CHAPTER 2

Caste Dominance or Elite Factionalism?

Scholars have often foregrounded dominant castes as the primary lens through which to study power in rural India. Yet, as this chapter will show, a strictly caste-centered lens obscures the class-mediated mechanisms that organize power. This is because today there is no straightforward overlap between caste, class, and power; substantial inequalities in landownership and institutional control exist within dominant castes such as the Jats. This chapter argues that while the category of dominant caste can be useful shorthand to identify communities that tend to hold power in particular regions, it obscures the question of who within those communities actually wields power and whether those who wield it do so in ways that advance collective interests or primarily serve their own class position. As Chapter 1 already began to show, in rural Punjab it is agrarian elites, rather than Jats as a whole, who exercise power—and they do so to the detriment not only of Dalits but also of many of their fellow Jats.

Dominant castes have stood at the center of scholarly analyses of rural power relations ever since M. N. Srinivas (1959) introduced the concept in the mid-twentieth century. He famously argued that power in the decades before and after independence continued to be exerted by corporate caste groups that he termed "dominant castes." Instead of the courts, dominant castes collectively adjudicated village disputes, and their influence was such that they could even expect people to comply with their voting instructions during elections. In other words, it appeared as if the advent of democracy initially did little to alter long-standing patterns of authority in rural India. However, over subsequent decades, dominant castes reportedly began to lose their grip over the areas where they once held sway at an accelerated pace.[1] The growing availability of work beyond agriculture, combined

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with improved transportation infrastructure, facilitated laborers' attempts to escape their grip (Mendelsohn 1993), and democracy appears to have provided them with the mechanisms to challenge inherited structures of social privilege. For example, Dalits became defiant toward their former masters on an unprecedented scale, formed political parties, and came to power in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, during the 1990s (Jaffrelot 2003). Moreover, dominant castes continued to lose interest in exercising social power as they exchanged "feudal" lifestyles for urban-oriented middle-class ones (Breman 2007).

And yet, despite these significant political and economic transformations, journalists and scholars often implicitly refer to dominant castes as the collective social agents that make Indian politics distinctive. Thus, Jats in Punjab (Martin 2015b), western Uttar Pradesh (C. Jeffrey 2001), and Haryana (Chowdhry 2009) are described as a dominant caste, as are the Bhumiars in north Bihar (Chakravarti 2001), the Yadavs in Bihar (Witsoe 2013) and Uttar Pradesh (Michelutti 2008), the Marathas in Maharashtra (Hansen 2001), and the Gounders in specific regions of Tamil Nadu (Carswell and De Neve 2014a). Hansen, Witsoe, and Michelutti, in particular, have highlighted how—in line with what Srinivas predicted—democracy has encouraged these communities to merge into larger coalitions to gain and benefit from political power.

Taken together, the preceding examples sustain the dominant caste vocabulary, yet the dominant caste framework, while providing a compelling framework for understanding rural power, can also obscure the ways in which material inequalities structure it. Punjab offers one illustrative case, as this chapter will demonstrate, in which political power is less a function of the capacity of corporate caste blocs to capture power than a result of rich farmers' ability to dominate local governance structures such as *gram panchayat*s, cooperative societies, and market committees. Controlling these and other institutions allows them to act as crucial intermediaries between the state and rural populations, mediating access to welfare, credit, subsidies, and, as this chapter shows, even informal forms of police support and institutional cover from law enforcement. This empowers them to maintain patterns of dependency that, while transformed, persist in new forms shaped by people's need to access the state and the rights and resources that the democratic state is meant to guarantee—signaling both continuity and change in the nature of patronage and control.

What emerges is not cohesive caste-based mobilization but factional politics built on vertical ties of dependence. This helps explain why, contrary to the vision of dominant caste unity put forth by Srinivas and others, caste

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groups at the village level are frequently divided politically, and that the same is often true at the state level—as is the case in Punjab, where Jat Sikh political allegiances are primarily divided across the Congress Party and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). Instead, factionalism reflects the enduring centrality of class-based inequalities—shaped by land, institutions, and the strategic distribution of state resources. At the same time, this chapter highlights how when caste-based coalitions do emerge, it is important not to assume that they reflect collective caste agency. Rather, careful attention must be paid to those who lead such coalitions and to what ends, to correctly identify where power actually lies and the interests driving these formations.

The Dominant Caste

To understand the concept, we must return briefly to Srinivas's original formulation. He coined his approach the "field view of caste," positioning it against an intellectual tradition that predominantly relied on Hindu textual sources to understand India's social hierarchies. This traditional view emphasized the role of ritual purity and the fourfold *varna* classification in structuring Indian social relations. Contrarily, Srinivas aimed to shift the focus from abstract ideas to tangible and observable power relations on the ground. He noted that social hierarchies were fundamentally shaped by relations of force based on concrete factors such as land ownership, numerical strength, and access to state power through education, rather than solely by notions of ritual purity. In practice, this implied that any community possessing a combination of these attributes could exercise social control, command respect, and play a pivotal role in resolving village disputes and conflicts within and beyond their own caste.[2] According to Srinivas, only the former untouchables experienced such extreme social discrimination that they were unable to exert influence. However, Shudras, despite being at the lowest level of the *varna* hierarchy—though not entirely excluded like the "untouchables"—could wield influence. In Srinivas's south Indian Rampura field site, Shudras even commanded respect from Brahmins.

According to Srinivas,

> A caste may be said to be "dominant" when it preponderates numerically over the other castes and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low. (Srinivas 1955, 26)

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He further explained that, particularly during the postcolonial expansion of the Indian state, factors such as education and occupation became vital for exercising power. The increasing availability of state employment during this period allowed educated village elites to bolster their social influence by obtaining government jobs. Srinivas posited that castes possessing all of the above attributes could be deemed "decisively dominant" (Srinivas 1959). In Rampura, the Okkaligas were considered decisively dominant as they formed the largest community, collectively owned more land than all other castes combined, and had the highest number of graduates with government jobs. [3]

In Srinivas's framework, numerical strength was significant because "the capacity to 'field' a number of able-bodied men for a fight and a reputation for aggressiveness are relevant factors in determining the position of a caste vis-à-vis other castes" (Srinivas 1959, 5). Having a substantial number of able-bodied men prepared to engage in violence enabled a variety of castes to assert themselves over others.[4] Conversely, numerically weak castes, lacking sufficient fighting men to defend themselves, often faced abuse, violence, and various forms of exploitation (Srinivas 1959, 5).[5] Furthermore, Srinivas anticipated that democracy would amplify the importance of numerical strength, as larger castes could leverage their demographic advantage to influence or win elections.

Landownership held importance in Srinivas's perspective because it implied the existence of a dependent clientele over which members of dominant castes could exert power. Affluent landowners typically employed sharecroppers, servants, and daily wage laborers, thereby controlling a dependent group that granted them considerable sway over village affairs. This relationship with their dependents transcended the workplace. In exchange for providing work, land, and housing, these landowners could expect loyalty, obedience, and even muscle power to advance their factional disputes.

Building on this summary, the most debatable among Srinivas's factors in this early account of his is numerical strength. Ethnographic studies from the first three decades after independence cast doubt on whether a caste needed to be numerically strong for its members to exercise power. Works by authors such as Alavi (1971), Dube (1968), Dumont (1970), Oommen (1970), and Pettigrew (1975) have highlighted how factional leaders wield power without necessarily drawing on support from members of their caste. In doing so, they indicate that belonging to a numerically strong caste does not necessarily grant members advantages in terms of power. Oommen, in a critique of Srinivas's work, asserted, "In order that the possession of

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resources [namely land, numbers, graduates, and ritual status] should result in the act of power being exercised, the group concerned should be highly articulate and politicized" (1970). In parallel, Dube questioned the claim that castes acted as collective agents. Her ethnography highlighted the role of dominant individuals who exercised social power through wealth and political activism rather than through caste.

Alavi (1971) and Pettigrew (1975) likewise highlighted the accumulation of power with individual village patrons who presided over vertical factions that crossed caste and class lines. In Punjab, these factions caused divisions among the Jats, leading Pettigrew (1975) to assert that considerations of class, caste, and even party affiliations were irrelevant to politics. However, while Pettigrew underscored Jat Sikh egalitarianism and negated the role of material inequality in shaping power dynamics, Alavi positioned class as a critical factor in his analysis of factionalism. Alavi noted that Jats seldom constituted unified political groups in the Pakistani Punjab. This was because affluent landlords within the Jat community could wield power by securing the political support of a dependent lower-caste clientele instead of collaborating with their Jat counterparts. As a result of their affiliation with diverse factional leaders, this lower-caste clientele also lacked collective unity. Alavi pointed out that the economically independent peasant farmers were the only group exhibiting a degree of corporate unity. Their unity stemmed from being self-sufficient farmers without a dependent clientele; their only avenue to exert political influence was through unification.

Even so, caste-based political mobilization across India since independence might still appear to vindicate Srinivas's emphasis on the importance of corporate caste unity. In a later essay, he claimed, "The numerical strength of caste groups has become critical in a political democracy based on universal adult suffrage, and dominance based on economic power and education alone was not enough. Dominant castes tried everywhere to increase their strength by ignoring subdivision among them previously regarded as important" (Srinivas 1966, 153).

In this passage, Srinivas seems to imply that democracy may have reinforced the relationship between numerical strength and dominance. The rise of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in states such as Bihar (Witsoe 2013) and Uttar Pradesh (Michelutti 2008), or of the Marathas in Maharashtra (Hansen 2001)—to name just a few examples—would seem to confirm this. These communities leveraged their demographic advantage to displace traditional upper-caste political elites, whose power was based on wealth rather than numbers. Surprisingly, as documented by Jaffrelot (2003), even the Dalits—whom Srinivas thought could never

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become a dominant caste—have managed to transform their demographic strength into political power in Uttar Pradesh under the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

Nonetheless, reference to dominant castes can lead to a misconstrued perception of collective agency among their members. Just because groups like the Jats or Marathas are overrepresented in positions of power does not mean that those who belong to these castes exercise authority collectively or derive equal benefit from its use. In the context of Punjab, for example, reference to Jats as a dominant caste can obscure how wealthy Jat farmers, not Jats as a whole, exercise and benefit from power. As we saw in Chapter 1, the actions of these elites have adversely affected Punjab's economic, social, and political development, leaving Dalits and most Jat Sikhs struggling to sustain their livelihoods. The following discussion examines how these developments manifest at the village level.

Jat Sikhs as a Dominant Caste?

Jat Sikhs in Punjab are often considered a dominant caste due to their substantial influence on the region's economy and politics (A. Kumar 2020; Martin 2015b; Ram 2007). In the forthcoming analysis, it becomes clear that this influence is not deployed collectively by the Jat community. Instead, it is a distinct stratum of affluent Jat Sikh landowners endowed with political connections who predominantly possess this influence. Significantly, these landowners exercise their influence to uphold the interests of their socioeconomic class, often at the expense of poorer Jat farmers. To explore how caste and class power are actually configured on the ground, I use the pseudonymously named village of Nurpur as an entry point. Upon initial observation, the Jats in Nurpur might appear to exemplify what Srinivas described as a decisively dominant caste. According to the 2008 census—which categorized the village population into two groups—there were 273 Jats and 171 Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Sansis in this case).[6] Besides comprising the majority of the population, the Jats owned all the land, were more educated than the landless SCs, and were more likely to have government jobs (as teachers or army officers) and hold public office. Furthermore, the fact that, at least at the time of fieldwork, they were not divided into factions suggested that they could exercise power as a unified block.[7]

However, like Mendelsohn's Ahirs, few Nurpur Jats seemed interested in exercising the sort of social control described by Srinivas. Unlike in the villages of neighboring Haryana (Chowdhry 2004), the Jats of Nurpur—

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like those of most neighboring villages—never formed caste *panchayat*s to regulate either intra- or extra-caste matters, and their general attitude was one of individual- and family-centered pragmatism. Moreover, like their counterparts in western Uttar Pradesh (Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffrey 2011), they aspired to urban middle-class lifestyles and were keen to settle in town. Thus, despite many of them expressing an attachment to rural life, most viewed urban living as superior. As in Uttar Pradesh, the richest Jats built large, modern homes that they explicitly associated with urban living. Moreover, the young Jats I first met were more interested in taking me on motorcycle rides around town or to the new shopping mall an hour away than in showing me their village, which they believed was not worth seeing. I also soon learned that most Jat farmers who could afford it preferred to move to town and use their village homes as weekend getaways.

Two rich local farmers—both of whom owned commission agencies and had relocated to the town to provide better educational opportunities for their children—made it clear to me that they regarded urban life as superior. They praised the town's atmosphere (*mahol*), attributing it to the educated population and cleaner environment. In contrast, they claimed that Nurpur was a dusty and dirty place with a rotten (*kharab*) atmosphere characterized by crime, intrigue, and envy. One also mentioned that the town offered a safer environment for their children, who were less likely to encounter drug and alcohol users than in Nurpur.

Because villages are no longer the focal point of social and economic activity they once were, Jat Sikhs—much like the Anavil Brahmans in Gujarat (Breman 2007)—appeared to have abdicated their erstwhile control over village affairs. In Nurpur, this abdication gave the superficial impression that the local SCs had liberated themselves from their clutches and prospered. The Nurpur SCs belonged to the Sansi caste, whom the British had placed under the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 due to their alleged involvement in crime and the so-called Mutiny (Major 1999). This classification entrenched negative stereotypes against them, even though, for most Sansis, this was unjustified. However, some Nurpur Sansis did happen to be involved in illegal trades. By 2013–2014, the profits from drug smuggling had enabled around twelve Sansi households to construct homes as well-built and spacious as those of average Jat Sikh farmers, and in some instances, even within the Jat section of the village from which they had historically been excluded.[8] After spending several months in Nurpur, I discovered that some local Jat Sikh farmers were even indebted to them.

The Nurpur Jats strongly disapproved of these developments. Many of them told me that their ancestors had invited the Sansis into the village

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as servants around the time of partition and claimed that it was thanks to them that they even possessed roofs over their heads. An elderly Jat even mentioned that the Sansis' continued residence in the village had depended on good behavior until just a few decades ago. He elaborated that any misbehaving Sansi and their entire family would have been banished from the village back then. He then juxtaposed those times with the present, where Sansis could engage in criminal activities and tarnish Nurpur's reputation with impunity.

But it was not just the Nurpur Jat Sikhs who were unhappy about the newfound independence of the SCs. Even in villages where the latter had not noticeably prospered as some Sansis had done, I heard Jat Sikhs alleging that members of the SCs were now better off and even more powerful than most farmers. They claimed that the state was subservient to Dalit interests and provided them with all sorts of welfare schemes while farmers struggled under a growing debt burden.

However, Dalit economic independence, social insubordination, and even increased political assertiveness did not warrant Jat claims about their newfound prosperity and political clout. The reality is that most SCs, including the Nurpur Sansis, possessed little more than their labor power and subsisted mostly on intermittent and low-paying daily wage labor. Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter 1, rich Jat farmers maintained their grip on state politics and received far more state support through agricultural subsidies than the SCs through welfare programs.

An alternative explanation is that the increased independence of the SCs reflects processes of proletarianization due to the introduction of labor-displacing mechanical technologies at the time of the Green Revolution (Byres 1981). One of the main outcomes of these technologies was that they enabled affluent farmers to supplant sharecroppers with tractors (Chakravarti 2001), thereby liberating them from the strenuous task of overseeing personnel and thus allowing them to pursue more urban-oriented lifestyles. Jodhka (2012), based on fieldwork in the neighboring state of Haryana, reports that by the 1980s, wealthier farmers had largely stopped using long-term sharecroppers, and nearly all farmers sowed and harvested their fields employing a mix of local and migrant daily wage laborers. He also demonstrates how, in Punjab and Haryana, a steady increase in the availability of combine harvesters since the 1970s significantly reduced the demand for daily wage labor by shortening the harvest season by several weeks.[9] When combine harvesters first appeared, farmers found it difficult to avail themselves of those in time for the harvest and were forced to attract their owners with chicken-and-whiskey parties. However, by 2013,

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as mentioned in Chapter 1, there was an oversupply of them, and no farmer needed to depend on laborers to harvest grain.[10] If, over the coming years, farmers adopt new mechanized technologies for paddy transplantation and weeding, their reliance on labor will likely decline even further.

Jodhka's study of two Haryanvi villages also showed a significant decrease in the number of people working as farm servants (*siri*s) since the 1980s. Wealthy farmers with 10 or more acres often hire *siri*s, primarily because they keep dairy animals. These farmers—like all Jats—place a premium on keeping buffaloes, whose milk they regard as superior to cow's milk and which they use to produce yogurt, buttermilk (*lassi*), and clarified butter (*ghee*). These dairy products are prized components of their diet and are generously offered to valued guests, including flatbreads soaked in clarified butter, warm milk in the winter, cold *lassi* in the summer, and homemade yogurt for dessert. However, ensuring a consistent supply of these products demands significant labor. Taking care of dairy animals involves, among other tasks, cutting and shredding fodder from the fields to feed them, milking and bathing them, cleaning their stalls, and processing the milk into its various derivatives. Therefore, farmers who can afford to do so hire *siri*s to handle the work.

In recent decades, some farmers have set up commercial dairies. However, most wealthy farmers have either reduced the number of livestock they keep or have stopped keeping any entirely, increasingly opting to purchase milk from milkmen instead. This change seems to be related to their growing reluctance to hire *siri*s. Jodhka (2012) reports that while in the 1980s both Haryanvi villages he studied had a total of around seventy to seventy-five *siri*s, by the 2000s there were only ten to fifteen *siri*s in one village and between twenty and twenty-five in the other. My research suggests that this reduction is connected to the fact that affluent farmers now view the hiring and management of *siri*s as a costly inconvenience incompatible with their increasingly urban-oriented lifestyles.

Through my discussions with both farmers and laborers, it became evident that finding, hiring, and retaining laborers willing to work as *siri*s had become increasingly challenging and costly. Due to enhanced transportation options and increased opportunities for daily wage labor in adjacent urban areas, Punjabi laborers could increasingly avoid agricultural labor. For example, Sansi laborers from Nurpur could travel by motorbike or bus to construction sites in towns or nearby villages. They could also conveniently travel to a nearby PepsiCo plant where Lays crisps were made, horticultural fields in neighboring villages, agribusiness facilities and mechanical workshops in towns, and—during wedding seasons—wedding

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venues where they worked in catering. During the two primary harvest seasons, many found employment in fields outside their villages and grain markets, filling gunny sacks with grain before loading them onto trucks.

Most of the laborers I interviewed during fieldwork considered attached farm labor a last resort, to be taken only when a lump sum of cash was required. All expressed a preference for daily wage labor, even though it was often only intermittently available. They almost unanimously viewed attached farm labor as being at the mercy of domineering and abusive employers. One former attached servant told me that his employer had made him work from dawn until well after dusk, subjected him to daily verbal abuse, and even struck him once for taking a break to nap. He also complained about being served cold leftovers in the courtyard outside the house while his masters enjoyed fresh meals inside, seated on comfortable sofas.

Nonetheless, due to the unavailability of daily wage labor throughout the year, laborers in need of cash sometimes still opted for attached farm labor. Through my survey of Nurpur, I found that Sansi laborers obtained an average of fifteen to twenty days of paid work per month, with some getting as few as ten days. Assuming they worked fifteen days per month at ₹250 per day, their earnings could be estimated at around ₹4,000 per month and ₹48,000 per year. While this might have sufficed for necessities, covering additional expenses such as medical bills, home expansions, or purchasing a motorcycle required finding a farmer willing to provide an advance in exchange for their labor.

During fieldwork in 2013–2014, farmers were willing to provide advances worth between ₹60,000 and ₹1,00,000 per year, along with daily meals, cups of tea, and often additional loans upon request. Due to the shortage of willing *siri*s, these advances were significantly higher, even adjusted for inflation, than just a decade earlier, when farmers could attract attached farm servants with advances for no more than ₹20,000.[11] None of the *siri*s and ex-*siri*s I had the opportunity to interview or spend time with had taken these advances intending to enter a lifelong employment relationship. They were generally just as eager to extricate themselves from these relationships as they were hesitant to enter them in the first place. In other words, they regarded them as contractual, time-limited relationships rather than long-term ones that might stretch across generations. This was evident because *siri*s typically sought to repay their advances quickly and frequently shifted employers to find better conditions and pay.

I spoke with two of the four Sansi *siri*s from Nurpur, and both made it clear that they were doing their best to repay their advances and regain their

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freedom. One was a middle-aged Sansi whom a Nurpur Jat had employed for four years. He told me that by subsisting on his employer's meals and with his siblings' help for extra expenses, he had saved enough money to rebuild his house. He planned to leave his employer at the end of 2014 and take a few weeks of rest to recover from the hardship of attached labor before re-entering the market for daily wage labor. The other was a young Sansi who, in addition to a ₹40,000 advance, had obtained a loan worth ₹70,000 from a farmer in a neighboring village. He told me that since his father had a job as a security guard (*chowkidar*) in a rice mill in town and his mother worked as a domestic servant in Patiala—commuting daily by bus—they could help him repay the loan. He hoped to be able to leave his employer within the next three years and then earn his livelihood from daily wage labor "like everyone else."[12]

Others may not have been in as much of a rush to exit attached farm work, but they nevertheless frequently shifted employers in search of better conditions and pay. As a result, farmers often employed different *siri*s throughout their lives. From my survey, I gathered that only five Jat households in Nurpur employed *siri*s, and I found that they had employed several different people over the years. They told me they had employed Nurpur Sansis, Ravidasias, and Mazhbi Sikhs from nearby villages and Biharis and Uttar Pradeshis when they were available—the latter were increasingly difficult to obtain because the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in their home states meant that they had less incentive to migrate to Punjab for work.

Nearly every Jat Sikh farmer capable of hiring *siri*s resented these developments. They consistently complained about the increasing difficulty and expense of finding and retaining good *siri*s. Many also claimed that laborers had become lazy and disloyal and accused them of running away with their advances without repaying their debts. One elderly farmer explained that while Biharis and Uttar Pradeshis had occasionally run away, it had been unheard of for local Punjabi *siri*s to do so. Biharis, he explained, could flee to their home states hundreds of miles away without fear of being tracked down, whereas local runaways could be easily located and punished. However, he went on, the threat of punishment no longer seemed to deter local *siri*s from reneging on their debts.

Like other Jats concerned with these developments, he blamed state laws and policies in favor of SCs and singled out what he considered harmful and senseless laws against bonded labor. One of the laws he referred to was the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976, which stipulates a maximum sentence of three years in prison and a fine of ₹2,000 for

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those who force someone to perform bonded labor and those who make monetary advances or provide loans that bind employees to their employers in a debt relation. The other was Section 374 of the Indian Penal Code, which recognizes the crime of unlawful compulsory labor and punishes it with a sentence of imprisonment up to one year, a fine, or both. Like other farmers, he thought these laws were both harmful and senseless because they allowed laborers to file criminal charges against employers merely because they had given them an advance in exchange for their labor. He saw no situation where laborers were being deprived of their freedom. *Siri*s, he explained, took out advances of their own free will, and they could freely shift to another employer if they found one willing to provide them with an advance with which they could compensate their current employer.

While he and other farmers may have overstated the extent to which *siri*s were using the law against their employers, their concerns were not entirely baseless. In Nurpur, no local or foreign *siri* had ever run away, but I learned about runaway *siri*s in nearby villages. For example, in a village that I will call Mavi—located 6 miles from Nurpur—the village president (*sarpanch*) told me how in 2009 some Dalit "agitators" had instigated three local *siri*s to use the laws against bonded labor to place charges against their employers. While these charges did not result in fines or jail sentences, they allowed the *siri*s in question to leave their employers without repaying their debts. In response, the Jats united in disciplining the laborers by imposing a collective boycott on all Dalits in Mavi. This involved an agreement never to hire Mavi Dalits as *siri*s, to cap daily wages in the village at ₹200, to prevent the NREGA scheme from ever being implemented, and to ensure that no Dalit ever occupied the seat of *sarpanch*—even when the seat was subject to SC reservations.

It might be tempting to interpret this boycott as evidence of persistent Jat domination, but that would entail ignoring that the boycott was implemented by wealthy Jat farmers rather than the Jats collectively. Because I was not present when the boycott took place, I could not determine whether small farmers and marginal cultivators supported it. Still, I would venture that their support was not a decisive factor in implementing the boycott because they did not hire *siri*s. Moreover, highlighting this event as proof of the existence of persisting caste dominance would entail ignoring that Jats no longer have the same authority over Dalits as they may have had, and that the latter can even consider placing charges against them and not repaying their debts to them. It would also entail ignoring that such boycotts have generally taken place where Dalits have already made political and economic gains at the expense of Jats (Jodhka and Louis 2003).

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This particular case also seems to suggest that labor boycotts were not necessarily always devastating to Dalits. After I spoke to the *sarpanch*, some of the Dalits I interviewed indicated that the boycott was inconvenient but was not a decisive blow to their livelihoods. They said that because it did not extend beyond the confines of Mavi, they could still find work outside the village—either as daily wage laborers or even *siri*s. They also told me that the bar on their position of *sarpanch* and on implementing the NREGA scheme was nothing new. As in other villages (see Chapter 3), the Jats had never allowed the Dalits to exert any influence over local government and had prevented the NREGA scheme from being implemented.

Finally, there is also evidence to suggest that wealthy Jat farmers sometimes failed to join forces in a way that would allow them to discipline labor effectively, including through boycotts. I came across instances where leaders of opposing factions even incited each other's *siri*s to flee and sue their employers for engaging in debt bondage. A case in point is from the village of Amarpur in the year 2000. Gurmeet Singh and his siblings, who collectively owned 200 acres of land and were thus among the most affluent farmers in the area, lost eight *siri*s this way. The family, who were supporters of the Congress Party, saw their SAD rivals persuade all eight *siri*s—most of whom were Mazhbi Sikh Dalits—to file charges against their employers and abandon their jobs without settling their debts. These rivals even assured physical protection to the *siri*s if Gurmeet attempted any violent retaliation and thwarted Gurmeet's efforts to impose a boycott on the Dalits who had participated in the incident.

Much like his Mavi counterparts, Gurmeet was neither fined nor imprisoned, yet he endured a financial setback of ₹2,00,000. In an informal conversation, he shared with me that if such an event were to occur today, his losses could reach approximately ₹10 crores. He stated that this was why farmers like him had to think hard before employing *siri*s. He expressed that the state had given Dalits so much power that farmers like him felt completely helpless. The only available recourse against runaway laborers was to attempt to damage their reputation, but he asserted that this approach was not always fully effective, as they would invariably find some form of employment.

Gatekeeping as Power

The discussion up until now offers limited proof of unity among the Jats and even a lack of ability or desire to govern the lower castes as they used to. Economic expansion and diversification, primarily driven by the Green

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Revolution and its subsequent impacts, have diminished the once-prevalent mutual hierarchical interdependence between dominant and subordinate castes. The mechanization of agriculture has provided farmers with the opportunity to evade the headache of employing and managing laborers and sharecroppers, thus enabling them to chase increasingly urban, middle-class lifestyles. Conversely, these advancements have also allowed primarily SC laborers to break free from the Jats' control.

However, the situation in Nurpur, although unique in certain aspects, demonstrates how individual Jat Sikh farmers continue to exert influence over Dalits through their role as "gatekeepers" (Pattenden 2011). These gatekeepers can either deny or provide access to state protection and resources. As will be evident in the subsequent discussion, such gatekeepers exercise their influence as Jats or not merely as landowners but primarily through their connections with the state.

For instance, Balwant Singh, introduced in Chapter 1, was not the most prominent landowner in Nurpur, nor did he encapsulate the collective interests of Nurpur's Jats. Yet he had managed to control the village *panchayat* since the 1970s. The most significant landowner in the village owned 40 acres, while Balwant owned 12. However, the former was only able to translate this landownership advantage into political and social power until the mid-1970s. Beyond that point, Balwant's influence grew steadily until it expanded beyond Nurpur's boundaries.

Balwant, a busy man with concerns larger than engaging in a conversation with me, did not share his story personally. Yet his tale was well known throughout the region, a narrative I pieced together through talks with other Nurpur residents. His rise had more to do with support from the Sansi community and political connections rather than the agreement of his fellow Jats. His father had initiated the family's journey to political prominence by branching out into the hooch (*desi daru*) business in an unequal alliance with the Sansis. To cater to the burgeoning public demand for liquor, he protected the Sansis who manufactured it, receiving a portion of the profits in return. This arrangement involved police officers who also took their cut, allowing Balwant's father to establish strong connections with local authorities. These connections were inherited by Balwant, who used them to further diversify into the drug trade by shielding Sansis involved in opiate smuggling.

Several Sansis I interacted with were willing to share basic details about their bootlegging and opiate smuggling operations and to reveal the nature of the support they received from Balwant. Although I could not ascertain the exact number of Sansi households engaged in producing hooch,

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I gathered that at least half of them did, especially when they needed additional income. I also learned that these households could rely on fellow Sansis to maintain silence when police made their rounds. Understandably, given the much lengthier prison terms associated with drug smuggling compared to bootlegging, the Sansis were considerably more hesitant to disclose who among them was involved in the poppy husk trade or to provide specific details about how they procured the drug. Nevertheless, they shared that the drug was delivered to them in vehicles from Rajasthan, a region where opium production is legal. A young man even volunteered additional information, stating that he had occasionally accompanied these vehicles as an advance scout on a motorcycle, his role being to warn those following about police checkpoints along the route.

As discussed in Chapter 1, politicians frequently utilized official vehicles to transport drugs and illicit money. I was unable to verify if Balwant had any involvement in organizing the vehicles used for shipping the merchandise; however, what I did discover was his role after the goods arrived in Nurpur.

Balwant was kept apprised of impending police raids on Nurpur through "friends" at the *tehsil* police headquarters, enabling him to warn the Sansis when a raid was imminent. The Sansis explained how this advanced notice allowed them time to hide their merchandise in Balwant's fields, which the police typically did not search. During one of my fieldwork sessions, when a police convoy was en route to Nurpur just after the wheat harvest left the fields barren and unable to conceal anything, Balwant even invited the Sansis to hide their goods in his residence.

Nevertheless, Balwant was not always successful in alerting the Sansis about impending raids. I learned that several Sansis had been apprehended and incarcerated over the years, and, tragically, one individual was tortured and killed while in custody. When the police detained them, Balwant stepped in to assist with their bail by providing the necessary surety for their release. In instances where Sansis faced prolonged jail sentences, it was reported that he even facilitated bribes to persuade the police to drop charges against them.

In return for his protection, the Sansis compensated Balwant with a portion of their profits and nearly unanimous political support. This support enabled him to dominate the Nurpur *panchayat* for four decades, superseding the influence of the most prominent landowning household in the village. In essence, his power was founded more on a dependent clientele than on the unified support of Nurpur's Jats. Though somewhat reluctantly, many Jats, including the wealthy Cheemas, eventually supported him in the *panchayat* elections. During my discussions with them as part

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of my household survey in Nurpur, most indicated that they had ultimately supported him because of his wide network of important officials and politicians, which he could leverage to procure funds for the village.

However, many of them harbored resentment toward him for transforming their village into a hub for drug trafficking. They held him responsible for their children encountering drunks and drug addicts in village alleyways, "enriching" the Sansis and making them insubordinate. These Jats often overlooked that, apart from a few exceptions, most Sansis were essentially ordinary daily wage laborers who had not significantly prospered and lived under the constant threat of severe police brutality and extortion.

For instance, during my household survey, I encountered a Sansi widow whose husband had been tortured and killed in police custody in the mid-1990s. She told me that during a police raid, her husband had been arrested for confronting officers who were damaging furniture while turning their home upside down in search of drugs and alcohol. When the police brought him back a few days later, he was a bruised corpse. She said the police did not bother to explain his death, but it was evident that they had tortured and killed him. She told me that Balwant appeared on her doorstep with a bundle of cash the following day and said that the cash was from the police. She did not disclose the exact amount she received but conveyed that she had accepted it out of necessity. Given her circumstances, she felt incapable of rejecting the money or attempting to seek justice against the police.

Another distressing story came from a Sansi woman who previously sold vegetables in town. She was arrested in 2008 under suspicion of using her vegetable stand as a front to sell *phukki*. Despite not finding any drugs on her, the police detained her in an attempt to gather information about local drug trafficking networks. When she failed to speak due to a lack of knowledge or desire to protect her friends and family in Nurpur, they tortured her by applying electric shocks to her feet and head. She was released after two days, but she shared with me that she had been suffering from frequent migraines ever since.

Yet another Sansi woman recounted an incident in which she and her husband spent several weeks in Ludhiana jail on fabricated attempted murder charges following a police raid that escalated into a physical altercation. With a hint of pride, she mentioned that she had shattered a police jeep window after one of the officers, who was drunk, inappropriately touched her niece. She shared that, in the years following the incident, she and her husband had spent considerable money on bribes, brokered by Balwant, to extricate themselves from these false attempted murder charges.

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Lastly, in 2009, two Sansis were apprehended during a raid that uncovered 40 kilograms of *phukki* in Nurpur. One of the individuals arrested told me that the police had hung him upside down from the ceiling rafters, struck him with a rod, and applied electricity to his genitals. He shared that Balwant had helped him evade further trouble by arranging for him to pay a ₹40,000 bribe to the police. However, his partner was less fortunate, and as of 2014, he was still engaged in a protracted court battle, facing the possibility of several years in prison. Although the man was grateful to Balwant for his assistance during a challenging time, he suspected that Balwant might have taken some of that bribe.

What emerges from these stories is that, regardless of what they did and how much they knew, all Sansis, rich and poor, lived far more insecure lives than even the humblest Jat Sikh farmers. Another thing that emerges is that their relationship with Balwant hinted at extortion more than patronage. At first glance, there is nothing to suggest that Balwant had coerced the Sansis into voting for him or into providing him with a share of their illegal profits. On the contrary, Balwant seemed to shield them from police brutality and exactions.

However, when considering that Balwant's prosperity was partly built on the back of police extortion, a different image begins to form. As discussed in Chapter 1, the police offered protection to individuals involved in illegal and criminal activities, like the Sansis, in exchange for some of their illicit gains. If we define extortion as a process involving parties who generate a threat and offer protection against it for a price, then it is clear that the police—and their political superiors—were engaging in such practices. In Nurpur, they inconsistently refrained from arresting the Sansis in return for bribes and a cut of the Sansis' profits. If Balwant's role was to mediate this transaction, then he was, at the very least, complicit in the process of police extortion. Even though he did not exert direct control over the police, he benefited from their extortive activities.

Power in Rural Punjab Today

Taken together, the Nurpur findings typify a wider state-level pattern that calls for a fresh analytical lens. Srinivas proposed that power in rural India was frequently concentrated in the hands of social entities that he termed "dominant castes." He argued that these entities wielded power due to different combinations of landownership, population size, and educational superiority. Moreover, he predicted that the onset of democracy

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after independence would allow castes with large populations to mobilize electorally and capture power.

The chief merit of this influential account is that it drew scholarly attention toward concrete power relations on the ground and away from the theoretical social schemes contained in ancient Hindu scripture. However, while it contributed to shifting the focus of research on caste toward analyzing empirically observable social relations, this chapter has shown that attributing agency and interests to castes alone obscures the central way class is constitutive of power in village India.

Despite the value of this approach—particularly its shift toward the empirical study of power relations—this chapter has demonstrated that the patterns of dominance observed in Punjab align more closely with Alavi's framework than with Srinivas's. While Srinivas attributed power to cohesive caste groups with shared interests by virtue of their class-belonging, Alavi reminds us that such caste blocs are more likely to emerge under specific material conditions—namely, when land and other productive resources are relatively evenly distributed. In such contexts, as Alavi showed in his study of west Punjabi villages, peasant cultivators may form caste-based alliances to exercise collective power. But where land is concentrated in the hands of a few, power tends to be monopolized by landlords who dominate through vertical ties with a mixed clientele of subordinate castes and classes. In the Indian Punjab, despite the presence of a large and politically assertive peasantry, rising rural inequality and the capture of key institutions by elite landholders have entrenched a more factionalized political structure. Rather than acting as unified corporate caste blocs, dominant groups like the Jat Sikhs reproduce their influence through selective brokerage, institutional control, and the ability to mediate access to land, credit, and state resources.

Building on these insights, this chapter has argued that contemporary rural power in Punjab is better analyzed through the lens of landlordism and institutional capture. Scholars such as Mendelsohn (1993) and Breman (2007) have shown how shifts toward an urban-oriented political economy have restructured village authority, often without redistributing it. In Punjab, Jat Sikhs have increasingly disengaged from direct involvement in village regulation, turning instead to urban livelihoods and elite networks. Yet this retreat has not empowered Dalits, who remain largely excluded from institutional control and state resources. It is landed Jat elites—figures such as Balwant—who continue to dominate, now through their integration into broader political and economic circuits. Their influence stems not only from landownership but also from bureaucratic leverage,

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business capital, and the ability to mediate access to credit, welfare, and even informal state protection. As we saw in Nurpur, much like the Ahirs and Anavils elsewhere, these elites have withdrawn from everyday rural life, aided by mechanization and other technological shifts. What appears as Dalit autonomy is better understood as elite indifference—a withdrawal from their former role as patrons, rather than a genuine reconfiguration of power—in a landscape still fundamentally shaped by class inequality.

As such, the ethnography illustrated that it would be an oversimplification to equate Dalit autonomy and even assertiveness directly with empowerment. As this book will further corroborate in subsequent chapters, the reason for this is that Dalits remain largely on the margins of Punjab's political economy. In the context of Nurpur, we saw Sansis, including some who had prospered through smuggling, remained vitally dependent on their local Jat Sikh patron, and this dependence rendered them subject to exploitation. In exchange for granting them some degree of police cover, Balwant was able to extract votes and cash from them and prosper through politics.

Certainly, Nurpur represents a unique case. Unlike SCs in most villages, some of its Sansi inhabitants were engaged in drug trafficking and bootlegging. This involvement in illegal activities subjected them to higher risks of police extortion and intensified their reliance on patronage compared to other SCs. Yet, despite these unique circumstances, subsequent chapters in this book will demonstrate how this case illustrates a broader situation among SCs across Punjab who rely on gatekeepers for access to a range of state protections, from physical security to guarantees of subsistence.

The observation that Dalits in Punjab continue to rely on Jat Sikh patrons may appear to validate Srinivas's prediction that demographically dominant castes can assert or reconstruct dominance via electoral democracy. However, this view overlooks the more nuanced reality outlined in this and Chapter 1. It is not the numerical strength of Jat Sikhs that explains political dominance in Punjab but rather the strategic actions of a relatively small elite within the group. This elite has consolidated power by capturing and controlling key political and economic institutions, particularly in urban centers. They do not constitute a cohesive or representative Jat Sikh bloc; instead, the majority of Jat Sikhs remain entangled in subordinate and even exploitative relationships with this elite, much like other subordinated caste and class groups.

As we saw in Chapter 1, this elite group rules Punjab at the expense of both Dalits and middle and marginal Jat Sikh farmers. This chapter illustrates a similar dynamic at the micro-village level through the case of Balwant, whose rule has allowed him to prosper at the expense of the Sansis

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and, arguably, fellow Jats by turning the village into a drug smuggling center and destabilizing traditional hierarchies. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility that while appropriating state resources, elites may also incorporate their fellow Jats into a larger political coalition by mobilizing a "Jat Sikh" farmer identity. Caste-based coalitions therefore can and do emerge—as highlighted by the various authors cited at the start of this chapter—but such formations are not necessarily expressions of collective caste agency. Rather, as this chapter shows, such coalitions are more likely to be the result of elite actors strategically instrumentalizing caste to serve their own political and economic interests—thereby perpetuating existing inequalities. This suggests that any efforts to address rural inequality must go beyond caste alone and engage with the basis of agrarian power—such as land, access to institutions, and control over state resources—without which structural inequalities will persist, regardless of the composition of caste-based coalitions. In the absence of a focus on material and institutional control, power risks being mistakenly measured by which caste-coalition appears to hold formal political power.

Chapter 3 examines what elite dominance means for the functioning of *gram panchayat*s—supposedly participatory institutions that, under conditions of institutional capture, have become instruments of party politics and elite brokerage, thereby undermining democracy at the so-called grassroots.

Notes

1. Of course, the authority of members of the dominant caste was always subject to resistance, and there is evidence suggesting a decline in dominance already from before independence. Some of the literature highlighting this includes Opler and Singh (1952) and Cohn (1955).
2. Srinivas reported that in a village named Kere, peasant elders could even threaten to outcaste members of castes other than their own; he cites an example where peasants threatened to outcaste a fisherman who had been accused of committing incest.
3. The Okkaligas constituted a numerical majority with 735 members, followed by the shepherds with 235, the Muslims with 179, and the untouchables with 125.
4. Srinivas gives the example of a south Indian regional caste of fishermen who could impose their will on other castes when they were in a majority but who had to bow down to the dictates of other castes when they were in a minority. Where ritually impure fishermen were in the majority, as in

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Malavalli Taluk for example, they could take their wedding processions through Brahmin and peasant neighborhoods. Neither Brahmins nor peasants would try to stop these processions from crossing their neighborhoods because they knew that the fishermen were numerically strong and could easily overpower them in a fight. On the other hand, where fishermen were in a minority, such as in the village of Kere, both the Brahmins and peasants could easily prevent them from taking their processions through their neighborhoods.

5. Thus, Srinivas suggests that members of the same caste tend to gather in separate village neighborhoods to obtain security in numbers rather than simply to maintain ritual purity. Brahmins, for example, just would not feel safe living in a village ward where most inhabitants belong to the peasant caste. By making this claim, Srinivas once again emphasizes the importance of power relations above considerations of ritual purity as the critical factor shaping inter-caste relations.
6. One of Nurpur's particularities was that most of its SC members belonged to the Sansi caste—rather than to the more usual Chamar and Chuhra communities—and many supplemented their incomes through the illegal production of liquor and smuggling of poppy husk.
7. Forty years earlier, the village had been divided by factional rivalries between the leading Cheema and Virk families. At the time, the Cheemas had been the richest and most influential family in the village, and still today the richest Cheema household owned 40 acres—four times more than what any other farmer owned in Nurpur. Few people recalled details about the rivalry, but elders remembered that it was fierce and bloody. An elderly Virk recounted how his faction had enlisted some Sansis to fight the Cheemas and that they had once managed to gather the leading Cheemas into a room and beat them up. The man also told me that his grandfather and some Sansis had murdered a member of the leading Cheema family. Since then, however, the rivalry had become a distant memory kept alive by a couple of village elders.
8. The Sansis had historically been restricted to the southeastern corner of the village, a place of narrow and unpaved alleyways and cramped single- or double-room houses. The better northwestern side of the village, with its spacious homes and paved alleyways, had been occupied by Jats exclusively.
9. The harvest season that used to last a month now lasts less than a fortnight.
10. Most combine harvesters in Punjab were produced in small-scale local workshops dotted throughout the state.
11. In his work on neighboring Haryana, Jodhka (2012) reports that in 2009 attached wage laborers received advances of between ₹18,000 and ₹22,000

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per year, whereas they received advances of only ₹5,000 some twenty years earlier. Using India's consumer price index (CPI) (2005–2014), prices roughly doubled (≈ 100 percent increase), so ₹20,000 in 2005 is ≈ ₹40,140 in 2014; even after this adjustment, the advances offered in 2013–2014 (₹60,000–₹1,00,000) were about 1.5–2.5 times larger in real terms.

12. Confirming my earlier findings from across the border in Pakistan (Martin 2009), these two *siri*s told me that it was easier for households with several able-bodied workers to repay their debts.

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