CHAPTER 5

Unschooled Knowledge from Ancestral Spirits

Bhrigupati Singh

It is an honour to contribute to this volume that takes stock of knowledge formations within and beyond academic disciplines in India at this juncture—roughly seven and a half decades or so into our postcolonial journey as a sovereign, democratic republic. One of the tasks of such formations of thought, whether in myth, ritual, or in non-mythic forms, is to teach us how to relate to the past. I write this chapter, inspired by postcolonial anthropology and popular religion, not as a historian but as an anthropologist and as a citizen, a term that can still hopefully endure based on sentiments not necessarily nameable as nationalism. How do we learn to count and recount what lay prior to India at 75, and to sense forces, including historically blurry forces, that remain active or reactive even today? If that sounds too obscure, let me pose this instead as a founding question that any nation may face or evade: is India a settler colony like Israel, the United States, Australia, or Canada? And if not, then what were the forms of conflict and cohabitation between first and later settlers? Such questions could be diversely and combatively answered, even today, depending on the regional vantage point from which it is asked.

Rather than statist or separatist answers, in this chapter I receive forms of unschooled knowledge from two kinds of ancestral spirits—first, a horse-bound deity found in byway shrines across South (and East) Asia,[1] said to police untimely dead ancestral spirits, who I argue offers an insight into South Asian pasts that reorient terms like caste and tribe, in ways different from state and national curricular definitions. By *unschooled* knowledge, I mean ways of naming, remembering, and being, prior to its codification into teachable disciplines, in which the past is usually periodized through histories of sovereignty and the names of rulers or dynasties. Schooled or disciplined knowledge may take academic but also everyday conversational forms, in ways of narrating histories of settlement and unsettlement.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

In the second half of this chapter, I channel a different set of ancestral spirits, namely Indian sociologists and anthropologists[2] in the early postcolonial period, focusing on their discomfort with the term Adivasi (original inhabitants), since, many of them argued, the term misrepresented the very idea of settlement in South Asia, although this scholarly discomfort may itself be seen as regionally differentiated and less sharply expressed in the northwest and northeast 'frontier' regions of South Asia.[3] Rather than a merely academic debate over formerly fuzzy or indistinct categories hardened by colonialism, I suggest that this was an Indian reckoning with a question that many old and new nations confront, namely what the relations have been or could be between potentially hostile and unequal neighbouring groups, and how first and later settlers lived and may live together. Some polities dealt, and deal, with such questions through genocide and historical erasure. How did these early postcolonial anthropologists and sociologists observe and narrate India's settlement in light of their discomfort with the term Adivasi?

An unschooled debate may gradually be disciplined. I suggest ahead that this first generation of sociologists/anthropologists of independent India gradually accepted the term Adivasi, although not as a racial category, or as an equivalent term for first nations elsewhere, or based on demands of the communities themselves, but rather as part of postcolonial state projects in identifying social groups most in need of state welfare or 'developmental' support. As such, this term gradually became teachable and more acceptable, even to those groups who would self-identify as Adivasis today but may have thought of themselves very differently even a generation or two earlier, as warriors, forest-dwellers, or pastoralists. Was the era prior to census scheduled disciplining more fluid in terms of social identities? Not quite, as I will argue ahead, in channelling these spirits.

In knowing a nation through forms of unschooled *knowledge*, I do not mean simply fluidity or fuzziness or a lack of clarity. Rather, these other forms of being, recounting, and remembering may indicate their own specific forms of contract, relatedness, conflict, and cohabitation that nonetheless remain distinct from codified categories like Hinduism or Islam in the case of deities, or from national histories. Crucially, unschooled does not mean only non-academic or oral traditions, as I will hope to show through glimpses of these debates in what we could take to be canonical texts of Indian social science, with ancestral spirits like N. K. Bose and Surajit Sinha. Schooled and unschooled are not synonyms for scholastic versus everyday knowledge, since the schooled can appear in everyday, conversational forms, such as the spurious and harmful 'historical' explanations often offered

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

today for non-Puranic deities, such as 'Hindu' warrior figures. Let us begin with one such unschooled and yet deified warrior spirit.

Shared Ancestors beyond Caste and Kinship

In travel writing, India is often described as having unknowably numerous 'folk' or 'local' shrines. Studied more closely, such shrines, in the case of masculine deities, are usually for *vir* warriors, or for *pir* or *siddha* ascetics. Between 2005 and 2007, I came to closely study one such *vir* deity, a ubiquitous, although often inconspicuous, sight across many parts of north, central, and southern India, small roadside shrines depicting a headless horseman. The specific area of my ethnographic fieldwork in these years was Shahabad, a subdistrict of 236 villages in Rajasthan on its southeastern border with Madhya Pradesh. The main focus of my research was the Sahariyas, governmentally classified as a 'Primitive' tribe, a subsection of Scheduled Tribes, known locally as Adivasis, but also as one among other *jati*s (a common word for the English terms 'caste' and 'tribe'), an overlap that signals a classic debate in South Asian anthropology.[4]

The Sahariyas constitute 34 per cent of the population of Shahabad (M. L. Verma Tribal Research and Training Institute 2004: 2), alongside Kiraads (cultivators, 30 per cent), Ahirs (pastoralists/cultivators, 10 per cent)—both governmentally classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—and Jatavs/Chamars (a Scheduled Caste, former leatherworkers-turned-agriculturalists, 15 per cent). While the Sahariyas self-identify as Adivasis, economically dependent on minor forest produce and small-scale agriculture, I searched in vain for historical narratives of dispossession, as in other cases of settler colonialism. Instead, what I encountered more often among these four neighbouring groups—Sahariyas, Ahirs, Kiraads, and Jatavs—were roughly similar narratives of settlement: 'We have been in Shahabad for seven generations' (usually the longest that kin memory stretched); 'We came here four hundred years ago from a village in Madhya Pradesh'; 'An ascetic blessed our ancestor and told him to settle by the side of this hill.' Despite these similar narratives of settlement, memories of social relations between these groups were not necessarily harmonious.

Until the relatively recent past, Sahariyas and Jatavs often served as *haali* (agricultural/bonded labourers) to Kiraads and Ahirs. Many would recount bitter memories of intergenerational servitude and indebtedness. Starting in the 1960s, nationwide laws were passed against bonded labour, leading neighbouring groups like the Sahariyas and Kiraads to renegotiate transactional relations, usually to more temporary, seasonal, and often

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

differently extractive arrangements. At present, most Sahariya families earn their livelihood by cultivating small, often depleting landholdings assigned to them in postcolonial land reforms, while also working as agricultural wage labour on the lands of neighbouring castes.

History as a Deceptive Form of Knowledge

Can one imagine such unequal, potentially hostile neighbouring groups having shared ancestors? Let us approach a horse-bound deity, known in these parts of Central India as Thakur Baba, often depicted on byway 'hero stones' common in many parts of India (Sontheimer 2022). Baba is a common suffix of respect for ascetics or even for ordinary older men. Every village in Shahabad has at least two shrines. An active shrine is usually attached to a *ghodala* (spirit medium). Men and women also encounter Thakur Baba in dreams or visions of a man, often headless, on a horse. I mulled over the most common description: 'He is called Thakur because he is a Rajput [warrior caste] who died in battle. His head was cut off but he continued to fight. These shrines mark the spot where they died.'

And what battles were these? Answers to such historical questions were vague: 'There must have been battles … in the time of kings.' Right-leaning village schoolteachers offered more 'historical' suggestions: 'These are *shaheed* [martyrs]. We call them *vir* [braves]. They were Hindus who died fighting Muslims.' Which Muslims? I pointed out there were similar shrines for Muslim *vir*s/*pir*s (often called *ghazi pir*)[5]; they were uncertain. 'Mughals? Or other Rajputs? Rajputs were always fighting each other anyway.' The source of Thakur Baba's power, I realized, was not to be found in historically identifiable royalty. In the absence of historical or theological textual genealogies, such a deity could be easily obscured, either as entirely unknowable or as too easily knowable, as a credulously 'folk' form of deified power that simply mirrors feudal authority from an earlier era.

How else is knowledge of such pasts denied or obscured? A more sophisticated argument for the unknowable is to be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty's much feted *Provincializing Europe*, where he cites Ranajit Guha's instance of the Santal tribal leaders of an anti-colonial rebellion who, while facing execution, declared: 'I rebelled … because Thakur made an appearance and told me to rebel' (2000: 103). Chakrabarty calls this a 'subaltern past' because it deals with 'supernatural' causation. According to Chakrabarty, a historian will invariably 'cover up' this kind of a cosmological gap by interpreting it through Eurocentric 'universal' mediating terms like the 'spirits of dead landlords', a move that for Chakrabarty reveals

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

an irreducible gap between the 'rational' historian and the 'supernaturally infused world of the Santal' (2000: 106). While I agree that cosmological gaps should not be covered up, my discomfort hinges on Chakrabarty's terms: *supernatural* and the *world of the Santal*. Such a deity, as we will see, is not confined to an entirely inscrutable 'tribal' world. How might a 'modern' nation still access the knowledge of such historically unnameable spirits, rather than leaving them to be colonized as 'Hindu martyrs'?

Rethinking Caste/Tribe and the Rajput–Tribe Continuum

Let us re-inhabit what the anthropologist Surajit Sinha described as the 'Rajput–tribe continuum' (1962), to better understand what is meant here by the seemingly obvious term 'Rajput'. A commonsensical idea of feudalism necessarily equates sovereignty with kingship and 'illustrious' genealogically based kinship. According to this definition, the Rajputs, genealogically organized into 36 'royal races', lorded over different parts of north India, living in *jagir*s (fiefs) and *thikana*s (larger fiefs, usually based out of a fort) (Hitchcock 1959:10). In Shahabad, though, as far back as land records go, there were only three border *jagir*s barely covering a village each and not a single *thikana*. In conversation with local historians, I learned the names of the successive rulers of the area. I found that Thakur Baba's presence invoked no relation to any known royal lineage of Kota or Gwalior, the two main kingdoms in the region.

Nor could I find formerly dominant clans among the handful of Rajput families who lived in present-day Shahabad. Most lived in relatively straitened circumstances and claimed no past glories: 'The royalty you read about in history books was maybe one percent of the lot. The rest of us were *naukar*s [servants], fighting battles, getting killed.' Are these masters demoting themselves to servants? I found a different and perhaps more accurate valence for these words and hierarchies in Dirk Kolff's *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* (1990), which defines the term Rajput not as king but through the word *naukari,* a Mongolian term for 'service in a war band' (Kolff 1990: 20). *Naukari* is still commonplace in Indian languages to denote 'service' or 'job', of high or low status, while the noun form *naukar* (servant) has pejorative class connotations. *Naukari* was a crucial term in a bloody conflict of medieval north and central India that was not between Hindus and Muslims but, rather, between Mughals and Afghans, the latter particularly of the Lodi dynasty. Within this conflict, *naukar* soldiers could belong to varied castes and tribes, serving under patrons with shifting alliances (Kolff 1990: 182). Rajputs, for instance, fought both for and against Afghans and Mughals.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

Moreover, Afghan and Rajput, Kolff argues, were not exclusive ethnic groups but also contractual soldier identities (Kolff 1990: 57). Tribal and agrarian caste identity could be supplemented by periodic soldiering (Kolff 1990: 184), recognizable in the popular motif of departure from home, as in the *viraha* (songs of separation) still sung in India and Pakistan. Status could be renegotiated by marriage alliances between 'warlords', not only between Rajputs and Mughals but also between Rajput and Bhil tribal 'chiefs' (Augustine 1986: 6). The main recruiting centres for caste and tribe soldiers until 1850 were Malwa and Bundelkhand in central India, neighbouring Shahabad and an area of Bihar farther east, also called Shahabad, the centre of the renowned Afghan warrior Sher Shah Suri (Kolff 1990: 59).

While Indian pre-colonial agrarian society is sometimes pictured as entirely settled within structures of caste and genealogy, we can see an outside to this world. Two key exit possibilities were as an ascetic or as a warrior, through contractual service in a war band. As the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari tell us, knowledge formations of 'modern' centralized sovereignty often disable and obscure global and local histories of 'war bands'.[6] Inheriting this global morality within South Asia, 'modern' writers, as a habit of thought, regardless of their nationality, refer, for instance, to the raids into central India by the western Indian Marathas as 'glorified plunder', or in the case of 'tribes' as 'marauding gangs of Bhil tribes' (Augustine 1986: 10), and perhaps now most threateningly, Hindu nationalist depictions of 'invading Muslims hordes. Like many other parts of the world, South Asia too might be better understood through local and translocal ecologies of competitive war bands, within which kingdoms were often fragile fortifications, although an expanding war band could also turn into a state (for example, the Mughal empire begins with Babur's war band and intergenerationally turns into a formidable sedentary state).

Within central India, Kolff describes how the contractual war band gradually declined with the ascendancy of Mughal and then British sovereignty. A gradually emerging centralized state began to disable earlier networks of mobile war bands. Kolff dates the beginnings of the settled Rajput 'genealogical orthodoxy' to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The modern definition of the Rajput was hardened into 'thirty-six royal races' by British colonial historians such as James Tod, whose *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829) is still owned by most notable Rajput families. Tod's account is drawn in part from local 'bardic' traditions and *charan* genealogists, whose task was often to create 'illustrious' genealogies for 'tribes'. In contrast, accounts such as Kolff's show us centuries of intermingling and competition to extend the ambit of the term Rajput.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

Rather than entirely negating Tod and the *charan*'s genealogies, we could say that there are *major* and *minor* definitions of the Rajput. The major definition centres on genealogy and property, as it stood at a particular historical moment of accumulation. Untraceable in the major definition, Thakur Baba perhaps expresses the minor variation, the warrior as a possibility of life, open for centuries to several castes and tribes.

The minor definition does not eliminate the possibilities of violence among groups identified as Rajput and neighbouring tribes and castes. Historians have recorded centuries of warfare between Rajputs, Bhil, Gond, and other central Indian tribes (Skaria 1999: 75). In what ways are these forms of settler–unsettler violence remembered in ritual or in memorials? Kota, for instance, now described as a former Rajput kingdom, which included Shahabad, is known to have been founded by the Koteah Bhil tribe, marked by a decrepit memorial site in present-day Kota. In older forms of state ritual, for instance, until the fourteenth century, for his coronation, the *rana* (king/'chief') of Mewar, a leading Rajput kingdom, had his forehead marked with the blood of a Bhil chief, drawn from his thumb or big toe (Kramrisch 1968: 52). Warrior cultures in other parts of the world share comparable rituals, such as the investiture of Julius Caesar with the sacrifice of a defeated Gaul chief, although in the Rajput case we have a sacrificial substitution, a drop of blood instead of a human life.

While such rituals may be understood as consecrated tribal dominance, harder to explain 'historically' are rituals among other castes and tribes that incorporate Rajputs. As Stella Kramrisch, writing on central Indian Bhil rituals, notes:

> The figure of the rider on his horse plays the leading role in the essential 'death-in-life' tribal rites of the Bhils. The equestrian figure in art and legend is associated with the feudal Hindu Rajputs, the northern neighbors of the Bhil. The Bhil use the image of the horseman as the ancestor of the clan, although the Bhil neither raise nor use horses. (Kramrisch 1968: 52)

How does this man on a horse become an 'ancestor' of other clans? How might we understand this form of 'national integration', if we might call it that, which has nothing to do with so-called Nehruvianism?[7] In a classic text of Indian anthropology, *State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India* (1962), Surajit Sinha set out a 'tribe–Rajput continuum' (Sinha 1962: 79). As Sinha argued:

> The way in which the upper strata of tribal groups have been drawn to the generic *Kshatriya-Rajput* pool is perhaps not much different from

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

> the way in which the now most highly esteemed Rajputs had been drawn into the *Kshatriya* fold from the original invading stocks of tribal Huns around the 6th century A.D. … the 'Scythians' of Tod. (Sinha 1962: 76, emphases original)

Sinha's thesis concludes by positing an end to this tribe–Rajput continuum:

> Making frequent reference to their 'heroic *Kshatriya* (warrior) traditions of the past' from which they had fallen in recent years, the Bhumij were shocked in 1951 when they were classified as 'Scheduled Wild Tribes' in the electoral rolls. Between 1952 and 1960, however, the interest in Rajput identification has considerably waned.… The image of the 'Rajput' is fast losing its glitter in the face of many concrete advantages received from the government on account of 'low' tribal affiliation. (Sinha 1962: 78, emphasis original)

Agreeing genealogically with Sinha in terms of the continuum, but disagreeing in terms of spirits and rituals, I will say that if it were only a case of strategizing 'upward identification', then the worship of Thakur Baba, for instance, would not have survived 75 years later, as it has. How then might we understand the vitality of 'minor' deities, if this is not simply a mirror of former or current social dominance or strategies of upward mobility? Let us take a further step or two closer to these shrines.

Varying Thresholds of Life

Unlike most other Hindu deities, there is no elaborate mythology connected to Thakur Baba. Instead, I encountered descriptions of ritual, mainly of three types. The first regarded troublesome ancestral spirits known as *preet*, those in one's lineage, particularly unmarried males, who died an *akaal mrityu* (untimely death). Thakur Baba is said to control such wandering spirits. A second ritual task involves requests for *santaan prapti* (childbirth) addressed to Thakur Baba, while the third involves healing, usually by expelling a weaker spirit causing the disorder.

A word of warning to inadequately experienced 'modern' readers, who may begin to feel naïve forms of scepticism, which they call thought, for instance, the idea that spiritual experience is fundamentally about 'belief', in 'supernatural' worlds, even as some among them wish to reanimate the 'agency' of the non-human, without knowing existing animations. Knowledge of a nation bleeds into secular and spiritual knowledge formations per se, so here let me offer one such global and local insight

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

about spirits. All spirits are not necessarily beholden to a teleological Hegelian *Geist*. For instance, an abstract spirit of modernity or a secular education does not necessarily result in the disenchantment of 'minor' thresholds of deified life, such as Thakur Baba.

In ways quite different from ideas of ontologically alien 'tribals', I met innumerable schoolteachers, non-governmental organization (NGO) and government employees, and other self-professed moderns who could be possessed by Thakur Baba or at least participate in the whispers that convey a manifestation of deified force. Such whispers are not self-evidently 'beliefs', since spiritual experience often contains its own forms of fluctuating doubt and conviction. In hushed tones, my closest research associate and mentor in some ways, at least in matters to do with spirits and humans in Shahabad, Gajanand, in his mid-sixties, from the low-status Namdev (tailor) caste, would say, 'I tell you from my heart, all this is *andha-vishwaas* [superstition].' Then we would reach a spirit medium, and Gajanand, a veteran performer in countless 'rural education and development' campaigns, would prostrate himself, saying, 'Baba, I have been troubled for years. What can I do to please my ancestral spirits?'

This was not simply the cunning of self-interestedness. Unbelievers, or the spiritually unschooled too may also sense the power of deified life. I was caught unprepared when I first heard the *gote*, a musical form associated with Thakur Baba. Accompanied by a *dhaank* (a *ran ka baaja*, or 'war' drum), a group of men sang from a supplicant woman's perspective, conveying a childbirth request:

O mere deva re, teri dhaakan kei dhamora mene ghare angana ri sun lai re…

[My deity, I heard the sound of your drum in my courtyard…]

O mere deva, mere Thakur Baba, din ugtai mene puriya karaiya chattiso pakavaan…

[My deity, my Thakur Baba, since dawn I have been cooking flatbreads and sweets to offer you…]

Deva re, mere Maharaje, mujhse devraniya jethaniya nai re, binne dhar lau mero banjhutia naam…

[My deity, my king, my sisters-in-law tease me, they've given me the nickname 'barren'…]

Mere Deva re, teri saranan gayi re, aava ki pataaiya raakh diyo, mere dinbandhaiya re…

[My deity, I beg you, keep my respect, I fall at your feet, friend of the unfortunate…]

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

It was less the words and more the extended tones and deliberate rhythm, slowly increasing in intensity, that I found unsettling due to some unidentifiable affect. Sensing my goosebumps, Gajanand whispered, 'I hope you are not going to become possessed.' The spirit medium who had been observing me closely laughed. 'It's nothing now,' he said. 'You should have seen my grandfather. When Thakur Baba came to him, he would roar. Even the peacocks in the surrounding forest would call back. At that time, people knew how to sing a *gote*. Everyone would be in tears.' This was not mere nostalgia. I too could sense these shifts in intensity, for example, in the generation following Gajanand's, who would mock the exalted operatic tones of the *gote*, even as they quickly bowed their heads by a few degrees and slowed down their motorcycles when passing a shrine for Thakur Baba. From the deity's perspective, we might call this a shift in their quality of life.

What does ordinary deified life look like within such byway shrines? Gajanand emphasized the way kin groups are linked to particular shrines:

> In a way, Thakur Baba is everyone's *poorvaj* [ancestor]. Almost every household has an untimely dead ancestral *preet*, linked to a *chabootra* [byway shrine] for Thakur Baba. Like our family shrine for my father's unmarried *kakaji* [younger uncle]. He had hair down to his ankles, my grandmother used to say. One day on a journey, he suddenly vomited and died. He became a *preet* and so my elders had a shrine constructed for him at the spot where he died. This was near the shrine of Thakur Baba in Tilpassi [an abandoned village nearby], so our *preet* comes under him.

Along with the untimely dead, the other key threshold joining Thakur Baba to specific households is the unborn. In a ritual and terminological overlap with *pir* (saintly/ascetic) shrines in popular Islam, a childbirth request to Thakur Baba is called *mannat* or *jholi-bharna*, describing a ritual in which a woman spreads her *chunni* (shawl) into which the spirit medium places a coconut, grains, or incense from the shrine, which are then ingested by the woman. Gajanand's father and his eldest daughter had been born as blessings from the incense of the Tilpassi Thakur. Gajanand described other rituals undertaken by a household linked to a specific shrine, marking further stages of life: *paalna* (a baby born as a blessing from Thakur Baba is brought to the shrine to be placed in a crib for the first time), *bacchon ke baal* (a baby's first haircut), *shaadi ka gathjoda* (during a wedding, a ritual knot is tied, linking the bride and bridegroom that is untied at the shrine).

These forms of life led me back to one of the oldest of anthropological curiosities: how might we think of the dead and the unborn and spirits and deities as participants among the living? Differently asked: what conception

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

of life would it require to neither entirely negate nor fully claim to know neighbouring non-human forces, including deified force? Elsewhere, in more detail (Singh 2012; 2015), I offer the term *varying thresholds of life* as a way of engaging ancestors, spirits, the undead, and the unborn who subsist alongside the living. I use *thresholds* in two senses: first, to denote points of passage across phases of life—initiations, births, marriages, and deaths—that often occasion ritual commemoration. Second, *thresholds* also refer to varying degrees of intensity that may continue after death, as a spirit is preserved or recedes, through possession or in visions or just in memories and dreams, enduring in different dimensions. As such, I neither doubt nor prove the 'existence' of spirits. A memory, a dream, or even a hallucination is also a threshold of life, which even the most hardened secularists may experience. Such a continuum of human and non-human life is not 'timeless' or static. Rather, it is composed of varying thresholds that endure or recede along rhythms of conscious and nonconscious duration.

Staying close to Thakur Baba, and related forms of the byway *vir* and *pir*, relations with deified forces are not necessarily 'fluid' and instead follow specific forms of force and contract. Contractual negotiations or renegotiations with a deity may involve offering forms of ritual obligation such as regular visits on a fixed lunar date, varied sacrificial offerings, and shrine upkeep. Other ritual alternatives may involve a 'minor' deity making a demand for a 'mainstream' Hindu ritual such as a visit to a sacred *tirtha* (crossing point or threshold, a term for pilgrimage sites), to convey a particular *preet* ancestral spirit to a more distant threshold, or a *saptah* (a week-long sacred recitation) by a Brahmin, also called a *katha*, narrating segments of the *Bhagavad Gita* or the longer *Bhagavad Purana*.

The Greatness of 'Little' Traditions: Forms of Unschooled Knowledge

Are these forms of knowledge not exactly what South Asian cultural theorists of an earlier generation called 'great' and 'little' traditions? My answer would be yes and no. Rather than an inexorable textual (literate) versus oral (non-literate) difference, consider four points that might help us to better understand the greatness of little traditions. First, the idea of deified hierarchies ('larger' and 'smaller' deities) is not in itself only a colonial or Brahmanical imposition. With Thakur Baba, while he is not subservient to any higher deity, even the most worshipful would call him a *chote devta* (a smaller deity) with a relatively delimited region of sovereignty. People in Shahabad often compare divine hierarchies to governmental

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

gradations: 'Your business is with the district collector but your request goes to the tehsildar.' As many theorists of South Asia, including Ashis Nandy and Shail Mayaram, among others, have argued, these lower thresholds of deified life often allow for traversals between what in secular terms would be called other religions.

Hashim Khan, a Muslim spiritual adept in Shahabad, in his mid-seventies, enjoyed schooling me into such traversals and the translation of terms and techniques:

> For a *mannat* [request], we [Muslims] have a *dua*, you [Hindus] have a *jaap* [recitation]. For Hindus and Muslims, a mantra is useless until you give it force by completing your initiation. An initiation takes forty days. It ends on a festival night. For Hindus, there are two festival nights to finalize an initiation: Shivratri [the night of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati] and Ant Chaudas in the month of Bhadon [the 'dark fourteenth', also the festival of Thakur Baba]. For Muslims, these festivals are Shab-e-Qadar [the 'night of power', on the twenty-seventh night during Ramzan] and Shab-e-Raat [the 'night of the dead', the month before Ramzan]. If you want to guard against a spirit, Hindus call the mantra a *keel* [boundary]. We Muslims call it a *bandish*.

These overlaps are often described as 'popular syncretism', expressing an 'inchoate pagan faith', said to be more fluid than modern census categories for instance, when communities identify themselves as 'Hindu-Muslim' or 'Hindu-Buddhist' (Nandy 2001: 5). Rather than taking such translatable, 'multiple' identifications as necessarily a sign of religious cosmopolitanism, or of an inscrutably inchoate 'paganism', I suggest that in such cases the contracts of birth, life, and post-death thresholds are conceived less with a covenant (an expanded 'descent' group) and more with locality-specific kin-based shrines such as Thakur Baba, a form of religious life that may allow for multiple pacts, even with a deity/shrine from another religion. As such, when households in those early censuses described themselves as Hindu-Muslim, they may have been accurately describing the contracts their household had with two or more shrines. With 'modern' (that is to say, theologically covenant-based) census categories, a contractual shift—say, from a Hindu to a Muslim shrine—begins to be considered a 'conversion' (Eaton 1984: 356).

So what, then, is the difference between 'great' and 'little' traditions? Differently asked, staying closer to the question of spiritual traversals between neighbouring castes and tribes, what is the shared source (or one among the sources) of human deification, for figures like the *vir* and the *pir*? Rather than emphasizing the littleness of byway shrines, consider the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

opposite—their participation in a ritual or mythic memory comparable across several religions (monotheistic, polytheistic, 'tribal'), the sacrifice of a deified human, as in the dismemberment of Purusa–Prajapati in the *Rig Veda* or the sacrifice of Jesus that inaugurates Christianity. Alongside the sacrificial imperative runs the drive to find substitutes. A lamb in place of a human is a substitution memorialized in several mythologies, including the story of Abraham. The *vir* and the *pir* are human sacrifices without a substitution. The warrior and the ascetic express heightened thresholds of life, although in different forms.

The difference, according to Nietzsche, is that the ascetic ideal turns violence 'inwards' as self-sacrifice ('Sacrifice yourself, not animals!' as Gandhi, a key modern proponent of the ascetic ideal, famously said). Rather than stressing their difference in life, the site-specific shrines of the *vir* and the *pir* express a comparable relation to death. These shrines mark the spot where they died, as we are told, or in the case of the ascetic, where they attained *samadhi* or *chilla*, a heightened 'blissful' threshold of life, also described as a 'conquest of death' (Parry 1994). In both the warrior's death and the ascetic's passage over thresholds, their power emanates from their status as human sacrifice. Many seek to access this power, to enable their own journeys across thresholds, to bring the unborn to life, or to bring order to the lives of neighbouring spirits. Contractual negotiation with these forces may require further intermediaries such as spirit mediums or sacrificial offerings and substitutions, for instance, a coconut (also known as a *khopra*, or a human head) in place of a goat or consecrated ash from shrines called *babhoot* in Shahabad (*vibhuti* in formal Hindi, a 'regenerated remnant') (Knipe 1989: 145). Thus, a particular type of death is linked to the regeneration and maintenance of life.

Varying Degrees and Forms of Transcendence

This is not to say that such forms of power are fixed or unchanging. The deified humans we may encounter in South Asia and elsewhere are partially mortal, with unpredictable lifespans. Which god or spirit is not mortal in this sense? The forces they exert may wax and wane and become lifeless. How do such variations and conflicts occur, not only as a result of 'secularization' but even within religious formations? Here, I will emphasize a resonant tension between and within South Asian religions, in ways that exceed South Asian boundaries. 'Modernizing' Hinduism, Protestant Christianity, and puritan Islam all turn against the 'lower' thresholds of deified life.[8] In Shahabad, as elsewhere, representatives of the Hindu right

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

as well as the left and liberal NGOs carry out educational campaigns against *andha-vishwaas* (superstition), a prime target of which are lower-level deities such as Thakur Baba, at best 'rationally' transfigured into *lok-sanskriti* (folk culture).

How might this conflict be understood in politico-theological terms? Following Weber, puritan Islam and Protestant Christianity are often described as forms of 'rationalization' (Weber 1963: 151). What makes higher gods more 'rational' than lower deities? Rather than increasing greatness or modernization, I emphasize the contest between different degrees and thresholds of transcendence, such that a 'rationalizing' puritan movement may in fact assume a more violently heightened degree of transcendent life, such as heaven, or a threshold of secularized transcendence, such as the nation.

Pacifying Warrior Spirits

In relation to the project of *Knowledge Nation,* I asked at the outset: how might one learn to count what lay before 75 years of a republic? How might a nation come to know its pasts, including forms of relatedness and conflict, as distinct from genocide and erasure? This could also lead us to ask: how do certain forms of knowledge debase the spiritual life of a nation, if we take spiritual life not only as a sign of metaphysical purity or Vedantic monism, or the transcendence of saints, but also as the everyday life of byway spirits? As we saw earlier, politically right-leaning literates in Shahabad assert their historical common sense, claiming that these were Hindus who died fighting Muslims. At a national level, Hindu right-wing groups often try to generate anti-Muslim sentiment with incendiary invocations of medieval Islamic invaders marauding Hindu polities. A historical pacifier to this logic is that the warrior castes and tribes of north and central Indian Hinduism fought not for a sacred covenant but as contingent war bands, as we saw with Kolff, fighting occasionally against other Rajputs or with the Afghans against the Mughals and vice versa. The minor definition of the Rajput warrior bleeds into the major one. I will say that the word *shaheed*, when used to describe Thakur Baba as a Hindu martyr, imports an unfamiliar force into this spirit, composed not necessarily of modern rationality but, rather, the concept of the covenant in its contemporary form, as nationalism, a spirit quite foreign to Hinduism, administratively 'international', traveling across small neighbouring kingdoms until very recently. This new valence only becomes viable with 'historical' education, the story of nations and states, in which spiritual elements are transfigured, often into more debased forms.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

Spiritual life, however, does not necessarily 'end'; more often, it morphs. Forces wax and wane; contracts are renegotiated. What place will Thakur Baba find in the oncoming dispensation, if not, or not only, as a 'Hindu' martyr? Old ghosts may show up unexpectedly in forms that may or may not do justice to their earlier thresholds of life. In what ways are nations settled? One form of settlement, elementary and yet at times too ordinary to notice, is marriage. In many parts of India and abroad, a groom in a Hindu wedding is still made to dress up in princely attire and sit astride a horse. Uncomfortably perched on a hired pony, most grooms cut a comical figure. And yet this overlap of martial and marital imagery still seems apt to many to express their passage across a threshold and the hope for the continuation of life. Maybe for Thakur Baba's afterlife, this is as good as it gets. Are we disappointed? Rather than theological or secular hopes for redemption, let us return to the grounding question of this chapter: is India a settler colony? And if not, in what ways do knowledge formations, outside and within schoolbook knowledge, express cohabited and conflicted pasts? Here, in the second part of this chapter, I turn to a different set of ancestral spirits, whom I might claim as my own, based not on my caste but rather through my occupation as an anthropologist.

Early Anthropological Spirits

Knowledge formations such as anthropology are not simply western imports into the non-West, just as the *Bhagvata Purana*, a pre-eminent text of Hinduism, first composed by Tamil Alvar poets, in praise of the deified Krishna-Gopala, the child from 'Mathura in the north'" (Vaudeville 1975: 108), would not be called a southern imposition on the north, or vice versa. Knowledge formations may be de-territorialized and then re-territorialized in new ways, as they cross territories. As anthropology came to be re-territorialized in India, what questions did early postcolonial anthropologists confront?

In an edited volume titled *Anthropology in the East* (Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande 2007), we find lively biographies of the generation who established the first departments of sociology and anthropology in India in the early to mid-twentieth century, including G. S. Ghurye, Irawati Karve, N. K. Bose, Patrick Geddes, M. N. Srinivas, and others. Even as these figures cannot be reduced to 'westernized' thinkers, at the same time to call this a 'non-Western' tradition of anthropology would also be a mistake, given the lines of descent, training, and inspiration, which stretch across colonial and cross-national geographies, for instance with G. S. Ghurye,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

who, hired just after Geddes in 1924, co-founded the first Department of Sociology India, at the University of Bombay. Ghurye did his PhD with W. H. R. Rivers and A. C. Haddon at Cambridge. M. N. Srinivas, after a period of research apprenticeship with Ghurye, trained with Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard at Oxford.

Even for those who completed their education entirely within India, the lines of inspiration were not only national, as with N. K. Bose, who, while studying and then teaching at the University of Calcutta, participated in the Gandhian freedom struggle (jailed in 1931 during the Salt Satyagraha, and then again for three and a half years from 1942–1945 during the Quit India movement) while also being deeply influenced by Franz Boas, whom he described as 'one of his gurus in anthropology' (Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande 2007: 296). How are the concerns of this first generation of anthropologists taught? In Indian sociology textbooks, it is often said that this first generation 'attempted in different ways to demonstrate the organic unity of Indian society' (2008: 245) as a way to bolster 'India's claim to self-governance (*swaraj*)' (2008: 108).

Rather than anti-colonial antagonisms, let us pose a decolonial question, to do with hierarchies 'within' national or social formations. This first generation of anthropologists was almost entirely Brahmin by caste, G. S. Ghurye being a Saraswat Brahmin, Irawati Karve a Chitpavan Brahmin, and so on (Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande 2007: 27). How did these caste elites engage with, write about, and act for or against their proximate and not so proximate social others, groups that would today be described as Dalit and Adivasi? Again, in textbook renderings of this chapter of the history of anthropology and sociology in India,

> tribal policy was the subject of bitter debate between Verrier Elwin (the 'protectionist') on the one side, and G. S. Ghurye (the 'integrationist') on the other, with N. K. Bose, Director of the Anthropological Survey of India in 1959 and Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1967–1970) attempting to strike a middle position. (Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande 2007: 39)

Ancestral Discomforts

In recounting postcolonial knowledge formations, let us go in a different direction than these well-trodden (and now perhaps politically dismembered) renderings of unity and diversity and protectionism and integration. Instead, let us say that this first generation of anthropologists in India was animated not only by anti-colonialism. Rather, as part of the postcolonial responsibility

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

of being part of, and helping build a new nation, they may also be read as implicitly or explicitly confronting a global, existential question that animates this chapter: is India a settler colony, like the United States, Canada, or Australia? Let us say that these first anthropologists were faced with this delicate topic, the displacement of the first inhabitants, on which many countries are founded. This was and is not only a question of the past but of the present and the future. How did and how would future neighbours live together in postcolonial India? How did these first anthropologists face these questions?

As we know, the most common term for indigenous people in present-day India is Adivasi (original inhabitants), a term that originated as recently as the 1940s, popularized by A. V. Thakkar, a Gandhian activist, as part of tribal self-respect movements (Hardiman 1987: 13). Rather than self-evidently dividing themselves into 'protectionist' and 'integrationist' camps, initially these first anthropologists were quite hostile to the term itself and the Euro-American style of settler colonial history that it implicitly or explicitly suggested. Criticizing Thakkar, Ghurye condemned the term 'Adivasi' as divisive, arguing that it was 'question-begging and pregnant with mischief' (Hardiman 1987: 13).

The 'question-begging' arose on three fronts. First, unlike specifiable 'first-contact' histories on other continents, most groups classified as tribes in India themselves claimed to have migrated to their present areas of residence, sometimes displacing other inhabitants in the process (Hardiman 1987: 12). Second, most tribes, even 'remote forest dwellers' and 'hill tribes', show numerous elements of cultural continuity with other groups in the region (Béteille 1977: 13). For instance, regarding central Indian Scheduled Tribes, the numerically dominant Adivasi groups even today, S. C. Dube argued: 'The four million Gond, the equally numerous Bhil, and the three million Santal were all regionally dominant groups and can hardly be described as living in isolation' (Hardiman 1987: 12). Finally, tribes and Hindu castes are not sealed off from one another, even in terms of marriage and descent. The Bhilala segment of the Bhils describes its descent from marriage alliances between Bhil chiefs and Rajputs (Augustine 1986: 6), while other lineages claim to be of Bhil and Meena alliances (Hardiman 1987: 16).

Alliances notwithstanding, these first anthropologists had to confront the question of how diverse social groups were 'assimilated to Brahminical Hinduism, and incorporated into the caste system' (Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande 2007: 215), and what this 'assimilation' looked like, if it did not consist only of coerced conversion. Incendiary as the question sounds,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

the answers offered by this first generation continue to be memorized for exams by students of sociology and anthropology across most Indian universities today, as with Ghurye's 'acculturation' (2008: 228), or Srinivas's canonical thesis on 'Sanskritization".[9] Are there any answers offered by that generation of scholars that I myself would want to memorize? I return to one such answer by N. K. Bose.

The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption

Is India a settler colony? How did Brahminical Hindus and Adivasis relate to one another? Rather than a 'middle position', I will say that N. K. Bose's answer sets out the simultaneous possibility of cohabitation and coercion, although in ways distinct from Euro-American settler colonialism. In his essay, 'The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption' (1941), Bose begins with his own rite of entry, a sacrificial ritual in central Orissa, performed 'on 16th January 1928 by the Juang headman of a village where the present writer had been camping for some time … so that their guest (the present writer) might speak their language with facility' (Bose 1941: 188). As Bose tells us,

> [t]he Juangs have started worshipping a Hindu goddess although in their own way … in nearly all respects, the Juangs are a tribe living outside the pale of Hinduism. They have their own language, which belongs to the Mundari group. No Brahmin or Vaishnava priest serves them; and they perform their marriage and funeral rituals all by themselves. They eat beef and carrion and are not considered by the Hindus to be one of the Hindu castes. (1941: 188)

And yet in their proximity to 'neighboring Brahminical people', 'the Juangs', Bose asserts, 'seem to be losing pride in their own culture and are adopting Hindu culture with a certain amount of avidity'.

How does this hierarchical order perpetuate itself? Who specifically enforces 'Sanskritzation', if it is that? According to Bose, rather than genocide, the mechanism of colonization or cohabitation, whichever we may choose to call it here, is the 'assignment of a hereditary occupation', as a *jati* (translatable as 'caste' and 'tribe'), often at 'the lowest rungs of prosperity' (Bose 1941: 193), along with a potentially violent prevention of upward mobility, as with the mythic example Bose offers, of Rama killing Sambuka, the 'Sudra who aspired to Brahminhood' (1941: 193). And yet, with warrior figures like Thakur Baba, we see that high and low, or tribe and Kshatriya, were not necessarily stable categories.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

A few years later, still within this first generation of postcolonial Indian anthropologists, Bose's student Surajit Sinha, who later wrote a biography of Bose, made Bose's thesis more dynamic, pointing out that rather than a stable 'high' Hinduism, many of the so-called upper echelons of the Hindu pantheon may be seen as initially 'tribal' or 'pastoral' deities, and similarly for parts of the so-called high Hindu social order, as with the essay on 'State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India' (1962) cited above where Sinha sets out a 'tribe–Rajput continuum' (Sinha 1962: 79). Let us return to the last line of Sinha's text quoted above: 'The interest in Rajput identification has considerably waned … in the face of many concrete advantages received from the government on account of "low" tribal affiliation' (Sinha 1962: 78). How were these affiliations decided?

The Order and Spirit of Classification: What Is a Tribe?

For anthropologists like Bose and Sinha, such references to classification were not just a second-hand archival invocation of colonial power/knowledge formations, since this first generation of Indian anthropologists were occupationally involved not only in scholarly labours but also in administrative jobs. As directors of the Anthropological Survey of India, a post held by Bose and Sinha respectively, and as Commissioners of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, they were also tasked with identifying which groups would be classified as such. How are knowledge formations to be judged if we do not take, for instance, Michel Foucault as the sole judge of the value of knowledge, in its relation to power?

I will say that these founding acts of anthropological classification need not only be thought of in a sinister light, as an exercise in governmentality, or just a new mode of making 'populations knowable', or in racial and physiognomic profiling. Is there a difference between the colonial and postcolonial spirit of classification? There may be 'continuities and ruptures', as sociology and anthropology essays were often titled in that earlier era. What are the continuities? The category of Scheduled Tribes is, in fact, an inheritance of the British colonial state, created in the aftermath of 'sporadic disturbances', as anti-colonial rebellions by 'forest-dwelling' communities were euphemistically termed, in ways well-documented by Indian subaltern studies historians.[10] An 1874 British legislation declared certain areas of India 'Scheduled Districts', requiring two-pronged administrative procedures of 'special welfare protection' and 'pacification' (Dhebar 1961: 37).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

While the term Scheduled Tribes continues intact into the postcolonial era, the term 'tribe' itself is not legally defined in ethnic or racial terms in the Indian constitution. In fact, as recurrent government reports in post-independence India tell us: 'There is no satisfactory definition acceptable to all' (Dash Sharma 2006: xi). In the absence of a binding definition, the term Scheduled Castes and Tribes 'denotes particular groups seen as socioeconomically disadvantaged, thereby requiring special welfare provisions for education, government jobs, and reserved electoral positions' (Dash Sharma 2006: xii).

What did postcolonial classificatory initiatives look like? The term 'primitive tribe', for instance, when applied to the Sahariyas and other groups across India, Eurocentric as it may seem, is not of British colonial origin, and emerges out of post-independence processes of deliberations. As part of postcolonial state initiatives, in the 1960s, the Planning Commission, the highest policy wing of the Indian state at the time, undertook a national review of 'Tribal Development' programmes (Dhebar 1961; Shilu Ao 1969). These two policy reports note 'a marked imbalance in economic development among different tribal communities' (Dash Sharma 2006: 4). Rather than withdrawing existing support to better-off social groups, the policies recommend a further identification of groups within Scheduled Tribes in need of land grants, government job reservations, and intensified forms of state support. Overseen by Surajit Sinha, seventy-four such groups in fourteen Indian states were identified (Dash Sharma 2006: xviii), under the new category of 'Primitive Tribal Groups' (PTGs), with the Sahariyas being the only group identified as such in Rajasthan.[11]

While this is not the occasion to evaluate the difference between ideas of primitive and modern, since the idea of the 'primitive' here is defined primarily as economic deprivation, or between state 'care' as welfare, or as coercion, or a mix of both,[12] I will say that the government reports authored by many of these first anthropologists in India are as articulate as any scholarly or activist writings today in speaking of 'partnership, not paternalism' (Shilu Ao 1969: 32) and in expressing passionate idealism. As Sinha writes: 'A nation will be judged within itself and also outside … by the informed tenderness with which we deal with the problems of the weakest elements' (Sinha and Sharma 1977: 21).

What more might we have hoped for from knowledge formations within a new nation? Here, in the early decades of postcolonial India, we might say that in small and yet significant ways, anthropology helped create a postcolonial architecture for the barest lineaments of a welfare state, in whatever fragile and tentative form this has appeared in the context of India.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

How do knowledge formations remain unschooled, that is to say, inhabiting and yet not only beholden to state formations? Subsequent generations of anthropologists in India, we might say, have continued to document how the postcolonial state, and economic elites, fail or cannibalize marginalized social groups, as 'political forces in the last few decades have not only arrested the absorption of tribes into wider society but have to some extent reversed the process', (Béteille 1986: 318), as many Adivasi groups are pushed further into becoming what Jan Breman strikingly calls 'wage hunter gatherers' (Breman 1994). Is this a failure of knowledge or of a nation?

In this chapter, I have traced two kinds of ancestral spirits—deified warriors and early postcolonial anthropologists—each of whom, in their own ways, played a role in settling a nation, and in making relations more habitable between unequal neighbouring groups, before and well into 75 years and more of the Indian republic. Do we, whoever we may be today, as scholars, fail or succeed our ancestral spirits? Perhaps we do not know what the counter-concept of genocide or slavery is, since even the best of our knowledge is unable to prevent dispossession in broad daylight.

Notes

1. For the similarities between ancestral 'policing' spirits in South Asia and East Asia, see Singh (2012: 393) and Wolf (1974: 134).
2. My sincere thanks to Professor Maitrayee Chaudhuri for closely reading and commenting on this chapter, in the CSDS *Knowledge Nation* essay review seminar, and for her helpful comments. As Professor Chaudhuri pointed out, in this chapter, I use the term sociologists and anthropologists interchangeably, partly or mainly as a result of a longer history, where a number of founding figures of the social sciences in postcolonial contexts consciously decided not to separate sociology (for example, as the study of the 'urban') and anthropology (as the study of the 'primitive') and instead kept these fields integrated within university departments. See for instance, Uberoi, Sundar, and Deshpande (2007). Rather than dwelling on this debate, which would be more specific to the fields of sociology and anthropology, in this chapter I choose to focus on a different 'minor' debate in the founding years of the Indian social sciences, on the term Adivasi, which I argue has a much deeper significance.
3. As Professor Chaudhuri also pointed out alongside the discomfort which I explore here, as scholars like Virginius Xaxa have pointed out in their response to Beteille essays on the concept of tribe, other communities, and communities of scholarship, in northwest and northeast 'frontier'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

regions of South Asia self-identified more strongly with the term 'tribe' (with its anthropologically distinct idea of segmentary lineage systems), in comparison to the term *jati*.

4. On the translation of the word *jati* as 'caste' and 'tribe', but also as *species*, see *Encyclopedia Brittanica*, 15th edition, *s.v.* 'Caste Systems' (Inden and Marriot 1974), in an entry written by the leading anthropologists Ron Inden and McKim Marriott. For an interesting article on the caste–tribe 'confusion', wherein the gathering of forest produce is governmentally assigned a tribal status but is socially seen as akin to a caste occupation like that of barbers, weavers, and so on, see Fox (1969).
5. On the figure of *ghazi pir*, see Shahid Amin (2015).
6. As Deleuze and Guattari describe it: history is on the side of the state. Even in their record of rebellions, state-based histories cannot grasp the sovereignty of the 'war band'. As they further clarify, this is a delicate distinction because groups that begin as 'war bands' can well morph into large-scale state formations, as was the case in South Asia with the Mughals and the Afghan 'warlord' Sher Shah Suri. In his analysis of the *kleftes* in modern Greece, Herzfeld (1986) describes a resonant but somewhat different process of discursive transformation by which the *kleftes*, situationally defined thieves, were recategorized and reified by the new nation state of Greece as heroes, while those who continued to defy the central authority were reclassified as 'brigands' (*listes*) (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 412).
7. Here too, I am grateful to my discussant Professor Chaudhuri, for this provocative formulation regarding national 'integration'.
8. In Islam, the turn for and against saints is more checkered than in Christianity. Doctrinal definitions of Islamic transcendence were often hostile to saintly intercessors, even in their medieval heyday from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries (Brinner 1987: 45). This 'tolerant' hostility took a more actively violent form with 'modernizing' Islam. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the Unitarian Wahhabis sought to destroy Muslim saintly shrines and networks in the Middle East, as did the secular Kemal Atatürk in early twentieth century Turkey (Brinner 1987: 51), and 'moral regeneration' movements in these regions that turned against Sufism (Lindholm 1998: 216). In South Asia, the Deobandi movement beginning in the late nineteenth century is most strongly associated with the puritan turn within Islam. Without organized state support, however, in either India or Pakistan, the Deobandis could only diminish and not erase the significance of 'saintly' Islam (Lindholm 1998: 217).
9. 'Sanskritization' is one of the founding theses of Indian sociology, defined by M. N. Srinivas as 'the process by which a "low" Hindu caste or tribal

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently "twice-born" caste' (Srinivas 1969: 6).

10. For an overview of subaltern and other approaches to recounting tribal anti-colonial rebellion, see Dhanagare (1988).
11. Rather than 'isolation' or cultural distinctiveness, three criteria were formulated for the classification of primitive tribes: economic backwardness and impoverishment, 'pre-agricultural' levels of technology, and negligible levels of literacy (Sinha and Sharma 1977: 2). As Sinha writes, most of the reclassifications concerned what he called 'secondary primitives' engaged in 'longstanding dependent symbiotic socioeconomic articulation and relations with the surrounding dominant peasantry' (Sinha and Sharma 1977: 18). In other words, rather than being remnants of an 'earlier prehistoric stage' (Fox 1969: 141), a group like the Sahariyas may be seen as

> highly specialized exploiters of a marginal terrain from which they supply the larger society with desirable but otherwise unobtainable forest items … an occupationally specialized productive unit similar to caste groups such as carpenters, shepherds, or leather-workers … the position of the group is more akin to the specialization of caste hereditary occupation geared to trade and exchange. (Fox 1969: 142)

12. I document the ambivalent outcomes of many of these tribal welfare measures including land grant programmes in central India, in Singh (2015), in particular in 'Mitra, the Caregiving State' (2015: 82).

Bibliography

Amin, Shahid. 2015. *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.

Augustine, P. A. 1986. *The Bhils of Rajasthan: Burdened by Their Past*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.

Béteille, André. 1977. 'The Definition of Tribe'. In *Tribe, Caste and Religion in India*, edited by Romesh Thapar, pp. 12–15. Delhi: Macmillan.

———. 1986. 'The Concept of Tribe with Special Reference to India'. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 27(2): 296–318. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000397560000463X.

Bose, N. K. 1941. 'The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption'. *Science and Culture* 7(2): 188–189.

———. 1975. *The Structure of Hindu Society*, translated by Andre Beteille. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Breman, J. 1994. *Wage Hunters and Gatherers: Search for Work in the Urban and Rural Economy of South Gujarat*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

Brinner, W. M. 1987. 'Prophet and Saint: The Two Exemplars of Islam'. In *Saints and Virtues*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, pp. 36–52. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cook, D. 2007. *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dash Sharma, P. 2006. *Anthropology of Primitive Tribes*. New Delhi: Serial Publications.

Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Denny, F. M. 1988. 'Prophet and Wali: Sainthood in Islam'. In *Sainthood: Its Manifestation in World Religions*, edited by Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond, pp. 69–98. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dhanagare, D. R. 1988. 'Subaltern Consciousness and Populism: Two Approaches in the Study of Social Movements in India'. *Social Scientist* 16(11): 18–35.

Dhebar, U. N. 1961. *Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission*. New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India.

Eaton, R. 1984. 'The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid'. In *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, edited by Barbara Metcalf, pp. 333–356. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fox, R. 1969. 'Professional Primitives: Hunters and Gatherers of Nuclear South Asia'. *Man in India* 49(2): 139–161.

Hardiman, D. 1987. *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Herzfeld, M. 1986. *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*. New York: Pella Publishers.

Hitchcock, J. 1959. 'The Idea of the Martial Rajput'. In *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, edited by Milton Singer, pp. 10–18. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society Publications.

Inden, R. and M. Marriot. 1974. 'Caste Systems'. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th Edition, Vol. 3, pp. 982–991.

Knipe, D. 1989. 'Night of the Growing Dead: A Cult of Virabhadra in Coastal Andhra'. In *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, edited by A. Hiltebeitel, pp. 105–123. Albany: SUNY Press.

Kolff, D. 1990. *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

Kramrisch, S. 1968. *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Lindholm, C. 1998. 'Prophets and Pirs: Charismatic Islam in the Middle East and South Asia'. In *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotions in Sufi Cults*, edited by Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu, pp. 209–234. London: Routledge.

M. L. Verma Tribal Research and Training Institute. 2004. *Baseline Socio-economic Survey of Saharia (Primitive Tribal Group of Rajasthan)*. Udaipur: M. L. Verma Tribal Research and Training Institute.

Nandy, A. 2001. 'A Report on the Present State of Health of the Gods and Goddesses in South Asia'. *Postcolonial Studies* 4(2): 125–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790120077470.

Nietzsche, F. 2007. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Carol Diethe. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Parry, J. P. 1994. *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shilu Ao, P. 1969. *Report of the Study Team on All-India Tribal Development Programmes*. New Delhi: Committee on Plan Projects, Planning Commission, Government of India.

Singh, B. 2012. 'The Headless Horseman of Central India: Sovereignty at Varying Thresholds of Life'. *Cultural Anthropology* 27(2): 383–407.

———. 2015. *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sinha, Surajit. 1962. 'State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India'. *Man in India* 42(1): 35–80.

Sinha, Surajit and B. D. Sharma. 1977. *Primitive Tribes: The First Step.* New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs Research Study, Government of India.

Skaria, A. 1999. *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.

Sontheimer, G. D. 2022. 'The Vana and the Kṣetra: The Tribal Background of Some Famous Cults'. In *The Routledge Handbook of the State in Premodern India*, edited by Hermann Kulke and Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, pp. 81–100. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Srinivas, M. N. 1969. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tod, J. 1997. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

Uberoi, Patricia, Nandini Sundar, and Satish Deshpande (eds.). 2007. *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

Vaudeville, C. 1975. 'The Cowherd-God of Ancient India'. In *Pastoralists and Nomads in South Asia*, edited by L. S. Leshnik and G. D. Sontheimer, pp. 17–46. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006

Weber, M. 1963. *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by E. Fischoff. Boston: Beacon Press.
Wolf, A. (ed.). 1974. *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Xaxa, V. 1999. 'Tribes as Indigenous People of India'. *Economic and Political Weekly* 34(51): 3589–3595.
———. 2008. *State, Society, and Tribes: Issues in Post-Colonial India*. New Delhi: Pearson Education India.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 05:03:57, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009596947.006