small husbanding households, the need for additional labour was met seasonally, and locally. As Walker remarked, '[w]hen a proprietor has any spare land, more than he can work, this is either let to a co-sharer who has not enough land of his own to support himself, or an agricultural partnership is entered into.'⁶³

Walker's remark leads us to the second fundamental flaw in the narrative of self-sufficiency, namely, the narrow definitions that it relied upon. In fact, as settlement officers themselves noted, tenancy and mortgages were just two of the ways in which a husbanding household might seek external help in order to get by. Two additional, overlapping, and entirely unquantified forms of cooperation were the partnerships mentioned by Walker, and servitude. The form assumed by the first of these, known locally as a *lana*, varied, but they were ubiquitous in the region, without regard for the crops grown. They were especially common where sugarcane was grown, as this was an extremely labour-intensive crop. In the Satlaj uplands (Pawadh, Dhaia) in Ludhiana district, for example, Walker noted

⁶¹ Based upon Walker, *SR Ludhiana* (Appendices Va and Vb), Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak* (112-13), Ibbetson, *SR Karnal* (Statement No. XXVII) and Wilson, *SR Sirsa* (353-55).

⁶² Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 246.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 127.

that partnerships could keep the moneylender at bay. Where a Bania had forwarded capital to the sugarcane grower, his influence over the production process was difficult to limit, and he would insist upon the harvested crop being brought to his mill to be cleaned, pressed, and boiled, so that he could appropriate the sugar syrup at its source, and sell it further at a high price. Where households chose to pool their capital—land, labour, and cattle—the entire production process could be kept in the husbandman’s hands, with the sugar syrup sold to the Bania at a far more favourable price.⁶⁴ However, partnerships were by no means limited to commercial crops; they represented a safer way to effect an exchange of land for labour (for instance), than a recorded tenancy. In Karnal, agrarian partners (*sanjhi* or ‘sharers’) would each bring whatever capital they had to the cultivation of a field. Some would bring a pair of bullocks; others would supply the land itself; and still others, would provide labour alone (*ji ka sanjhi*, literally ‘corporal partner’).⁶⁵

The advantages of such partnerships were not only material, but social too. They offered a way for status-conscious landholders, who wanted to distance themselves from the labour of cultivation, a respectable way to earn their living from the land. At the same time, status within the village also shaped the terms of a partnership. Landless labour, usually drawn from the ‘*kamin*’ (labouring) groups such as ‘Chamars’ and ‘Chuhras’, constituted a significant chunk of the rural population, but owned next to no land (see Tables 14 and 15). Usually, the only capital they could bring to a partnership, was their physical labour, and perhaps that of their kin. These groups, who generally lived on the brink of subsistence, were also likely to require an advance on the yield of the partnership. This advance had then to be worked off, and the labourer was expected to perform all household tasks as well until the ‘body-debt’ (*ji ka qarza*) had been cleared.⁶⁶ For such groups, then, a partnership could quickly become a form of bonded labour. ‘Chamars’ and other landless labourers could also be made so-called ‘tenants-at-will’, that is, cultivators whose right to exploit a plot of land was limited to an agricultural season.⁶⁷ Sometimes, such holdings were given instead of a money payment for services rendered, an arrangement known as a *bhonda*. Such temporary leases were not, however, of the same order as the *dohli* grants given to higher-status village servants, such as the priest or ascetic. The latter were akin to a gift; on the other hand, if a labourer given a plot of land to till, whether as a revenue-paying tenant, or a holder of a *bhonda*, ‘[did] not do what [was] expected of him, he [would be] deprived of the *bhonda* land’.⁶⁸

Landless labouring communities, such as ‘Chamars’ and ‘Chuhras’, did not only become relevant to the husbanding process within the context of a *lana* or a temporary lease of land. In fact, these communities played a pivotal role in the husbanding process. Writing in the 1830s, Charles Gubbins described them as ‘an important branch of the agricultural community’⁶⁹; Fanshawe, some forty years later, concurred, writing that without them, agriculture would be ‘almost impossible’.⁷⁰ The work that these groups were called upon to do varied, but reliably included the severest labour, or tasks considered menial and unclean, and thus beneath the dignity of a landholder. At the time of ploughing, labourers would be called upon to drive the cattle and level the land; they would also be required to assist with weeding and hoeing, as well as with cutting grass for fodder.⁷¹ Where canals were used, the channels leading to the fields were cleaned by the ‘*kamins*’; their labour was also required to dig and maintain

⁶⁴ Ibid., Appendix XIII, cix-cxx.

⁶⁵ Cf. Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 114, and Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 41-2.

⁶⁶ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 113.

⁶⁷ A. Anderson and P. J. Fagan, *Report of the Revised Settlement of the Hissar District, 1887-92* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, n.d.), 14.

⁶⁸ Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 80.

⁶⁹ ‘Pergunnah Rohtuc-Beree’, 70.

⁷⁰ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 58.

⁷¹ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 114; Maconachie, *SR Rohtak*, 41.

wells.⁷² Where sugarcane was grown, the task of feeding the cut cane into the mill and removing the straw would likewise fall to landless labour.⁷³ In the few pockets where rough varieties of paddy grew, preparing the soil and transplanting the saplings was also done by them.⁷⁴

The presence of such labouring communities in any settlement, freed landowners of dependence upon strangers, whether that be hired seasonal labour or tenants. Their attachment to the village enabled a level of control that was far more difficult to achieve with seasonal migrants, who had a home to return to, and who took on extra paid work when their own fields could spare them. By contrast, labouring households within the village were each bound to one or more husbanding households.⁷⁵ They would receive a stipulated part of the harvest in return for performing certain agreed-upon tasks. The duration of these contracts varied from place to place, and could vary from a year to a customary, lifelong relationship between the household of master and servant. The dues to be paid for services were fixed at the time of the settlement to avoid disputes and negotiations. Payment was usually slender; in Rohtak district, for instance, a 'Chamar' might receive between a tenth and fortieth of the seasonal yield. For a tenth of the harvest, he was expected to 'assist, as required, at every kind of house and field labour; to supply shoes to the whole family twice a year, [along with] whips, goads, etc.'. Labourers were further entitled to a money fee at weddings, being paid one rupee at a boy's wedding, and between 1-5 rupees for the marriage of a girl.⁷⁶ Similar arrangements with landless labouring groups were worked out across south-eastern Panjab; and it was only the very poorest of villages in which no '*kamin*' was to be found.⁷⁷

An important part of the labour assets of any household, landless or landholding, were its womenfolk. Even high-ranking groups that might keep their wives and daughters in seclusion, would nonetheless require working women, whether these be of client, landless households, or of concubines and dependants taken into its fold. The precise tasks that women performed were subject to some variation, but these usually included collecting fodder and animal dung for fuel, picking cotton and spinning it into fabric, husking, cleaning, and grinding grain, cooking and cleaning for the entire family, drawing water from the well, weeding, and guarding the crops. Fanshawe was of the opinion that women performed at least as much, if not more, of the agrarian labour as men, while Wilson claimed that in the wake of the cattle epidemic of 1868, women were seen to be drawing the plough in parts of Sirsa district.⁷⁸ The relationship of the male landholder to these women, to whom much of the labour of cultivation fell, differed from place to place, and according to social class. In general, the nature of the labour that fell to a proprietor's wife depended upon his wealth. Where either tenants or subordinates, and *their* womenfolk could be afforded, the landholder's wife might be shielded from the heaviest labour. On the other hand, the value of women's labour also received formal recognition. Where agrarian partnerships (*lana*) were entered into, for instance, the shares to the produce were calculated keeping in mind the contribution of the partner's household, not just its men.⁷⁹ An exception was made in the case of those contributing labour alone (*ji ka sanjhi*), likely as a mark of their lower status.

⁷² Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, ; Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 83; Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 52.

⁷³ Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, xlv.

⁷⁴ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 185.

⁷⁵ In Ludhiana, for instance, some 'Chamar' households were tied to ten husbanding households. Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 129.

⁷⁶ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 97.

⁷⁷ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 115.

⁷⁸ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 63; Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 293. Darling, in his *Rusticus Loquitur*, confirmed that women in Rohtak were viewed effectively as slaves and chattel, even though his attitude to this treatment was decidedly ambivalent; Malcolm Darling, *Rusticus Loquitur or the Old Light and the New in the Punjab Village* (London [etc.]: Milford, 1930), 103-4.

⁷⁹ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 114.

The role of landless labour and agrarian partnerships, as well as of unrecorded mortgages and short-term leases of land must be foregrounded not only to complicate the *khud-kasht* narrative, but also to underline the continued importance of trust, familiarity, and kinship in the rural economy. Such informal arrangements enabled an exchange between those households that had more land than they could till themselves, and those that had an excess of labour capital. The balance of power in these relationships was not always skewed entirely in favour of the former; in many instances, reliance upon the labour of other households was central to a landholding family being able to retain control of its land. In Delhi district, Maconachie noted that most tenants paid no rent to the landholder, instead assuming responsibility for a share of the revenue obligation alone. This applied both to tenants with ‘occupancy’ rights, as well as to tenants-at-will.⁸⁰ Likewise, in Sirsa district, proprietors found themselves saddled with the revenue burden of entire villages, and settling tenants was therefore a prerequisite to retaining a landholding.⁸¹ This was equally so in areas where, either due to ecology or environmental degradation, the prospects of agriculture remained dim. In the Nardak tract of the Karnal district, for instance, the pastoral Rajput proprietors were in a bad way after their herds had been twice ‘decimated’ between 1868-80.⁸² As a result, at least 15% of their land was held by tenants paying no rent whatsoever. A further 9% had been mortgaged to outsiders.⁸³ Here, the difference between tenant and owner was reduced to the say that each had in the affairs of the village. Only proprietors could elect headmen; and tenants could be evicted, although, until 1868, twelve years of continuous occupancy sufficed to make tenancy both permanent and hereditary.

The importance of trust and familiarity in land-sharing arrangements is even more appreciable if we consider the predatory nature that tenancy and moneylending could assume. Once a household had formally been granted the lease to a plot of land, it could use that foothold to evict the original landholders from the settlement. For example, Fanshawe mentioned that some of the more powerful Jat lineages had acquired leases to the land of several Rajput villages in the Jhajjar *tehsil*. The share of these ‘too-powerful tenants’ in the village lands was considerable; and knowing this, they would deliberately default on their revenue payments to the proprietors, who would then be hard-pressed to pay the revenue demand. Their status as so-called ‘occupancy tenants’ meant that they could not be evicted; and their aim was clearly to edge the Rajput families out of the village.⁸⁴ It is worth highlighting, however, that the tactics witnessed by Fanshawe in Rohtak were only effective because the tenants concerned belonged to lineages that were already powerful in the area, being numerous, and holding considerable quantities of land. The tenant households concerned were from villages that bordered directly upon the Jhajjar lands. As such, confrontation with the Rajputs could be met by force. That they were able to pursue such a strategy of expansion is an indication that their households of birth had sufficient manpower—whether kin, biological, or otherwise, or servants—to be able to spare their labour.

The dispossession being played out in Rohtak district was replicated elsewhere in the region, as wealthier, welier, or simply more numerous husbanding lineages used the colonial state’s revenue system to consolidate their wealth. Those who suffered were often, if not always, those of high rank, or those hard hit by environmental degradation or disaster. In the Utar or uplands of the Sirsa district, James Wilson noted that the horse- and cattle-trading Bodla Sheikhs were rapidly losing their land to their Sikh

⁸⁰ Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 78.

⁸¹ Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 336-345 provides a detailed account of the changing relations between proprietors and tenants in Sirsa district. Wilson notes that as the cultivated extent increased and the pressure on land grew, tenants were losing the advantage they had once enjoyed. The choice to leave the village and migrate was made more complicated by the declining availability of land.

⁸² Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 297.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁸⁴ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 150.

Jat tenants, for which he faulted the poor management of their villages.⁸⁵ In Gurgaon, Wilson mentioned some instances of Meo families who had borrowed money from those belonging to service communities—‘Chamars’, ‘Chuhars’, and Kumhars—against surety of their land.⁸⁶ In Ludhiana, Walker claimed to know of ‘many places’ where the land of a primarily Rajput settlement was cultivated by ‘Hindu Jats’ from the neighbouring village.⁸⁷ Echoing Skinner’s sentiments half a century before, he claimed that the aim of the average Jat was ‘to get some more land into his hands; and he will keep his savings till a chance occurs of investing them in a mortgage.’⁸⁸ Conversely, household and clan could equally serve as a bulwark against the ingress of competitors. The villages of the Satlaj Dhaia, for instance, were careful not to let mortgagees from outside into their midst. They had, so Walker claimed, a ‘good deal of hard cash’ amongst them, allowing them to help a co-parcener and kinsman out at a time of need. Likewise, if a Jat husbanding household had more land than it could cultivate, it would prefer to lease it to another member of the same village rather than to find a tenant from outside the settlement.⁸⁹

Forging kinship, consolidating the household

If the household thus functioned as the fundament for accumulating and maintaining capital, the consolidation of kinship networks, within and beyond the village, was naturally of some consequence. In light of the state’s privileging of the village as the key unit of rural social life, much of this consolidation did indeed take place within the confines of the ‘village community’, as much of the scholarship on social change under colonial rule has pointed out.⁹⁰ Fanshawe noted that the size of villages in Rohtak district between the 1830s and 1870s had increased markedly. Early predictions that agrarian expansion would lead to the founding of new settlements had not been realized; and instead, villages expanded to accommodate colonized land. By the 1870s, therefore, Rohtak’s villages were the largest in Panjab, with an average population of 1,076 residents, and an average size of 2,244 acres.⁹¹ In Ludhiana, the average size of hamlets was much lower, no more than 628 people according to the census of 1881; however, as Walker remarked, there was a good deal of local variation.⁹² The principal villages of the most powerful rural clans were very high in number: Sahnna, the seat of the Maloud Jat *sardars*, for instance, had a population of 4,080 people. Raipur, the primary settlement of the Garewal Jats, had a population of 3,747.⁹³ The same trend was reproduced throughout south-eastern Panjab.⁹⁴

Besides the state’s own revenue administration, however, the progressive expansion of kinship networks itself necessitated the development and maintenance of relationships beyond the village. Moreover, given the importance of the household, how kinship was constituted remained fluid, a compromise between respectability (*sharafat, izzat*) and pragmatism. This also meant that kinship norms could differ significantly from one locality to the next, and that they changed with time. The delicate balance between respectability and practicality was nowhere more in evidence than in the obligations and restrictions placed upon women. On the one hand, given the close interdependence of wealth-in-people, and wealth-in-land, meant that women continued to be valued for their productive and reproductive capital alike. On the other, the degree of seclusion in which a household kept its

⁸⁵ Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 96.

⁸⁶ Wilson, *SR Gurgaon*, 29.

⁸⁷ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 215.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹⁰ See Introduction.

⁹¹ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 10.

⁹² *Ludhiana District Gazetteer*, 41.

⁹³ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 166.

⁹⁴ Cf. Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, 83, 101-104; Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, Map 12.

womenfolk—the extent to which it was able to shield them from hard labour—articulated its prestige. This was so even amongst Sikh communities, despite the fact that Guru Nanak and his successors were generally critical of practices such as *parda*. While colonial officials displayed little patience with what they deemed ‘excessive’ concerns with a woman’s modesty, the code of *sharafat* ran deep in south-eastern Panjab, and adherence to it was itself a means for a household to enhance its capital. By roughly mid-century, for instance, the Phulkian and other Cis-Satlaj chiefs had formally abandoned the practice of *chadar-dalna*, a heterodox and inferior form of marriage.⁹⁵ Similarly, Walker noted that some of the wealthier Arains in Ludhiana had started to keep their wives in seclusion.⁹⁶

Such concerns were perhaps primarily, but not exclusively, the concern of elites. While colonial observers tended to view *parda* as a binary between complete seclusion and none at all, its practice in fact encompassed a wide spectrum of behaviours. The subtle gradations between how much seclusion and comfort could be afforded to a wife were important for the status of a household, whether Rajput or Jat. This in turn impacted a household’s chances of forging kinship bonds with its social superiors, as custom formally dictated that daughters should be given in marriage to a family of higher rank than her parents. In Sirsa district, for example, Wilson noted that Panjabi Jat colonists from the more prosperous Sikh states, would not consider giving their daughters in marriage to a Bagri Jat household. The latter, immigrants from the arid Bagar, were generally poorer, and their daughters and wives were exempted from almost no field labour. The more well-to-do Sikhs, however, believed that women should work ‘chiefly in the house [going] out only to take her husband his food or to fetch water from the well’.⁹⁷ Households of low and middling status could also emulate this elite social code as a means of upward mobility, which led to the same kind of stratification within a single status group (*qaum*) as observed by Skinner. For instance, the Garewals, a prestigious Jat *gota* of Ludhiana district, were given the honorific ‘Sahu log’ (lords) by their fellow Jats. Their women were maintained in complete *parda* and were ‘sought in marriage by the best families of Sardars [chiefs], and even by Rajas.’⁹⁸

It is, however, clear that given the importance of female labour in the husbanding process, a variety of practices of bride-acquisition survived into the late nineteenth century, the code of *sharafat* notwithstanding. In the ‘codes of custom’ (*riwaj-i-aam*) compiled by the state from the 1870s onwards, the previously mentioned distinction between ‘proper’ (*sharif, puna*) and ‘improper’ marriages, is repeatedly made. The former, for which the appellation *nikah, shadi*, or *byah/vyah* was reserved, were described as ‘an alliance between two families’.⁹⁹ The betrothal took place when both bride and groom were still children, although the actual consummation of the marriage was much later. No money would change hands; and the contract would be sealed with the customary circling of the marriage fire, or the answering of the proposal and assent (*ijab o qabul*) in the presence of a *qazi*.¹⁰⁰ Such marriages were typically exogamous, with the degree of exogamy observed serving as yet another signifier of a household’s rank. Across south-eastern Panjab, the precise frontier between an exogamous and endogamous marriage was closely specified, although there were marked differences from one site to another. The Rajput residents of Gurgaon thus defined the kinship group, that is the group excluded from the search for a marriage partner, as the father’s *gota*, as well as the *thamba* or cluster of households within the mother’s natal village.¹⁰¹ Despite such minute specification, however, as the limits of such

⁹⁵ Lepel Henry Griffin, *The Law of Inheritance to Chiefships as Observed by the Sikhs Previous to the Annexation of the Panjab* (Lahore Punjab Print Co, 1869), 18. See below for *chadar-dalna*; also Chapter 2.

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⁹⁷ Wilson, *SR Sirsa*, 118.

⁹⁸ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 47.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 287; J. Wilson, ‘Appendix V: Code of Tribal Custom, Gurgaon District’, in Channing, *SR Gurgaon*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, ‘Code of Tribal Custom’, 27.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

kinship groups, as well as their status, were prone to change, the actual practice was likely to be even more variable. Ibbetson noted that in Ambala, some families were becoming increasingly stringent in their practice of exogamy, forbidding marriages within the lineage of mother and father alike.¹⁰²

Besides these unions, a number of accepted, if not celebrated, forms of bride acquisition, often decked by the catch-all terms *karewa* and *chadar-dalna*, also took place. These included the remarriage of a widow to one of her deceased husband's kin, often the brother. However, a much broader range of heterodox alliances also continued to be forged, some of which were discreetly tolerated, while others were punished. The threshold between the respectable, the acceptable, and the unacceptable, shifted from locality to locality, as demonstrated by the diverse answers to any single question of 'custom' contained in the *riwaj-e-aam*. Some Jat residents of the Indri *pargana* of Karnal, for example, felt that a *karewa* was only acceptable if the bride belonged to the same *qaum* as the groom. They recalled an instance of one of their own having been socially ostracised, for a *karewa* union with a Brahman woman. Some 60 kilometres away in Kaithal, however, other Jat respondents took a much broader interpretation of *karewa*, saying that any woman—even if a 'Chamar'—could be married this way.¹⁰³ That the respondents explicitly specified the legality of unions with 'Chamar' women suggests a real concern; if such women were taken as brides, it was important that the legality of these marriages be recognized to ensure their offspring were not excluded from the inheritance.

The productive and reproductive capital that women represented meant that the position of brides taken in heterodox unions within their marital households remained complex, as has been shown in previous chapters. Certainly, such women were subordinate in status to any wife married 'properly'; but the nature of her marriage did not necessarily divest her of all rights. A wife taken in *karewa* could expect to be maintained by her husband, and if he were to die, by his kin. She also had a life-time stake in his property, which was often equal to that of his other wives.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, a wife's status did not affect her children. Communities that recognized *karewa*, by extension recognized the right of the children born to such unions to inherit, as bearing heirs was one of the principal reasons that such a heterodox marriage was sought. Another reason was to mitigate against widows taking their share of their husband's wealth away from his household; in such cases, her remarriage to one of his immediate kin was arranged. Yet, there was a general agreement that widows could not be forced to remarry against their will, even though, in practice, this principle might well have been ignored. When widows became more of a burden than an asset; when their maintenance was too expensive, they might be allowed to marry into another household, one that had a deficit of labour capital. Such pragmatic exchanges of capital were usually accompanied by some kind of monetary compensation paid to the 'sending' household, a recognition of the value of the bride.¹⁰⁵

Besides various heterodox marriages, households also used adoption as a means to enhance their numbers. This was a particularly favoured way for sonless parents to dispose of their land without running the risks that formal tenancy entailed. In Karnal district, for example, Ibbetson noted that sonless proprietors not infrequently settled their sons-in-law on their land. This was against the custom of clan exogamy, according to which a wedded daughter was no longer part of her father's lineage, and by rights settled in the village of her husband. Upon seeking explanation for this unorthodox state of affairs, he

¹⁰² Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 78.

¹⁰³ J. M. Douie, *Punjab Customary Law, VIII: Tahsil Kaithal and Parganah Indri, District Karnal*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson, *SR Gurgaon*, 42; Douie, *Punjab Customary Law, VIII*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Fanshawe noted that although few families would admit to paying bride-price, he suspected the practice was widespread. Without mentioning his sources or entering into specifics, Fanshawe claimed that bride-price rates had risen steeply and had led to the practice of polyandry. Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 72.

was simply told, '*bhai karke basaya*' ('I made him a brother').¹⁰⁶ A tenant thus adopted was known as a *bhun-bhai* (literally, 'brother of the soil') on the principle that those who inhabited the same site were family ('*simjor ki biradari*', literally 'fraternity of neighbours').¹⁰⁷ Such arrangements were not uncommon, and those adopted could be related in many different ways to the landholder. Besides sons-in-law, nephews, distant relatives, or servants might all be adopted. At the same time, communities remained reluctant to acknowledge incidents of adoption within their ranks, as biological descent from an orthodox marriage and the fertility it implied were highly valued, especially amongst high-status groups. It thus remained the official opinion that 'adoptions are very uncommon'.¹⁰⁸

The continued consolidation of households within and beyond villages into the late nineteenth century was not, however, unaffected by colonial law, which sought to adjudicate civil disputes in accordance with 'tribal custom'. The same restrictions on the ownership and management of property by women that were used by the state to divest noblewomen of their estates, were also extended to women within husbanding households. This meant, for instance, that although a widow's right to her husband's property after his death was recognized, what she could do with it was restricted. In practice, even her ability to access this wealth might be made impossible by a combination of jealous relatives and the colonial courts. In '*Talewand Khan and others vs. Mussumat Khanzadee and others*', a case that set a juridical precedent, the widows of a certain Sarmast Khan found their request for the partition of their late husband's estate denied. Their reason for seeking this partition was to secure ease of access to their rightful share of Sarmast Khan's land, in which twenty of his extended male kin also had a stake. After prolonged deliberations, the Chief Court at Lahore finally ruled that given that widows had no right to sell, mortgage, or otherwise alienate a husband's wealth, there was no reason for the partition to be effected. Musammam Khanzadi and Sarmast Khan's other widows were thus effectively denied independent access to their rightful wealth.¹⁰⁹ This precedent was eventually overturned, but the overarching principle against a woman's right to autonomous property control remained.

Whereas the state's principles on the ownership of property by females were non-negotiable, it did elsewhere seek to accommodate local custom into its legal system. In pursuance of this goal, it undertook the aforementioned codifications of 'tribal custom'. The flaws of this exercise, which entailed seeking the opinion of (all male) village elders on a fixed set of topics, including inheritance, adoption, and marriage, have been carefully detailed by Bhattacharya.¹¹⁰ In general, it is true that these codifications often—though not always—reflected conservative points of view, and that especially social elites were hesitant to acknowledge the existence of heterodox practices amongst them. Yet, the actual effect of colonial law upon the constitution of households is difficult to gauge, for a few reasons. The first is that enshrinement in law alone did not lead to a wholesale abandonment of non-codified practice. With respect to marriages, for instance, Fanshawe remarked that if 'the first wife is childless or old, or if a man is well-to-do, an irregular marriage is pretty sure to take place, and often against the rules of clan inter-marriage.'¹¹¹ Similarly, although adoptions were sometimes contested in court on the grounds that

¹⁰⁶ Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 75.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 78. The connection between *bhun-bhai* and *simjor ki biradari* is not made by Ibbetson, but extrapolated from his account.

¹⁰⁸ *Riwaj-i-am of Tehsil Kaithal*, 15. Cf. Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 310.

¹⁰⁹ '*Talewand Khan & others vs. Mussumat Khanzadee & others*' under 'Civil Judgments', *Panjab Record*, 1868, pp.25-27.

¹¹⁰ Bhattacharya, *Agrarian Conquest*,

¹¹¹ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 65.

they had not been formally consecrated, Wilson noted that ‘adoption would be presumed from a long-continued relation between the parties implying adoption’.¹¹²

Fanshawe’s remarks highlight a second issue: namely, the frequency of litigation. Were juridical intervention sought in a property dispute, then it was certainly important to be able to prove and specify the relationships that constituted the basis of one’s claim to (partial) proprietorship. However, legal remedies were expensive: as mentioned in the introduction, stamp fees alone could be as much as 1 *anna* per rupee of the disputed property’s value, a fee of 6.25%. In addition, the courts did not move swiftly. In his report on the Delhi district, for example, Maconachie provides an overview of the workings of the ‘settlement courts’, where civil disputes pertaining to ownership, rent and revenue claims were decided. The lowest level of court was that of the *pargannah* or *tehsil*, which varied in size, and where cases of property worth up to Rs. 300 were tried.¹¹³ This was where the majority of cases from husbanding households would be decided. In the decade 1872-1881, the three *tehsildari* courts of Delhi district, one each for Ballabhgarh, Delhi, and Sonipat, decided a total of 106 inheritance disputes, roughly ten per year. In addition, they decided 59 mortgage disputes, 25 cases pertaining to the rights of ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ landholders, and just under 3,000 tenancy disputes. The lion’s share of litigation—23,654 cases—was made up of mutation suits, that is, petitions to change the name of the proprietor on a deed, as might be undertaken by an heir or a purchaser. In total, the settlement courts of Delhi district had adjudicated a little more than 30,000 suits, or 300 cases per year.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the district’s agrarian population was officially some 250,000 people, although this number was acknowledged to exclude ‘not only the considerable [population] who combine agricultural with other occupations, but also the much larger number who depend upon the yield of agricultural occupation’, such as landless labour.¹¹⁵ Yet, even using this very low figure, and assuming no repetition in the identity of the petitioners, the overwhelming majority—some 88%—of the population remained untouched by litigation.

A third issue is that even the state’s informants were not in agreement about what constituted ‘tribal custom’ on any single issue. Take the matter of female inheritance, for example. As with the aforementioned questions of marriage, the actual views of communities on the subject of female inheritance and property rights varied. In Ludhiana, for instance, the question of what right a daughter had to her deceased father’s estate yielded no single principle. Some Muslim Rajput respondents claimed that a daughter who had taken a vow of celibacy had the same rights as a male proprietor—to sell, buy, mortgage land, on consultation with the rest of the village. Other communities said that even a married daughter, if living with her father, had the right to manage his property as would a man; and upon her death, any immovable property would fall to her sons or brothers, rather than to her husband.¹¹⁶ In the absence of a clear ‘custom’, disputes concerning a daughter’s right to inherit, if taken to court, could end very differently, depending upon the counsel sought by magistrates.¹¹⁷ The outcome depended in part upon the specifics of the situation: where a married daughter and her husband were the primary

¹¹² Wilson, *SR Gurgaon*, 56. See also ‘Mukhun and others vs. Nikka and others’ under ‘Civil Judgments’, *Panjab Record*, 1868, 96-97, whereby non-performance of rites is not accepted as a legitimate reason to contest an adoption.

¹¹³ The *pargana* of Delhi, for example, included 43 villages. That of Sonipat, where the settlements were much larger, consisted only of three villages. See Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, Appendix XVIII. For the tiers of courts in so-called non-regulation provinces like Panjab, see Nasser Hussain, *The Jurisprudence of Emergency Colonialism and the Rule of Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), Appendix A.

¹¹⁴ Maconachie, *SR Delhi*, Appendix XIX.

¹¹⁵ Population figures have been derived from *Gazetteer of the Delhi District. 1883-4. Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press Comp., 1884*, 124.

¹¹⁶ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 303-4.

¹¹⁷ Prem Chowdhry, ‘Emerging Patterns: Property Rights of Women in Colonial and Post-Colonial South-East Punjab’, *Journal of Punjab Studies* 20 (2013), 111-134, at 114-15.

caregivers of an elderly or infirm man, arbitrators might find it difficult to exclude her from the inheritance.¹¹⁸

A daughter's right to inherit was only one of several points of 'custom' upon which unanimity proved elusive. Another example is provided by the principle of *ma-baant* or *chundavund*, whereby a man's fortune would be divided equally on his death amongst his wives. Colonial officers found this custom abhorrent, for *chundavund* took no consideration of the number of sons born to a woman, suggesting a greater concern with the welfare of a widow, than with that of a man's male heirs.¹¹⁹ However, despite British discomfiture with the principle, *chundavund* continued to be practiced in south-eastern Panjab, and was recorded in the code of custom.¹²⁰ In the event of a dispute being resolved in court, however, colonial magistrates tended to place the burden of proof upon the party pleading that *chundavund* was the norm.¹²¹ The effect of colonial law was thus to give those who stood to benefit from the implementation of codified custom a legal advantage, but since custom itself was disputed, this theoretical advantage did not always translate into a practical one.

Besides the influence of colonial assumptions about local social practices, and the administrative imperatives of compiling a legal code, 'custom' evolved in response to local factors that were less directly traceable to the British state. What Walker termed the 'law-creating faculty of the people' responded to constantly evolving circumstances, which frequently necessitated new compromises between pragmatism and respectability.¹²² In the aforementioned instance of the *chundavand* rule, for instance, the gradual replacement of this custom with *pagvand* has been explained by scholars such as Veena Talwar Oldenburg as a result of the state's prejudice against the practice.¹²³ Yet, the growing pressure on land and the need to maintain the integrity of households seem to have played as important a role in this evolution; at least, this was the explanation offered by male village elders to Walker. The rising pressure on land similarly led to an evolution of customs of adoption. Amongst those communities that recognized adoption—usually not of high social rank—there was a preference for adopting heirs from one's kin, whether that be a nephew, a distant male relative of the same lineage, or a daughter's son. However, since adoption could potentially open the door to claims by strangers upon a village's land, some clans insisted that such additions to a household be vetted by the other landowners in the settlement, especially if these were made by widows.¹²⁴

Wives and adoptive kin were not alone in finding their position within the household changing during the nineteenth century. So, too, did servants, specifically, those belonging to the landless labouring classes. A look at Tables 10 and 11 demonstrates that 'Chamars', 'Chuhras', and other so-called 'menial' labourers—including potters, washermen, and weavers—constituted the bulk of the rural population in south-eastern Panjab, even though they held little to no land. Their position was also much more precarious than that of other 'kamins' or service communities like the *bania* or the *purohit*. In contrast to the latter, groups such as 'Chamars' and 'Chuhras' possessed neither social status, nor significant material capital. Indeed, it is likely that these groups, who were at the very bottom of the social ladder and entirely dependent for patronage upon landholding populations, were especially adversely effected by the colonial state's undermining of the martial-pastoral economy, and the

¹¹⁸ See 'Meeran Buksh vs. Peeroo' under 'Civil Judgments', *Panjab Record*, 1868, 73-78.

¹¹⁹ Walker found *chundavand* to be 'clearly barbarous and unjust'. Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 301. Likewise, Wilson

¹²⁰ Cf. Ibbetson, *SR Karnal*, 99; Wilson, *SR Gurgaon*, 37; Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 301.

¹²¹ 'Ala Singh and Mussamat Kahno vs. Lehna Singh and Harditta', *Panjab Record*, 1879, 98.

¹²² Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 283.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 285-6.

¹²⁴ W. H. Rattington, *Digest of Civil Law for the Punjab, Customary Law as at Present Judiciary Ascertained* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazettee, 1901), 51.

extension of the agrarian frontier. Although in the absence of precise data on their conditions, any conclusions remain speculative, it is likely that the relative decline in their patrons' fortunes translated to an absolute loss of income for at least some, as formerly powerful households were increasingly unable to afford large retinues.

At the same time, the reduced circumstances of the many courts of *rajās* and *jagirdars* in the region, also led to an exodus of artisans and craftsmen to the hinterland, where it is possible that some merged into the population of landless labour.¹²⁵ Although these payments were regarded as reasonable by Fanshawe, he also observed that tensions between husbanding households and their '*kamins*' had been rising, and that the latter had begun refusing to perform some of the sanitation tasks demanded of them in protest.¹²⁶ Such disputes do not appear to have been new; in the 1830s, Charles Gubbins, while surveying Rohtak district, noted the frequency of disputes between 'Chamars' and cultivators.¹²⁷ While the state was quick to chastise the indolence and pride of precolonial elites for their straitened circumstances, and criticise their concerns with prestige and rank, they overlooked the wider webs of patronage and dependence that their revenue reforms had impacted. For it is clear, that what erstwhile elites experienced in the wake of colonization was a *relative* decline of their fortunes. Certainly, in specific pockets like Jhajjar, the Bet, and the Nardak, the conditions of Rajput pastoralists were dire, their pastures rapidly dwindling as colonists made ever-deeper incursions into their lands.¹²⁸ On the whole, however, Rajputs remained an important landholding population in south-eastern Panjab, as is borne out by Tables 15 and 16 above. Their lot remained considerably better than that of the so-called '*kamin*' ('menial') groups.

Rohtak was not the only district where the conditions of landless labourers were poor. In Ludhiana, for example, Walker noted that by the late 1870s, the custom of sharing servants amongst households was being replaced, and servants being employed by a single husbanding household. This gave the latter much greater hold over the former and had resulted in the cutting of allowances for services rendered. Walker further noted a tendency towards the casualization of labour. According to him, 'in some villages there are no customary allowances or services at all; and when a cultivator has any work to be done by one of the class, he pays for it in grain or cash.' By rescinding the contract between patron and client, husbanding households freed themselves of the obligation of providing for the latter the year round. Thus, animal skins, which 'Chamars', as leatherworkers, were generally allowed to keep, were being withheld by husbanding families in Ludhiana, wrote Walker, as the price of leather had risen in the 1870s.¹²⁹

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the impact that colonization had upon husbanding households in south-eastern Panjab and argued that lineage consolidation within and beyond the village continued to be of importance for rural populations in general. Precolonial class and status constituted an important fault-line in determining how this goal would be pursued. For village- and pargana level elites, who had served as tributaries within precolonial regimes, the transition to colonial rule often meant a relative loss of prestige and influence. While many of these communities, identified as Rajputs and Afghans, had

¹²⁵ This trend, viz., the movement of artisanal communities not only into agriculture but also into petty commodity production, was witnessed across much of the subcontinent over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; see David Washbrook, 'The Indian Economy and the British Empire', in *India and the British Empire*, ed. Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63.

¹²⁶ Fanshawe, *SR Rohtak*, 58.

¹²⁷ 'Pergunnah Rohtuc-Beree', 70.

¹²⁸ See Chapter 4.

¹²⁹ Walker, *SR Ludhiana*, 130.

already been marginalized by Sikh or other Jat colonists in the eighteenth century, they found their status even further diminished under British rule, as their tributary and lordly privileges were not recognized by the colonial state. It is worth emphasizing, however, that such a loss of status and privilege was not restricted to any single *qaum*; Sikh *sardars* in principalities conquered by the colonial state might likewise find their rights and privileges delimited to the circumference of their own settlement. Stripped of the capacity to retaliate with raids or large-scale violence, such communities used the language of *sharafat* to express their status. This martial, elite code was likewise embraced by upwardly mobile husbanding communities who, having amassed sufficient economic and material capital, sought to bolster their claims to elite status.

For less well-off communities, whose concern was to maintain a hold of, or increase their hold over land, lineage consolidation primarily took other forms. A landless husbandman might be absorbed into his wealthier kinsman's household as an added pair of hands to work in the fields. His status within this household was determined by a complex matrix of variables. If there were no male heir, he might be adopted, and the bond sealed by marrying him off to the adopter's daughter. On the other hand, if his inclusion within the household was more of an act of charity than an arrangement that equally helped both parties, his status might be somewhere between that of a servant and of a son. Marriages of different sorts were a further way of acquiring brides. While status-conscious households might deny non-*sharif* forms of marriage in their lineages, the productive and reproductive labour that women performed meant that various forms of bride-acquisition were practiced, if not celebrated. Partnerships, service, and servitude were further ways in which husbanding households could expand their network and enhance their 'wealth-in-people'. These relationships were to be found at multiple levels—within the village, they were visible in the form of the *thola*, *pannah*, and *thamba*; beyond the village, in the *thappa*, *zail*, and *gota*. Like its predecessors, the colonial state made pragmatic use of these household bonds, integrating them within its administrative apparatus.

The value and necessity of lineage consolidation in south-eastern Panjab is better appreciated against the background of rural precarity that was sketched in the previous chapter. The dependents, clients, and kin that constituted a household provided a safety-net, whose value had, if anything, increased due to the colonial state's push to sedentarize and pacify the region. Where lineages had previously expanded their control through raids and the forceful extraction of tribute, households used new forms of predation, whether these be moneylending or tenancy, to enhance their control over land. Conversely, it was those households who could rely upon their members to provide for them in times of hardship, who were best able to defend themselves against such forms of predation. For the most vulnerable in society, a category that swelled under colonization, the absence of a safety-net seems to have implied a worsening of labour conditions. Patrons were either unable to take care of their clients in the same manner as they had previously done, or the larger numbers of the labouring classes meant that the individual worker might be compelled to settle for less.

This chapter has sought to nuance the narrative of traditionalization that has tended to dominate the literature on community in nineteenth-century South Asia. Within south-eastern Panjab, it is true that amongst rural elites, the use of status markers as a sign of prestige increased in importance in the wake of demilitarization, and the colonial state's erosion of precolonial regimes. The language of status continued to be that of *sharafat*, Brahmanical codes remaining marginal in our region, at least during the nineteenth century. Nor, as we have seen, did the importance lent to these codes outweigh the more practical concerns of survival for the majority of the rural population. Even the absorption of 'orthodox' codes into law, one of the primary mechanisms through which, historians argue, a traditional society was created, did not have the effect that is sometimes suggested. This was partly because, the codes of custom documented by the colonial state were internally diverse, demonstrating differences of opinion on matters such as exogamy, adoption, and inheritance. A second reason is that the state simply could

not intervene in the composition of the majority of rural households. While families who had the means to pursue a civil suit, might invoke 'orthodox' practice to make their case, most households did not have the resources, and perhaps neither the inclination, to seek the intervention of the state. Non-elite households were, to this extent, far less 'legible' for the colonial state than elite households.