Introduction

Unpacking Punjab's Discontent

Any newcomer to rural Punjab who is otherwise acquainted with rural South Asia is likely to be struck by the appearance of prosperity evident in the towering mansions dispersed throughout the flat, green countryside and by the suburban appearance of the well-to-do areas in the villages. This impression is likely to be reinforced when visiting nearby market towns bustling with economic activity and traffic, where sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and fashionably clothed young men displaying their state-of-the-art touchscreen mobile phones are a common sight.

Beyond their upgraded physical infrastructure, the fact that these villages are well connected by road to Punjab's dense network of urban centers allows their inhabitants to commute to work in town and gives them a suburban commuter belt feel. The wealthiest villagers—farmers owning 10 or more acres—drive their SUVs or Bullet motorcycles to town to run shops and commission agencies and, often, also to participate in politics. Some even move to town for their children's education and only visit their villages on weekends during peak periods of the agricultural cycle. Laborers, when they are not working the fields, share motorcycles, take buses, or cycle into town to obtain daily wage labor on construction sites, in workshops, at wedding halls, or in the grain markets, where they are paid to carry heavy sacks of grain at harvest time.

In the 1960s, Punjab was the first Indian state to undergo the Green Revolution, a state-led initiative that brought about a transformative change in the region's agrarian economy. The Green Revolution led to a threefold increase in food grain production in Punjab, which has made the state the most affluent in India since the mid-1960s. This surge in agricultural productivity ushered in a period of growing rural prosperity, and the newfound affluence quickly translated into improved standards of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

living for farming households. According to Robin Jeffrey (1986), within a few years of the onset of the Green Revolution, every farming household in Punjab owned both a transistor radio and a tractor. By 1979, Punjab had universal electrification and the densest rural road network in India.

By 1970, Punjab's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita had overtaken that of all other Indian states. Alongside the introduction of biochemical and mechanical innovations, the Green Revolution was accompanied by extensive infrastructure and financial developments: electrification, credit expansion, improved road connectivity, and the creation of a dense network of agricultural produce market committees (APMCs) to regulate the trade in inputs and outputs. These policies generated significantly higher disposable incomes for farmers, particularly the rich peasantry, who were best positioned to access the new technologies and scale up production. Initially, rising incomes also stimulated domestic demand, spurring growth in agro-industries, engineering workshops, and new trades. Workshops producing combine harvesters, which are now exported to the rest of India, emerged alongside flourishing industries in textiles, steel, cycles, and beverages (Damodaran 2008; Jain 2016). Demand for services also surged, evident in the proliferation of private schools, banquet halls, and higher education institutions.

The material transformation of rural life was equally visible in the construction business. One observer noted that prior to the Green Revolution, most rural homes in Punjab were squat, single-story structures, many made of mud (Izmirlian 1979). In the years that followed, these were replaced by two- and three-story concrete buildings, symbolizing the broader shift in agrarian life and aspirations.

In addition to perceiving prosperity from the modern and developed appearance of Punjabi villages, the casual visitor might also be tempted to conclude that democracy has advanced significantly, rendering both caste hierarchies and the exploitative, servile relationships identified by Nehru and Ambedkar as defining features of Indian village life as relics of the past—or at least on the verge of disappearing. In rural Punjab—much like elsewhere across the Indian subcontinent—laborers and artisans were bound to landowning village patrons through hereditary ties. Among others, Chamar leather workers, Ramgharia carpenters, Nai barbers, and Mazhbi Sikh sweepers provided hereditary and caste-specific services to their patrons in exchange for patronage and a fixed share of the wheat harvest. The most degrading tasks were reserved for members of the "Chuhra" community, who were mostly agricultural laborers, although some were also assigned the task of "removing nightsoil" and cleaning latrines (see Chapter

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

6 for a more detailed discussion). Crucially, hereditary caste hierarchies were underpinned by oppressive economic and political relations based on inequalities in the control of land and means of coercion. Thus, in Punjab as elsewhere in India, only members of the British-designated agricultural castes were entitled to own land (Gilmartin 1994; Ali 1988; N. Gill 2024; Bhattacharya 2019). Moreover, members of these same castes possessed additional privileges, including the right to adjudicate village disputes and preferential access to the state. As throughout much of the Indian subcontinent prior to independence, this placed both sharecroppers and laborers at the mercy of exploitative landlords, to whom they were often beholden through debt relations.

This social order ran counter to the ideals of equal citizenship inscribed in the Indian constitution after independence. Caste-based status hierarchies violated these ideals by granting different rights based on caste. For example, a Jat farmer in Punjab had more rights than a Dalit laborer, as the former could own land, while the latter was barred from doing so under the 1901 Land Alienation Act. Although the concentration of land and power in the hands of a rural elite was not legally incompatible with equal citizenship, it undermined it in practice by making laborers and sharecroppers economically dependent on the landed classes, leaving them too fearful and subservient to fully exercise their democratic rights.

Half a century after independence, however, observers such as Dipankar Gupta (2005) have suggested that caste and landlordism are no longer the obstacles to equal citizenship that they once were. Thanks to improved transport links and economic diversification, lower-caste laborers and artisans can find work outside their home villages and need no longer depend on the landowners for their livelihoods. A minority—primarily among the Ramgharias, the Chamars, and the Nais—have even moved to towns, where they used their traditional skills to establish carpentry, leatherwork, and barbering businesses. Moreover, democratic institutions and the spread of democratic values and practices have, according to Gupta (2000), resulted in members of lower castes no longer accepting their subordination and, instead, using electoral mechanisms to compete against the upper castes for power.

Despite these signs of prosperity and democratization, there have been signs of discontent since independence, reaching a high point during the troubled period of Sikh militancy ending in the 1990s. Moreover, decades after the Khalistani insurgency had ended, at the time of fieldwork between 2013 and 2014, conversations in the street, in the media, and within Punjabi academic circles were invariably gloomy, dominated by issues such as

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

agrarian distress and farmer suicides, poverty, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, political corruption and criminality, pollution, young men fleeing to Europe and North America, and even an alleged surge in cancer rates due to the overuse of pesticides.

Since the 1990s, as a result of cutbacks in agricultural extension services and stagnant minimum support prices (MSPs) for agricultural produce, farmer incomes began to fall (Lerche 2011), and marginal farmers, in particular, faced increasing difficulties covering their operating costs and even meeting basic consumption needs and social obligations.[1] As a result, marginal farmers grew ever more indebted. Their debts were particularly burdensome because they were unable to obtain credit through formal channels and therefore turned to informal sources—*arthiya*s (commission agents)—who charged far higher interest rates. Unsurprisingly, then, marginal farmers together with laborers accounted for 70 percent of suicides in the state.[2]

Agricultural and industrial stagnation in Punjab has driven farmers across social classes to seek opportunities abroad (see Chapter 1). Wealthier farmers' children, with access to private education, secure study visas to countries such as Canada, Australia, or the United States, often settling there and starting businesses. Less privileged farmers resort to risky illegal migration to southern Europe,[3] doing manual labor until they regularize their status for better jobs. As in Uttar Pradesh (C. Jeffrey 2001), farmers invest in education hoping for government jobs, but with limited opportunities many educated youths face unemployment or low-paying, insecure work despite degrees in fields such as economics or engineering. Some work as underpaid accountants or technicians; others return to unprofitable farm labor, struggling to marry locally.[4] Many seek employment by paying brokers who promise access to coveted government posts; when these efforts fail, some drift toward alcohol and drugs, local politics, and petty criminality—such as drug smuggling and land grabbing.

Regarding the state of democracy, many people I spoke to at the time of fieldwork claimed that there was no such thing in Punjab or even in India overall. Dalits, for example, indicated that local elites were still able to prevent them from exercising their civil, political, and social rights. Their exclusion from landownership meant that they remained subject to a variety of exploitative political and economic pressures and were politically marginalized despite making up 32 percent of the population. But it was not Dalits alone who felt excluded from democratic processes. People across all social classes and castes alleged that members of a small, corrupt elite had captured the democratic process to enrich themselves

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

at everyone else's expense. They reasoned as follows: it was these people, in collusion with the police, who had created and profited from the drug epidemic that was ravaging Punjab's youth. They pointed the finger at the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) chief minister's family in particular, alleging that it was at the center of the drug trade and the escalation of criminality in the region. Moreover, they frequently spoke about a pervasive VIP (very important person) culture that had taken over politics, where politicians enjoyed impunity and privileges that set them apart from ordinary citizens. This culture was symbolized by practices such as the use of special number plates that allowed politicians at all levels—high and low—to bypass toll plazas and police check posts, reinforcing the idea that they were above the law. Thus, this VIP culture became, for many, a symbol of the deep-rooted corruption and lack of accountability that defined governance in the state, as well as a stark illustration of the erosion of equal citizenship, with not all Punjabis enjoying the same rights under the law.

This dissatisfaction with politics has intensified in the ten years since the bulk of the fieldwork for this book was carried out. The first clear sign of this discontent emerged when the anti-corruption Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) became a political force in Punjab during the 2014 general elections, securing four parliamentary seats and signaling a rejection of the entrenched status quo. Just over five years later, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)–led central government's controversial farm bills of 2020 further fueled public discontent. These laws, perceived as a threat to farmers' livelihoods in favor of corporate interests, sparked the largest and longest protest in India's history, lasting over a year until the laws were repealed in November 2021. The perception that the central government was indifferent—or even hostile—to Punjab's agrarian economy fueled resentment, particularly among Sikh farmers, who constitute the majority of the farming community.

Amid this backdrop of simmering unrest, AAP achieved a historic victory in the 2022 Punjab state elections, securing 92 of 117 seats and decisively displacing both Congress and the SAD–BJP coalition. Meanwhile, the SAD, inextricably associated with corruption ever since its previous tenure, has faced unprecedented marginalization, winning only three seats in the state assembly. Combined with the perceived high-handedness of the BJP toward Punjab's farmers and Sikhs more broadly, the decline of the SAD is now raising concerns about the potential reemergence of Sikh militancy. Under the Badals, the SAD historically served as a moderating force on Panthic (Sikh religious) issues and successfully integrated Hindus into its fold, fostering communal harmony. Its growing irrelevance risks creating a political vacuum that could be exploited by radical elements. This concern

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

has been heightened by recent international incidents, such as the murders of Sikh separatists in Canada in 2023, which many interpret as indicative of the BJP government's uncompromising stance toward Sikh dissent. Together, these factors have amplified fears of renewed instability in the region.

This book examines Punjab's political and economic crisis, linking it to broader issues across India. Punjab's agrarian distress, unemployment, and political corruption reflect systemic national problems. The agrarian crisis, marked by falling incomes and rising debts, mirrors India's failure to invest in agriculture, a challenge also evident in Maharashtra's farmer suicides. Punjab's employment crisis, where educated youth struggle to find stable nonagricultural jobs, parallels the stalled structural transformation in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, leaving many underemployed or unemployed despite having qualifications (C. Jeffrey 2010). These frustrations, driven by unmet aspirations, highlight India's developmental shortcomings.

Punjab's governance issues—criminalized politics and corruption—echo a national trend. Milan Vaishnav's *When Crime Pays* (2017) notes the predominance of criminally charged politicians, with 43 percent of members of parliament (MPs) in 2019 facing charges, up from 30 percent in 2009, as reported by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). In states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, figures such as Mukhtar Ansari and *bahubali*s exemplify the crime–politics nexus, where parties favor candidates with muscle and money, eroding trust in democracy.

The rise of AAP in Punjab, built on an anti-corruption platform, reflects a wider Indian pattern. Similar to the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) in Andhra Pradesh, and the BJP's 2014 national victory, AAP capitalized on public discontent with corruption. In Punjab, AAP positioned itself against the entrenched elite, leveraging its Delhi success in transparent governance. The BJP, while ideologically distinct with its Hindu nationalist agenda, also promised reform and clean governance under Modi. Both parties tapped into a demand for systemic change, highlighting a national anti-corruption sentiment reshaping politics.

By situating Punjab's crisis within this context, this book reveals how its challenges—agrarian distress, unemployment, and governance failures—reflect a broader democratic and developmental malaise in India. It explores the economic and political structures driving these issues, showing Punjab as a unique case of pan-Indian trends. It argues that the Green Revolution, while initially contributing to Punjab's prosperity, fostered the emergence

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

of a wealthy Jat farmer elite that consolidated its hold over the state, leading to economic stagnation, entrenched corruption, and the erosion of democracy, particularly for marginalized communities like Dalits. It also offers insights into how inequalities undermine democracy, not just in Punjab or India but globally. The next section outlines India's "crisis of democracy" and introduces an analytical framework, with an in-depth analysis in later chapters.

The Indian Crisis of Democracy

At the time of independence in 1947, India faced staggering challenges. Literacy was a mere 12 percent, life expectancy stood at just 32 years, and an estimated 70 percent of the population lived in poverty, with rural areas characterized by a hierarchical social order rooted in feudal-style relations and caste-based divisions (Guha 2011; Drèze and Sen 2013). As Sunil Khilnani (1997) noted in his book *The Idea of India*, the attempt to establish democracy and equal citizenship in this context required a radical break with the past. Both colonial and pre-colonial states had limited themselves to the extraction of wealth and revenue, transforming the social order only to the extent that it served these purposes.

After 1947, however, the Indian state embarked on a bold project to transform the country into a democratic society of equal citizens. This transformative vision sought to challenge deeply ingrained hierarchies and inequalities by leveraging the power of the state to reshape society itself. Unlike its predecessors, the post-independence Indian state became omnipresent in everyday life, expanding its reach into education, public health, land reform, industrialization, and affirmative action to fulfill the promise of equal citizenship and secular democracy. However, while the Indian postcolonial state successfully raised key social indicators, it failed to address poverty and deep-rooted inequalities adequately. By 2014, literacy had risen to 72 percent from just 12 percent in 1947, life expectancy had more than doubled to 68 years, and poverty levels had declined significantly, with the proportion of people below the poverty line (BPL) dropping from 70 percent to approximately 22 percent. Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the informal sector[5] still employed around 80–90 percent of the workforce, and India ranked among the fifteen poorest nations in terms of child mortality, female literacy, mean years of schooling, access to improved sanitation, and the proportion of underweight children (Drèze and Sen 2013). In addition, despite the emergence of megacities, India's jobless growth—deriving from skills rather than labor-intensive industries—

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

means that two-thirds of the Indian population still resides in rural areas with limited prospects. A significant portion of the population, primarily landless or land-poor, is still forced to migrate seasonally to urban centers, generally to work in precarious informal sector jobs (Breman 2009). Furthermore, the postcolonial state failed to eradicate social inequalities that relegate Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims to the margins of society. These groups also experience limited access to education and continued social exclusion; according to one survey, Dalits reported facing discrimination in public spaces such as schools, temples, and water sources in 25 percent of villages (Desai, Vanneman, and NCAER 2018).[6]

Why is it, then, that the Indian state, one committed to democratic ideals of equality, has not more successfully tackled the country's deep material and social inequalities? In his book, Sunil Khilnani famously suggests that populism in the form of caste-based and/or religious majoritarian mobilization is to blame. Indian populism mobilizes groups along narrow identity lines, framing politics as a battle for the rights and recognition of the claims of specific communities rather than as a collective effort to extend citizenship rights to all. This has given rise to targeted forms of clientelism, wherein political parties distribute state resources and protections to their own caste or religious communities rather than through programmatic policies aimed at the general public. As Kanchan Chandra (2007) notes, patronage politics ensures that access to essential services, such as healthcare, electricity, and running water, often depends on caste or communal affiliations. Ward Berenschot's (2011) study of Gujarat under the BJP underscores this, showing how the government provided hospital beds to Hindu supporters and denied them to Muslims. Such practices undermine equal citizenship, as those outside patronage networks or marginalized by caste and religious identity are systematically denied the protections and benefits afforded to others.

The reliance on patronage networks also undermines legal rationality by creating a law-and-order crisis in which state institutions are manipulated to serve partisan, caste, and communal interests rather than uphold impartial governance. Robert Wade's 1985 analysis of the transfer mechanism shows how politicians use control over bureaucratic appointments, particularly in law enforcement, to create networks of loyalty. By relocating uncooperative officials and appointing pliable ones, political actors ensure that state institutions, including the police, operate in their favor. This subversion of the rule of law enables criminal networks to flourish under political protection, leading to the increasing criminalization of politics. As Jaffrelot (2000) notes, competitive electoral politics has provided politicians with

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

an additional incentive to protect criminals to fund increasingly costly electoral campaigns. This has normalized the presence of criminal actors in politics to the extent that in recent years over 40 percent of MPs have faced criminal charges, including for serious offenses such as murder and corruption (ADR 2021). This intertwining of crime and politics not only creates a governance crisis but also erodes public trust in law enforcement and democracy itself, further entrenching inequality and undermining the legal rationality essential for equal citizenship.

Some scholars have suggested that the above trajectory was largely inevitable given the cultural underpinnings of Indian society. From this perspective, caste and communal forms of populism—and the clientelist or patronage politics that accompany them—are not deviations but rather natural extensions of Indian culture and values. For instance, Morris-Jones and Humphreys (1971) and Visvanathan and Sethi (1998) have contended that Nehru's vision of a democratic society centered on individual rights was foreign to most Indians, who were embedded in systems of kinship, caste, and religion that prioritized group identity over individual autonomy. Similarly, Sudipta Kaviraj (1984) and Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1993) have argued that Nehruvian ideals have remained largely confined to an intellectual elite, leaving much of the population anchored in social and cultural frameworks that are inherently particularistic rather than universalist. Echoing this sentiment, scholars such as Surindar Singh Gill (1998) have argued that the Indian constitution imposed a value system that was never internalized by the masses and was ultimately incompatible with India's cultural ethos.

In more recent years, Piliavsky (2014, 2020) has provided an anthropological perspective that likewise suggests that the ideals of equal citizenship are alien to Indians. According to her, Indian political behavior revolves around attempts to establish hierarchical relations of dependency with powerful patrons rather than around the quest to realize individual rights and equality. She argues that this reflects values of hierarchical attachment that, she alleges, hark back to an ancient tradition of kingly generosity and gift-giving. These values purportedly remain the cornerstone of political rhetoric, judgment, and decision-making in India. In essence, Indians tend to judge their politicians based on how generously they give rather than their policy agendas. Piliavsky, however, puts a positive spin on this phenomenon, noting that Indian politicians frequently distribute wealth through patronage, which contributes to higher voter turnouts than in countries where "abstracted, impersonal, asocial governance has prevailed" (Piliavsky 2014, 34). In her account, the possibility that poverty

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

may render citizens dependent on material support from vote-seeking politicians is not critically examined; instead, such support is cast as a sign of vibrant political engagement.

The problem with many such accounts is that they seem to ignore not only the fact that India possesses its own indigenous universalist and egalitarian traditions (Béteille 1979; Parry 1974) but also that many contemporary Indians clearly proclaim and struggle politically in the name of the constitutional ideals of equal citizenship (Sundar 2016; Corbridge, Harriss and Jeffrey 2013). Piliavsky's argument inadvertently echoes a familiar logic found in earlier interpretations, such as those of colonial administrators who claimed that Indians were culturally unsuited for freedom, or Louis Dumont's portrayal of Brahminical ideology as wholly dominant in Indian society (Dumont 1970). Such views risk conflating visible compliance with genuine consent. By emphasizing the persistence of hierarchical values and suggesting that ideals of equal citizenship are foreign to Indian political life, they overlook the deep structural and economic constraints that often compel people to rely on patrons—and to valorize them—not out of ideological alignment but as a pragmatic means of survival.[7]

Finally, the fact that Indians view political corruption as scandalous also indicates that they understand and adhere, at least in principle, to the ideals of equal citizenship. This is because the concept of corruption presupposes a distinction between the impersonal public sphere and the private one. People condemn corruption—defined as the private appropriation of public resources—because they believe state resources should serve collective national interests rather than private ones. This expectation, in turn, reflects a commitment to the principle of equal citizenship because it assumes that all citizens have an equal claim to state protections and public resources. Therefore, without the commitment to equal citizenship, the enrichment of a few through the public purse would be less of a source of moral outrage, as was the case in Mughal India, where the system of tax farming was officially designed to grant state officials the right to enrich themselves through public office (Parry 2000).

However, if Indians today understand and adhere in principle to the ideals of equal citizenship, why do their politics consistently violate these ideals? Moreover, why have they not made use of democratic mechanisms to help realize these ideals? Why, for example, as Drèze and Sen (2013) have asked, do they not use democratic mechanisms to demand policies that address extreme poverty? Drèze and Sen's answer to this question draws on a liberal tradition associated with thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and John Rawls, according to which democracy is essentially about the exercise

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

of public reason. From this point of view, democracy requires a public space in which information flows freely, allowing everyone's voices and concerns to be heard and discussed, and ensuring that political decisions reflect the shared interests of free and equal citizens.

According to Drèze and Sen (2013), this does not happen in India because the media fails to keep the public informed about matters of social concern, and therefore information does not flow freely. However, as Parry argues in his introduction to *Persistence of Poverty in India* (Gooptu and Parry 2017), it is far from clear that better-informed public reasoning will come up with the answers that Drèze and Sen expect and hope "that redistribution is unequivocally desirable, that present levels of inequality are unacceptable, and that the large numbers of poor are a scandal" (Gooptu and Parry 2017, 12). This is because addressing poverty would likely require state interventions and redistributive measures that threaten the substantial political, economic, and social privileges of the dominant classes that control Indian politics. These classes are therefore unlikely to push for such measures and are even likely to resist or block any attempt to implement them.

This last point suggests that to understand why democracy in India consistently fails to deliver on its ideals, we must focus on who wields power, how they wield it, and to what ends. This requires analyzing how state institutions refract the social distribution of power, rather than attributing the shortcomings of democracy to disembodied cultural values, as some of the aforementioned authors do. It necessitates understanding how wealth and economic privilege shape access to political power, influencing who enters politics and with what agendas. Wealth often acts as a gatekeeping mechanism, enabling those with resources to dominate the political arena and prioritize agendas that protect or expand their material and social privileges. Such gatekeeping lies at the heart of all systems of patronage.

These systems of patronage, moreover, are reinforced by institutional and economic factors. In contexts where institutional mechanisms for accessing state resources are weak—such as when bureaucratic procedures are opaque or decision-making centers remain inaccessible—citizens often rely on politicians to secure benefits that are difficult or impossible to obtain via formal channels. The gatekeepers, who are in a position to grant such access, use this authority strategically to ensure political loyalty and consolidate their power, creating a reciprocal dynamic where clientelism becomes entrenched. Moreover, economic conditions exacerbate the sheer scale of demands placed on the state and thereby also contribute to clientelism. This is the case where the state is the primary provider of jobs

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

and resources, as famously argued by Myron Weiner in the 1960s (Weiner 1962). In such contexts, vast sections of the Indian population rely on the state for subsistence and employment, overwhelming its capacity to deliver equitably. High demand on the state exacerbates patronage practices because it creates competition for limited resources, which politicians and elites can exploit to consolidate their power.

While Weiner's analysis reflected the economic and political conditions of post-independence India, elements of this scarcity-driven dynamic remain highly relevant today. The lack of sufficient jobs in the economy ensures that pressure on the state for employment and welfare remains enormous. This demand grants politicians significant power as brokers, enabling them to act as intermediaries that control access to scarce resources. These structural pressures ensure that systems of patronage remain central to governance, shaping both who enters politics and how power is exercised within Indian democracy.

This book examines the dynamics of political capture and clientelism in the context of Punjab, where an elite of Jat farmers—emerging out of the roughly 7 percent of farmers with landholdings above 10 acres—consolidated their political influence during the Green Revolution. With its emphasis on capital-intensive agriculture, the Green Revolution disproportionately benefited wealthy farmers, enhancing their economic status and translating this into increased political power (Frankel 2005; Byres 1981).[8] Over time, many of these farmers became dominant figures in Punjab's politics, leveraging their wealth and influence to shape governance in ways that have profoundly impacted Punjabi society and politics.

The book argues that while old structures of landed power and caste dominance have eroded—traditional caste hierarchies and agrarian patronage systems have weakened—new inequalities of power have emerged to take their place. These new forms of dominance, driven by economic disparities and the concentration of political power among elites, are equally detrimental to democracy. By tracing these dynamics, this book offers a deeper understanding of the structural forces shaping Punjab's political crisis and, hopefully, insights into similar processes unfolding elsewhere across India.

Research

This book is based primarily on ethnographic research, during which I established myself in a *tehsil* headquarters a forty-minute drive from the town of Patiala in the Malwa region. I selected the Malwa region because

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

it is among the areas most impacted by the agrarian crisis and where widespread Dalit landlessness exists. I wanted to examine whether and how democratic mechanisms allowed citizens to address these and other issues affecting their daily lives. My decision to focus on this particular *tehsil* headquarters was based on considerations of access and the fact that I had managed to establish connections with various notables and politicians in the region through a chance encounter. One evening, while I was staying at Punjabi University in Patiala, a young Canadian Punjabi approached me outside the university gates. Upon learning that I was interested in studying rural politics, he offered to introduce me to his in-laws, who were local politicians with close links to senior politicians in the ruling SAD. I accepted his offer, and his father-in-law hosted me for a night and introduced me to many local notables. One of these notables was a man called Balwant Singh, whose village, Nurpur, I visited several times a week and with whom I developed a close rapport.

To maintain the freedom to come and go as I pleased and to meet people from as many varied backgrounds as possible, I chose to rent a room in town instead of a village, where my hosts would have been more likely to monitor and control my activities. This decision was also influenced by my aim to gain a more comprehensive understanding of rural power relations, necessitating time spent in the town where politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen conduct their affairs. As such, this book draws inspiration from Clifford Geertz's assertion that "the locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages ... they study in villages" (Geertz 1973, 22). My objective is not to provide a complete account of the social and political life of a single village or several villages. Instead, I use particular events and issues both in town and across multiple villages as entry points to make sense of broader social and political processes in action.

Drawing from a well-established research tradition, the book is based on the premise that long-term ethnographic fieldwork can offer invaluable insights into processes that official narratives, statistics, and media reports often obscure. Social immersion for an extended period can expose social and political mechanisms that questionnaire-based surveys, opinion polls, and political science experiments—which test for predetermined variables—may not uncover.[9] This is because long-term engagement with the community leads to chance observations and conversations that could reveal issues not previously evident to the researcher. Moreover, these observations may raise topics that informants would be unlikely to discuss in formal or even semi-structured interviews, challenging the researcher to pursue investigations in unforeseen directions.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

Formal and semi-structured interviews were nevertheless central to my research. To obtain as comprehensive a picture of democracy in rural Punjab as possible for a single researcher with an assistant, I conducted hundreds of interviews with various stakeholders, including political leaders, *panchayat* members, local councilors, activists, scholars, bureaucrats, lawyers, policemen, businessmen, farmers, and laborers. However, some of the most valuable research insights and leads emerged from informal conversations with ordinary people in their homes, fields, streets, and other places, notably sitting areas next to tea or liquor shops. The stories and rumors I heard during these exchanges often prompted further investigation through formal interviews. For instance, if I heard about a violent land dispute in a particular village, I would visit the site and interview the parties involved and relevant officials with knowledge of the case.

I gained equally valuable insights through frequent serendipitous ethnographic observations. By being present in the right place at the right time, I witnessed events unfolding before my eyes. For example, during the 2013 block *samiti*[10] elections, it was sheer chance that I landed in a village where party workers from the ruling coalition had captured the polling stations while the police stood by and did nothing to stop them. This event, among others, confirmed stories I had heard during informal conversations and raised new questions that I then investigated further through interviews with people who had witnessed electoral fraud or held positions of power and understood its mechanics.

Following leads around town and beyond, I traveled to a dozen villages and locations within a 20-kilometer radius. My journeys took me into people's homes, government offices, grain markets, shops, restaurants, electoral rallies, and protest sites. I also investigated violent factional conflicts, electoral disputes, public resource and land disputes, caste conflicts, corruption issues, and water problems in various villages. At each site, I spoke to observers and individuals involved, including government officials. Because the details of these events were often disputed, I encountered a plethora of conflicting and biased narratives, where only some observers offered balanced accounts of events. To address this issue, I constructed plausible narratives by eliminating inconsistent and improbable details in people's accounts and contextualizing the information with what I had learned from the scholarly literature on political and social developments in Punjab and India. This book reflects my effort to present a nuanced and plausible interpretation of how democracy works in rural Punjab.

While I do not claim that this book offers a comprehensive view of Punjabi rural politics, I aim to provide a convincing and coherent account

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

of the processes that have made people unhappy with the political status quo. Given that I conducted research in only one town and about a dozen villages and spoke with a relatively small segment of the population, the picture is inevitably partial. Furthermore, because the public sphere in Punjab, like much of northern India, is dominated by men, male voices admittedly overshadow this account. Nonetheless, my data and analysis aim to capture processes that make sense of developments in Punjab and elsewhere across India.

The Chapters

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the new power structures in rural India by examining the rise of a new class of affluent farmer-politicians. This chapter explores how the Green Revolution and the state policies that supported it created a group of ambitious and politically active capitalist farmers whose interests eventually merged with those of the urban trading classes and who now hold a dominant position in Punjabi politics. This chapter suggests that the lack of economic opportunities beyond agriculture has made rent seeking and therefore politics one of the few viable paths for these individuals to attain or even retain their desired social status. By outlining the nature of this dominance and highlighting its consequences, such as corruption and criminality, this chapter provides a backdrop for the rest of the book.

Chapter 2 returns to the much-debated question of whether and how it might make sense to talk about caste dominance in village India. It examines how the Jat Sikhs, who have traditionally held a position of social dominance in Punjab, do not act like dominant castes because they now pursue urban middle-class lifestyles and are not interested in feudal control over retinues of dependents. As a result, Dalits no longer show their erstwhile overlords, from whose control they have escaped, much deference. However, this chapter also illustrates how the erosion of traditional forms of caste dominance did not result in substantial Dalit empowerment. Because Punjab's rich farmers have sought to secure their interests through politics, as illustrated in Chapter 1, they retain a stranglehold over village politics and continue to deny Dalits their share of power.

In Chapter 3, the focus is on examining how politically connected farmer-businessmen have impacted the effectiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)—the elected village councils in India—fostering grassroots democracy. These institutions aimed to increase political participation and encourage democratic engagement, thereby increasing transparency

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

and reducing corruption. However, this chapter highlights how state governments have stripped them of powers and used them to reward locally influential party workers. It shows how these interventions undermined local governance and contributed to preventing marginalized groups, such as Dalits, from participating in local decision-making processes. It also shows how, although ruling parties occasionally supported Dalit demands, they did so only on an ad hoc basis that failed to durably redress political and economic inequality.

Chapter 4 focuses on PRI elections and the issue of whether and how fraud, violence, and coercive mechanisms of perverse accountability shape them. While the literature has traditionally upheld the Indian state's ability to ensure free and fair elections, this chapter challenges this assumption, specifically in the context of PRI elections administered by state-level electoral commissions. By documenting cases of overt rigging and intimidation, as well as the use of perverse accountability mechanisms by politicians to manipulate voters, this chapter illustrates how electoral processes and even the secret vote cannot easily be sheltered from the broader coercive power relations that pervade social life.

Chapter 5 takes a closer look at how clientelism was ultimately complicit in the reproduction of social inequality. Some authors suggest that clientelism and informality can render the state more responsive and accessible to ordinary people. This chapter, however, shows how politicians who allowed farmers to encroach on agricultural common land undermined equality before the law and invariably tended to benefit the well-connected.

Chapter 6 explores the issue of Dalit political assertion. While scholars have documented how Dalits in India today assertively and sometimes effectively press their demands upon the state, this chapter argues that Dalit assertion in rural Punjab is often constrained by a range of factors that limit its transformative potential. This chapter demonstrates how, even though Dalits have asserted themselves both individually and collectively since the nineteenth century, their struggles remain largely localized and fail to bring about broader change. Through an analysis of the structural factors that contribute to the limits of Dalit political assertion, this chapter offers insights into the dynamics of power and marginalization in rural Punjab that go beyond concerns with purity-based discrimination.

This book argues that elite capture, institutional decay, and widening inequality have hollowed out democracy in Punjab and, increasingly, India. This cyclical self-harm erodes public trust, undermines state legitimacy, and radicalizes political demands. As the conclusion argues, this book traces how this pattern of institutional degradation and democratic failure has

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

fueled the rise of anti-establishment political forces in Punjab—including, more recently, a reported resurgence of Sikh ethnonationalist sentiment. I suggest that this trajectory parallels the broader national trend that has culminated in the ascent of Hindu nationalism to power since 2014. The fact that inequality and exclusion produce such forms of reactionary or insurgent nationalism is not unique to India; it echoes a broader global phenomenon in which populist nationalism has gained traction in the vacuum left by failed redistributive and representative projects.

Yet within this bleakness lies the theoretical possibility for rupture: protest movements—however co-opted or incomplete—remind us that alternatives remain imaginable. Whether these take the form of redistributive reforms, institutional renewal, or more radical reconfigurations of power will depend on the collective resolve of those whom the current order continues to exclude.

Notes

1. One study of six villages by Singh and Toor (2005) found that 78.4 percent of all farm households were indebted and that only 41 percent of debts were incurred for productive purposes, with the rest incurred for "nonproductive" purposes. These so-called nonproductive purposes included dowry and marriage expenses, house renovations, travel and brokerage expenses to send a son abroad, and sometimes just basic consumption needs.
2. According to Singh and Toor (2005), there were a total of 2,116 suicides between the mid-1980s and 2004. All except one were men, and 70 percent belonged to the dominant Jat caste. While farmer suicides have been an issue across India, one study by the Institute for Development Communication (1998) suggested that Punjab had seen a more significant proportional rise in farmer suicides than the country as a whole. It reported that between 1992 and 1993, farmer suicides in Punjab increased by 51.9 percent, whereas the increase was only 5.11 percent for India as a whole. In the subsequent period between 1993 and 1994, the increase in Punjab was 14 percent compared to 5.88 percent for the entire country. Most of these suicides took place in the Malwa region of Punjab—where I carried out my fieldwork between 2013 and 2014—and were mainly concentrated in the Sangrur, Bathinda, Ferozpur, Mansa, and Faridkot districts. See Chaba (2019).
3. Australia, Canada, and the United States were consistently listed as the ideal destinations. People thought that Europe—mainly southern Europe—was less of a land of opportunity than those mentioned earlier.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

4. As a result of the selective abortion of girls, only the wealthiest Jat farmers can obtain local brides, while the rest either do not marry or need to find brides from other parts of India (Kaur 2004).
5. The informal sector refers to the part of an economy that is not regulated by the government and is typically not taxed or monitored. It includes small-scale, self-employed activities such as street vending, home-based work, casual labor, and unregistered businesses. Workers in the informal sector often lack formal employment contracts, legal protections, job security, and access to social benefits such as healthcare or pensions.
6. Adivasis, similarly, face systemic exploitation and neglect. As Nandini Sundar and others have documented, they have been disproportionately displaced from their lands for mining and development projects, often without adequate compensation or rehabilitation (Sundar 2016). Forestry officials and state policies have further exacerbated their marginalization by exploiting their traditional lands and restricting their access to natural resources, leaving them vulnerable to poverty and displacement (Shah 2010). Finally, according to the Sachar Committee Report, Muslims, constituting approximately 14 percent of the population, face systemic barriers in education, employment, and housing. For example, Muslim literacy rates were just 59 percent compared to the national average of 64 percent in 2011, and their representation in formal sector jobs remains disproportionately low (Government of India 2006; Gayer and Jafferlot 2012). These systemic inequalities leave Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims particularly vulnerable to exploitation in informal labor markets and other marginal sectors.
7. The colonial ideology of Indian difference and Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) have both been thoroughly critiqued: see Metcalf (1994) for the former and Berreman (1971) for the latter.
8. As of 2005–2006, landholdings in Punjab exhibited significant concentration in the medium- to semi-medium-size categories. Semi-medium holdings (2–4 hectares) accounted for the largest share—33.51 percent of all holdings—followed closely by medium holdings (4–10 hectares), which made up 30.99 percent. Small holdings (1–2 hectares) comprised 19.16 percent, while large holdings (>10 hectares) constituted only 7.45 percent of the total. Marginal holdings (<1 hectare), typically the most economically vulnerable, represented a mere 8.90 percent, highlighting the state's relatively lower fragmentation of land compared to the national average (Singh and Bhogal 2014).
9. Paul Brass' book *Theft of an Idol* (1997) clearly illustrates how this holds in the case of newspaper reports regarding communal riots. Journalists,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001

he explains, most frequently write their articles about riots based on information obtained from the police. The problem is that the police are generally complicit in these riots and are therefore a particularly unreliable source of information.

10. Punjab's local government system follows India's three-tier Panchayati Raj structure. At the village level, governance is carried out by the *gram panchayat*; several villages together form a *panchayat samiti* at the block (or *tehsil*) level, which coordinates development activities across villages. Above this, the *zila parishad* functions at the district level, overseeing and integrating planning, budgeting, and administration across all blocks within the district.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 23:14:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009679053.001