CHAPTER 6

The Boundaries of Dalit Assertion

This chapter explores a central puzzle of Punjab politics: how a population that constitutes the largest proportion of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in any Indian state—over 30 percent—has not been able to translate its demographic weight into political or material power. It argues that this is not due to a lack of political consciousness or mobilization but rather because of the consistent ability of agrarian elites to co-opt, subvert, and channel Dalit assertion into forms that do not challenge their control over state institutions, land, and coercive power. This has placed boundaries on what Dalits can demand and realistically obtain through political engagement, often reducing Dalit political and social movement leaders to the status of clients and narrowing their focus overwhelmingly to symbolic issues and to the question of reservations, rather than broader transformative politics.

Here I track this pattern across three overlapping domains of assertion: religious conversion and reform, parliamentary politics, and civil society activism. It begins by examining the nature of Dalit subordination in Punjab and then explores the various strategies Dalits have pursued to resist it—starting with the historical phenomenon of religious conversion, which the literature increasingly views not as a purely spiritual choice but as a material strategy aimed at escaping caste-based subordination and gaining access to land, education, and dignity. Whether through conversion to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, or the creation of separate Dalit religious identities, these efforts were ultimately constrained by dominant caste interests. As this chapter will show, each of these avenues of resistance carried the potential for transformative change but was ultimately neutralized by dominant elites who acted to contain, deflect, or dilute their radical potential.

We then turn to post-independence electoral politics, specifically addressing the issue of the "silent revolution," which, according to Christophe Jaffrelot

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(2003), enabled north Indian Dalits from the 1990s onward to finally participate in politics and stake their claims to state resources. While, as Jaffrelot argues, reservation policies did indeed facilitate the emergence of a Dalit middle class from which politically active leaders emerged in both parliamentary politics and social movements, this chapter highlights how these leaders were ultimately unable to challenge the prevailing status quo dominated by entrenched elite interests.

This chapter engages directly with B. R. Ambedkar's early and enduring concern that reservations within joint electorates would ultimately undermine Dalit empowerment. Ambedkar feared that Dalit representatives elected from majority-dominated constituencies would be structurally compelled to serve the interests of dominant caste groups, thereby neutralizing the radical potential of political representation. As he presciently predicted, formal inclusion in democratic institutions would not necessarily translate into substantive empowerment. Here we show how this prediction came true in Punjab, where the dynamic manifested in the consistent alignment of Dalit leaders—often drawn from the emergent Dalit middle class—with establishment parties such as the Congress and the Akali Dal, whose core constituencies were entrenched within the dominant agrarian and trading castes. As a result, despite increased political representation, Dalits remained unable to make a meaningful claim on state institutions—beyond occupying subordinate or symbolic roles within them—or to advance substantive redistributive reforms. These included both improved labor protections—such as formalization, enforceable contracts, minimum wages, and access to social insurance—as well as secure and equitable access to land.

Finally, in a more ethnographic, micro-level case study, this chapter illustrates these dynamics through an examination of a Dalit rights-based movement focused on the implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). It highlights how Dalit movement leaders, while doing valuable work to secure access to legal entitlements and welfare benefits for their communities, were nevertheless compelled to operate within corrupt, elite-dominated structures. Their efforts, though locally impactful, were often shaped by the broader constraints of clientelist politics, and their ability to push for deeper structural change remained circumscribed by the political and institutional environments in which they were embedded.

In short, this chapter argues that Dalit assertion in Punjab has not been absent—it has been vibrant, diverse, and persistent—but that it has been systematically channeled away from radical transformation by agrarian

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elites who control the institutions, resources, and political networks that structure opportunity and constraint.

Dalits and Religious Assertion in Punjab

This section seeks to demonstrate three interlinked arguments. First, it highlights how Dalit subordination in Punjab is rooted not merely in religious exclusion but in deeply entrenched structures of landlessness and economic dispossession. Second, it shows how movements of religious conversion—whether to Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, or attempts at creating autonomous Dalit religions—must be understood as materially grounded efforts to challenge this subordination, rather than as purely spiritual or ideological exercises. Third, this section traces how dominant religious, political, and landed elites both directly and indirectly neutralized the radical potential of these movements, often by ensuring that they were confined to the spiritual domain, thereby severing them from the material claims and collective aspirations that originally animated them. After independence, this dynamic was reinforced by the system of reservations under joint electorates, which—as Ambedkar feared—enabled the co-opting of Dalit leaders by dominant parties, further entrenching the political marginalization of these movements. Altogether, the end result appears to be the proliferation of segregated religious spaces for Dalits—spaces that, rather than leading to empowerment, arguably merely reproduce caste-based segregation.

In Punjab, the relative absence of Brahminical influence because of the predominance of Islam and Sikhism has led some observers to claim that "untouchables" in the region did not face the severe forms of social exclusion that their counterparts had to contend with elsewhere (Jodhka 2004). Islamic theology tends to emphasize the equality of believers, and Sikh writings explicitly reject Brahminical orthodoxies regarding, among other things, caste hierarchy. Most distinctively, Sikhism glorifies the manual labor that Brahminical Hinduism devalues and assigns to lower castes in the Hindu Varna system. Observers have suggested that this explains why Jat Sikhs who perform physical labor in the fields consider themselves superior to the Sikh trading castes (A. Kumar 2014). Moreover, Sikhism has a history of anti-caste reformist movements seeking to realize Sikh egalitarian ideals.[1]

Nevertheless, the predominance of Islam and Sikhism in the region did not produce a social order devoid of hierarchical social segregation and exploitation. Thus, at the close of the nineteenth century, Denzil Ibbetson

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(1916, 293) reported that both Muslims and Sikhs subjected Chuhras who "removed nightsoil" and who ate carrion to forms of spatial and social segregation that Louis Dumont later famously attributed to Brahmanical values of purity and pollution (Dumont 1970). Thus, despite their ostensibly egalitarian creeds, neither Muslims nor Sikhs would accept water or food from Chuhras. Ibbetson (1916) and Wilson (1994) also report that this was true regardless of whether the Chuhras had converted to either of these religions in the regions where they were dominant. Moreover, Joel Lee (2021) and Navyug Gill (2019) have recently highlighted how even those converts who could disassociate themselves from manual scavenging were never accepted as equals. Along these lines, Lee (2021) reports on how, in the nineteenth century, Punjabi Muslims regarded Chuhra converts—who came to be known as Mussallis—as second-tier Muslims. My earlier research in the Pakistani Punjab confirms this in that it documents how their fellow Muslims often accused them of lacking knowledge of Islam and being both "dirty" and "immoral" and, as such, of being Muslims by name only (Martin 2015a). The same applies to Chuhra converts to Sikhism, who came to be known as Mazhbi Sikhs. Early in the twentieth century, Ibbetson reported that the taint of their "hereditary pollution" meant that Sikhs from other castes refused to associate with them even in their religious ceremonies (Ibbetson 1916, 294).

My own fieldwork observations in the Indian Punjab confirm that many Mazhbi Sikhs are still regarded as second-tier adherents to the faith. This is evident from the fact that Jat Sikhs will, on occasion—generally in private—refer to them as "Chuhras" rather than as Mazhbi Sikhs to deny them their status as "true" Sikhs. Moreover, Jodhka and Kumar report that Chuhras—but also members of other formerly untouchable communities—are sometimes still served last during communal meals held at *gurdwara*s (*langar*s) (Jodhka and Kumar 2007). They also report how former untouchables continue to play a marginal role in the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), which is in charge of administering all the major sites of Sikh religious worship throughout Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh.

The existence of caste discrimination within formally egalitarian faiths such as Islam and Sikhism suggests not only that Brahmanical values do not explain it, but also that its causes must lie somewhere other than in religion. Instead, in a predominantly agrarian society, landlessness and poverty seem to better explain the persistent social marginalization of Dalits. Here, British colonialism, rather than indigenous religious prejudices, played a decisive role by excluding them and members of artisanal castes from the list of

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hereditary "agriculturalist tribes" to whom they extended proprietary rights in land (Bhattacharya 2019; Ali 1988). As a result, the Jats—but also Arains, Gujjars, Kambohs, and Sainis—gained a virtual monopoly over land, while members of artisan, sweeper, and leatherworking castes were left without any. Subsequently, the Alienation of Land Act of 1901, which sought to prevent the transfer of land from indebted farmers to urban traders, had the effect of denying untouchables—together with all other non-agricultural "tribes"—the possibility of even acquiring land.

As the anthropologist Joel Lee has recently highlighted, Chuhra converts to Christianity in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Punjab saw conversion to Christianity by powerful outsiders as a means of undermining the economic and social foundations of their subordination. This is evident from the fact that when Chuhras approached Protestant missionaries to be baptized, the missionaries were dismayed to learn that their new recruits were more interested in obtaining rent-free or reduced-rent land, employment, legal aid, and schools than in the faith. Moreover, upon conversion, many refused to continue cleaning the latrines of landlords, who retaliated by implementing social boycotts that deprived them of access to wells and fields, and through physical violence.

However—much like conversion to Islam or Sikhism—turning to Christianity rarely freed converts from landlord control: missionaries framed conversion as spiritual, feared elite backlash, and offered only modest educational patronage. Moreover, much as in Tamil Nadu, missionaries fearful of upsetting the local balance of power appear to have done little to challenge caste discrimination toward Chuhras and other outcastes within local Christian communities.

Other untouchables sought to gain social equality by attempting to join the Hindu fold, primarily under the auspices of the Arya Samaj. As Juergensmeyer (1988) and, more recently, Joel Lee (2021) have highlighted, those untouchables who had not converted to Islam, Sikhism, or Christianity were excluded from the Hindu fold and did not consider themselves to be Hindu. What Lee (2021) highlights is that with the advent of parliamentary politics in India, some Hindus began courting Dalits by offering to include them within their fold. They feared that untouchables might join forces with the Muslims and that securing political clout in parliament required including untouchables. Thus, in the 1920s, the Arya Samaj began hosting "purification" ceremonies (*shuddi*) through which untouchables, whom they saw as having at some point departed from the Hindu fold, were ostensibly meant to regain their place within the Hindu community.

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As in cases of conversion to Christianity, untouchables who undertook this ritual appear to have done so primarily for social and material reasons. Lee (2021) shows Rahtia Dalits approached the Arya Samaj mainly to secure well access and equal seating, not religious doctrine. Once again, however, "conversion" to Hinduism did not do much to alter their subordinate social position. Neither the members of the Arya Samaj nor the later Gandhian social reformers who likewise sought to integrate them into the Hindu fold appear to have been able to overcome their prejudices fully or to have intended to genuinely transform existing social hierarchies over which they presided, or even the existing division of labor. As a result, some prosperous Punjabi Chamars disillusioned with the Arya Samaj concluded that since conversion to any of the major religions in the region had done little or nothing to elevate their social status, Dalits should create their own separate religious community. The effort to build a distinct religious identity, however, did not unfold as its proponents had hoped. It proved difficult to unify disparate Dalit communities under a single religious banner, and the new faith struggled to acquire the institutional infrastructure typically associated with religion. In practice, religious separatism often resulted not in collective empowerment but in the formation of effectively segregated Dalit religious spaces that reproduced, rather than dismantled, the hierarchies they sought to overcome.

Drawing on Juergensmeyer's (1988) analysis, we can see how some Dalits came to believe that creating a separate religion would provide them with the collective strength and identity needed to contest their social subordination. Mangoo Ram, the founder of this new religion, based his ideas on the premise that the untouchables descended from the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. He believed that these original inhabitants had professed an egalitarian religion and had lived under conditions of social equality. According to him, it was the Aryan invaders from Central Asia who had put an end to that by enslaving South Asia's original inhabitants. Subsequently, the Muslim invaders and the later Sikhs, despite their egalitarian creeds, had likewise maintained their enslavement. Mangoo Ram believed that the solution to his and his fellow Dalits' predicament was to revert to that original pre-Aryan religion he believed had once existed, framing it as the foundation for a newly constituted religious identity.

However, his intention was not merely spiritual or even ideological. He believed that if Dalits managed to overcome their internal divisions and unite under a separate religious banner, they would acquire the strength in numbers necessary to gain the respect of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. He reached this conclusion by observing that while Muslims, Hindus, and

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Sikhs may have quarreled, they nevertheless respected each other because they were members of large and politically assertive religious communities that provided them with security in numbers. Thus, in his view, the lower castes would similarly gain power and respect if they united as a religious *qaum* (nation, people, community).

However, as Surinder Jodhka (2009) points out, the movement never took off in part because it lacked the institutional and symbolic features typically associated with successful religions—such as holy scriptures, rituals, sacred symbols, and pilgrimage sites. Without these, it struggled to establish itself as a coherent and durable religious tradition. Jodhka also highlights additional factors contributing to the movement's decline, including the role of reservations for the SCs after the Poona Act of 1932, which caused the movement to lose its leadership to parliamentary politics and gave untouchables the incentive to declare themselves as Hindus rather than Ad Dharmis to benefit from reservations. Moreover, Mangoo Ram's new religion never quite took hold beyond the Doaba Chamar community. Juergensmeyer's work suggests that the movement's predominantly middle-class Chamar leadership was co-opted by larger political forces—including the pre-partition, landlord-dominated Punjab Unionist Party organized to forestall the threat of land reforms—when it became involved in parliamentary politics.

Mangoo Ram, however, believed that the movement had nevertheless radically transformed the consciousness of the lower castes in Punjab. In an interview with Mark Juergensmeyer, he claimed that "We helped give them [the former untouchables] a better life and made them into a qaum. We gave them gurus to believe in and something to hope for" (Juergensmeyer 1988, 82).

It is undeniable that the movement contributed to the emergence of a shared Dalit identity, particularly among Chamars, and that one way it arguably did so was by granting further religious prominence to Guru Ravi Das among the lower castes. Ravi Das was a fifteenth-century Chamar who preached a worldly utopia free from scarcity, violence, and private property, and whose verses are included within Sikh holy scriptures. By magnifying his teachings and writings, the Ad Dharm movement contributed to the emergence of a Ravidasia identity and the proliferation of *dera*s preaching his universalistic and egalitarian message.

However, while the movement undoubtedly encouraged the lower castes to cultivate their own autonomous social and religious spaces, it appears to have fallen far short of uniting them into anything resembling the sort of *qaum* that Mangoo Ram had envisaged and produced limited gains in

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altering the balance of social and economic power in favor of Dalits. As indicated above, the movement and its legacy have been confined chiefly to a geographically delimited segment of the Chamar community. Former untouchables in the Chuhra category remained either within the Hindu or the Sikh fold and did not come to form a united political block with those belonging to the Chamar bloc. Mazhbi Sikhs, for example, are often regarded not only as faithful Sikhs but also as loyal Akali supporters. Like their Hindu counterparts in Punjab and elsewhere (see Lee 2021), they appear to have sought to further their interests through incorporation into the dominant caste bloc.[2]

There is also little evidence to suggest that the cultivation of autonomous religious spaces helped raise their social and economic status. As indicated above, the SCs have been building separate *gurdwara*s and cremation grounds across the state for some time now. While this has granted them autonomy from the dominant Jats, it is not clear that it has raised their social standing vis-à-vis the latter. Puri (2003) suggests that this development, by threatening Jats' stranglehold over the institutions of the Sikh faith, has, instead, earned them animosity.

Similarly, the fact that Dalits have been flocking to Punjab's many independent religious institutions has not necessarily contributed to empowering them. These religious institutions, known as *dera*s, are headed by spiritual leaders—known as *guru*s, *baba*s, or *sant*s. Some follow orthodox Sikh teachings, and the SGPC recognizes them as *gurdwara*s. However, many operate independently of any established religion and welcome people of all faiths and social backgrounds. It is this latter sort of *dera* that has attracted large numbers of SC followers. According to both Juergensmeyer and Jodhka, these *dera*s have proven attractive to Dalits because they preach universalism, welcome people of all castes, and provide a sense of community and spiritual solace that they cannot find elsewhere.

Surinder Jodhka also attributes their success to the fact that they often encourage their members to abstain from alcohol and drugs. This makes them very popular among women whose husbands have fallen prey to substance abuse. As noted in the Introduction, drug and alcohol abuse have become major issues across all classes and castes in Punjab, and Dalits are just as prone to substance abuse as their Jat counterparts.[3] Nevertheless, despite their ostensibly constructive social role in the fight against substance abuse and in providing people with solace and community, *dera*s have undermined lower-caste political assertion. They appear to have turned Dalits toward otherworldly matters and instrumentalized them in vote-bank politics—thereby undermining the possibility of lower-caste political

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unity—to protect or enhance their considerable business interests. Since land ceilings do not apply to them, *dera*s often own large amounts of land. Surinder Jodhka reports on one *dera* in the village of Dhianpur where all the cultivators are tenants of a *dera* that owns 600 acres of land. Other more influential *dera*s, such as Dera Sacha Sauda and Radhasoami, own thousands and even tens of thousands of acres. These institutions often maintain close relations with bureaucrats and politicians to secure and enhance their business interests. Some *dera* leaders are known to cultivate these ties by mobilizing their considerable number of followers on behalf of political parties or candidates. Thus, in 2007, Dera Sacha Sauda—which can reportedly mobilize 1 crore voters across India, including 30 lakh in Punjab alone—used its influence to help bring the Congress Party to power in Punjab.

A Silent Revolution?

This section turns to examine contemporary forms of Dalit assertion in Punjab, shifting focus from the domain of religious reform and conversion to that of political participation. It takes as its starting point Christophe Jaffrelot's influential thesis of a "silent revolution," which argues that the extension of reservations in education, employment, and electoral politics helped catalyze a slow but steady process of Dalit empowerment in north India beginning in the 1990s. Yet, despite significant Dalit political activity and assertion—something that might be taken as evidence of a silent revolution—internal divisions and elite co-optation have ensured that Dalit participation in parliamentary politics has largely inserted them into systems of patronage rather than enabling substantive transformation. The section then moves on to show how, in the absence of substantial state-level power, social movement leaders are vulnerable to similar dynamics of co-optation. As illustrated in the case study of a local protest movement, this can result in opportunists entering activism primarily as a pathway to incorporation within patronage structures and the material benefits they afford.

According to Jaffrelot, reservations played a slow but steady role in the advent of north India's silent revolution. Because of the small number of state sector jobs available relative to the population and because the SCs lacked the educational qualifications to fill their quotas in all but the lowest-ranking categories—often in sanitation work—he argues that their impact was slow to unfold. He also argues that their political impact was initially quite limited because SC politicians in reserved constituencies were

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elected through mixed electorates and did not necessarily govern with SC interests in mind. Nevertheless, by the 1990s, reservations had given birth to influential SC and Other Backward Classes (OBC) political parties.

Jaffrelot's account shows how, by facilitating access to educational institutions and government jobs, reservations helped consolidate a small SC middle class whose members went on to lead political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh. In turn, the fact that the BSP subsequently gained power in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, boosted SC morale and encouraged them to struggle further. Crucially, moreover, it allowed the SCs to create new channels through which they could access the state.

Previously—before they and also the OBCs under the Samajwadi Party came to power (Witsoe 2013; Michelutti 2008)—the upper castes of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had exercised almost exclusive control over the state, and SCs were consequently denied substantive access to the state and its protections. They were, for example, deprived of access to various welfare schemes, and the police frequently failed to act in response to atrocities against them. The literature suggests that this began to change when the BSP rose to power under Mayawati. Jeffrey and Lerche (2000) have, for example, shown how SC politicians—including Mayawati—made sure that the police, traditionally captive to upper-caste interests, investigated atrocities committed against Dalits.

How did the silent revolution play out in Punjab? Unlike in Uttar Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj Party in Punjab never obtained more than single-digit percentages of the local vote share despite Dalits constituting a more significant percentage of the population than in any other Indian state. The literature suggests that social and political division among local Dalits is one reason for this. Punjab possesses thirty-seven different SC communities, of which roughly three-quarters belong to the Chuhra or the Chamar categories. The Chuhra category includes former untouchables associated with manual scavenging and sweeping occupations and today consists of two main groups who continue to constitute the most disadvantaged communities: the predominantly urban Balmikis, who adopted Hinduism, and the generally rural Mazhbi Sikhs, who adopted Sikhism.

According to the 2001 census, for example, the literacy rate among Mazhbi Sikhs within the Chuhra community was around 42.3 percent, and a large proportion of them were agricultural wage laborers and domestic servants (Office of the Registrar General, and Census Commissioner 2003). Untouchables within the Chamar community, on the other hand,

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were traditionally associated with leatherwork and are today divided into three main groups: the Ad Dharmis, the Ramdasias, and the Ravidasias. They are comparatively better off than the Mazhbi Sikhs. The Ad Dharmis from the Doaba region are the most affluent of these three, mostly because their traditional skills enabled them to establish successful tanneries and leather workshops but also arguably because the movement that created the community in the 1920s successfully urged its members to pursue education (N. Gill 2019; Juergensmeyer 1982). They have been at the forefront of SC politics in the state (Jodhka and Kumar 2007).

These two main groups have not united under a single political banner or even as a voting bloc in a position to bargain for resources with either the Congress Party or the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). After independence, the Congress Party largely managed to co-opt both through reservation policies and subsequent populist programs such as "Garibi Hatao" (eliminate poverty) and the twenty-point program for "total rural regeneration." Subsequently, it secured the allegiance of both Mazhbis and Balmikis in 1975 by ensuring that half of the 30 percent of government jobs reserved for SCs in Punjab would go to them. However, urban Hindu Balmiki Dalits have, at times, subsequently aligned themselves with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), while the Mazhbi Sikhs eventually shifted their allegiance to the Akali Dal. Following the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi after Indira Gandhi's assassination, many of them abandoned the Congress Party in solidarity with their fellow Sikhs and began supporting the Akali Dal (Jodhka and Kumar 2007).

Nevertheless, while Dalits may not have created a substantial political bloc, several developments suggest that a silent revolution is slowly but surely taking place. Reservations have ensured that Dalits can permanently occupy 34 of Punjab's 117 state assembly seats; there is now a small Dalit middle class; and Dalits throughout the state are increasingly engaging in both individual and collective acts of political assertion. On the latter score, scholars including Ronki Ram (2007) and Jodhka and Louis (2003) have, for example, highlighted how they have sought to escape Jat-Sikh domination by building separate *gurdwara*s and cremation grounds and flocking to independent religious institutions (*dera*s).

As we saw in Chapter 3, many Dalits have also sought to distance themselves from agricultural labor, and the Jats frequently complain that Dalits no longer respect them. Some bonded laborers are even using their political connections to take their bosses to court, alleging that they were held as slaves. On the political front, they have been pressing their representatives for access to government schemes and patronage, and

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political parties can no longer entirely ignore their demands. Moreover, Dalits have established a variety of social movements to struggle for their rights in terms of access to welfare schemes, common village land, and revenue-generating shrines (Jodhka and Louis 2003).

Building on the preceding discussion of Dalits' limited capacity to shape parliamentary politics, we now turn to examine whether the many Dalit social and protest movements that exist have been able to compensate for this limitation. This chapter looks at whether Dalit-led grassroots mobilizations have succeeded in pressing for redistributive claims or whether they too have become vulnerable to the same processes of co-optation and incorporation into elite-dominated political networks. To explore this question, I turn to a case study of one movement I was able to study closely during fieldwork: a Dalit-led civil society organization focused on ensuring implementation of the NREGA scheme. As I show, the lack of substantial power at the state level leaves such movements structurally dependent on the very bureaucratic and political intermediaries they seek to challenge. This dynamic, I suggest, sometimes opens the door to the entry of opportunistic actors who view activism less as a vehicle for collective emancipation than as a means of integrating themselves into existing systems of patronage and prestige. The case of the NREGA Union illustrates how, despite doing valuable work to help Dalits claim state entitlements, social and political movements can become entangled in the same extractive and hierarchical logics that characterize electoral politics. More specifically, it illustrates how the lure of incorporation into local patronage networks can lead opportunistic actors to enter activism as a strategic pathway to personal advancement rather than collective transformation.

Like much of India, Punjab boasts several active Dalit protest movements. The most notable of these is arguably the Zameen Prapti Sangarsh Committee—or land rights struggle committee—that has led the struggle for Dalit rights over common land (see Chapter 5) throughout some seventy villages in southern Punjab. Its tactics include disrupting village common land auctions held behind closed doors and exerting pressure on individual Dalits not to cooperate with Jat cultivators trying to use them as proxy candidates in the yearly village common land auctions. Two notable examples include the villages of Ballad Kalan and Tolewal, where the struggle led to violent confrontations. In Ballad Kalan, protesters clashed with the police while attempting to disrupt a land auction, and forty-one people among them were subsequently jailed for fifty-nine days on several charges. Nevertheless, after an extended struggle, Dalits managed to obtain their rightful share of village common land in both villages. In

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Tolewal, union members even succeeded in gaining control over the village *panchayat* and passing a resolution granting Dalits a thirty-year lease over its common land.

However, because this organization was not active in my field site at the time of fieldwork, this chapter focuses on a movement whose ambitions and scale were more limited. Around Lakhmandi *tehsil*, between 2013 and 2014, Dalits were not engaging in any meaningful struggle to gain their rightful share of village commons. Nevertheless, after inquiring about Dalit movements in the region, I found out about one that focused on access to the NREGA scheme and that I subsequently investigated over several months. This was a small-scale movement with roughly 500 members known as the "NREGA Union" that focused almost exclusively on helping laborers realize their right to work on the scheme. In comparison to the movement for land rights, this movement was limited in its scope and ambition; however, it illustrates some of the pitfalls to which Dalit and other civil society movements in India and beyond can fall prey.

The union in question was founded sometime around 2010 by a middle-class Ravidasia Dalit from Patiala who had taken his retirement from the Indian Army at age fifty-four. With a secure, albeit spartan, pension and income from some real estate investments, Khushwant Singh had decided to work to socially uplift his fellow Dalits. When I interviewed him, he explained that he had opted to do so as a social worker, or *sevadar*, rather than as a politician. He claimed, like many other Indians, that parliamentary politics could not offer a way forward because it was irremediably corrupt and criminalized.

He began his career in social services by traveling around villages in his home district to determine what Dalits needed and how he could best serve them. During these visits, what appears to have struck him most was the fact that Dalits were consistently being denied access to reserved seats in government councils, access to village common land, and access to a variety of state welfare schemes. Nevertheless, he decided to narrow his focus to helping Dalits gain access to the NREGA scheme. When I asked him why, he explained that he regarded the scheme as particularly important to Dalit livelihoods because it could help sustain entire households during periods of labor market slack; however, his choice appears to have also been a pragmatic one. As we saw in Chapter 4, the NREGA scheme was a rights-based scheme specifically designed to allow laborers to bypass local power structures. In practice, this meant that if a village council failed or refused to implement it, laborers could join together and approach the authorities at the block office level to demand that it be implemented.

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Since Dalits generally did not know that it was possible for them to enroll without their *sarpanch*'s approval and many found the bureaucratic procedures intimidating because of limited literacy skills, Khushwant saw where he could be of service. Thus, after becoming thoroughly acquainted with the scheme's various regulations, he traveled around the villages in the Patiala district in search of Dalits wishing to enlist in the scheme but unable to do so; he assisted them with the bureaucratic procedures necessary to apply at the block office.

Moreover, when the bureaucracy failed to implement the scheme in a timely manner or when laborers did not receive their wages, he organized protests and roadblocks to draw political attention to the issue. Finally, as we will see, he also organized rallies demanding the expansion of NREGA benefits. In exchange for these services, Dalits were expected to pay a ₹200 NREGA Union membership fee and attend rallies.

Khushwant's NREGA Union offers a revealing window into the complexities and contradictions of Dalit-led activism. At first glance, it appears to reflect the vitality of India's social movements in securing access to state entitlements. Yet, as the following account demonstrates, even such initiatives are susceptible to the dynamics that have long shaped Indian electoral politics. The above suggests that thanks to the NREGA Union, the state and political parties were rendered accountable, and Dalits were made aware of their rights and given the possibility of realizing them. Nevertheless, closer attention to how the organization was run reveals that it was not necessarily free of the corruption and processes of political co-optation. The case indicates that the Union's leaders were less interested in grassroots empowerment than in positioning themselves advantageously within existing patronage structures. They did so, as we will see, by attempting to convince political elites that they commanded a large following and were worth supporting, while simultaneously persuading their followers that they had powerful political connections and were therefore worth aligning with. This performative strategy enabled them to accumulate both the symbolic and the material capital necessary to insert themselves into local elite-controlled patronage networks.

From the very outset, it became evident that the movement's leaders had private financial and political stakes in their movement's operations. In February 2014, when I first met Khushwant, his Union had just split in two amid a flurry of corruption accusations. The organization had been growing, and Khushwant had come to rely on an associate to run the branch in the local *tehsil* headquarters. Sukhbir, his associate, was also a middle-class Ravidasia, and although his parents had not been government

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employees, they had owned some land and had been able to send him to school. Sukhbir claimed that he had decided to part ways with Khushwant because he was misleading Union members and making money at their expense. However, I had been following the local NREGA Union for several months and had seen how people had grounds to aim these very accusations at Sukhbir himself. I, therefore, obtained Khushwant's number and called him to organize a meeting to try to determine who was really at fault.

When I told Khushwant that I was researching Dalit movements and mentioned that I had spent time with his former associate, he offered to immediately make the forty-minute drive to come and meet me at the central hotel in Lakhmandi *tehsil*. His haste—I soon realized—was because he thought I might be a foreign journalist and feared that I might publish something that would create publicity for Sukhbir and not him and even potentially discredit him. When he showed up two hours later, he insisted on describing himself as a simple and frugal person (*fakeer aadmi*) and a social worker (*sevadar*). He told me that I should describe him as such in any article I might write and added that I should make it clear that he had founded the NREGA Union, not Sukhbir. He lightly dismissed Sukhbir's corruption allegations against him, explaining that he was using them to deflect attention from the fact that he had caught him red-handed stealing ₹8,000 worth of people's membership fees and then dismissed him from the Union. However, instead of resigning and handing back the keys to the local Union headquarters, Sukhbir appropriated the office and set up a separate Union that robbed Khushwant of local followers. Khushwant claimed that, despite the damage, he was not worried because people would soon realize the truth about Sukhbir.[4] He insisted that he was different, that he was a *sevadar* who was solely motivated by the desire to help the poor and oppressed. As evidence of his commitment to the poor, he claimed that, thanks to his real estate business and pension, he could easily have opted for a life of indolent luxury in an air-conditioned mansion but had instead chosen to brave the heat and the dust for those in need. However, the credibility of these claims was undermined by the fact that he had turned up in a white Mercedes-Benz—a rare vehicle in the region since the late 1990s—and that he showed it off. Visibly pleased by my interest in his car, he boasted that few people owned that type of Mercedes in Punjab and explained that he needed it because he made frequent trips to Delhi to meet high-ranking officials and politicians, including allegedly Rahul Gandhi and BSP leader Mayawati. He added that a luxury vehicle was indispensable for anyone like him who interacted with high-ranking

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personalities and who needed to be taken seriously by them. This boast, as I soon understood, was central to a performative strategy through which he sought to convince potential followers that he had powerful connections—and was therefore worth supporting—while simultaneously signaling to political elites that he had a solid local base. Likewise, his references to a flourishing real estate business and an army pension were not simply offhand remarks but strategic assertions of his financial independence and social power. By presenting himself as wealthy, well-connected, and indispensable, he sought to consolidate his leadership by projecting both political reach and economic clout.

Thus, despite Khushwant's repeated efforts to signal his moral authority, I left our meeting with the clear impression that he seemed more driven by personal ambition than by selfless commitment to the cause. Moreover, I got the sense that his political agenda and public platform included demands that stretched credibility—such as increasing NREGA wages to ₹1,000 per day and retroactive unemployment benefits—paired with unverifiable boasts that he had personally convinced Rahul Gandhi to support these proposals. These grandiose claims appeared cynically crafted to attract support by stoking false hope among laborers.

His associate, Sukhbir, made a similar impression on me. He likewise claimed to be a social worker and, like Khushwant, routinely insisted on stating that he had no interest in money, power, or status, presenting himself instead as a servant of the people. Yet he was keen on displaying social status and wealth. He sported an ostentatious gold watch, dressed in impeccably starched white kurta pajamas, and was eager to show off his latest Samsung smartphone. Shortly after his breakup with Khushwant, he erected a showy billboard outside his office with a picture of himself sporting an upturned mustache and a silk foulard. Sukhbir also boasted of contacts at the highest levels of the Indian state, and he struck me as exceedingly boastful from the very first time I met him. After serving me tea in his sitting room, he showed me a large pile of documents in a cupboard containing NREGA rules and regulations and boasted that he had memorized them and understood the scheme better than any official or politician in India.

As mentioned above, none of this negates the fact that both Sukhbir and Khushwant effectively brokered access to the NREGA scheme. When I met him one day in his home, Sukhbir made this clear to me by describing a recent case in a nearby village, where the *sarpanch*—a wealthy Jat farmer—had enrolled only his factional supporters. Sukhbir had intervened by informing the primarily SC laborers that 100 days of NREGA work

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was their right and helped them complete the required paperwork. This intervention led to the creation of an additional NREGA project for those previously excluded. During a subsequent visit to the village, I was able to confirm the accuracy of his account. Sukhbir told me he had carried out similar interventions elsewhere by raising awareness about the scheme, assisting those with limited literacy in filling out forms, and doing the paperwork. These claims were corroborated in conversations I had with government officers at the block office, who were well acquainted with his activities.

Moreover, Sukhbir organized laborers to protest whenever the state failed to pay NREGA wages in full or on time, which frequently happened, as we saw in Chapter 4. To redress these situations, Sukhbir would organize protests outside either the *tehsil* headquarters or the block office and, occasionally, block the main highway. Because these protests and roadblocks often drew media attention and made the pages of local newspapers, they could force the authorities to act or at least appear to do so. Both the *tehsildar* and the block development officer (BDO) told me that they had often had to show up at Sukhbir's protests and negotiate with him because not doing so might draw negative media attention to them. Additionally, he and Balwant had organized rallies in Delhi to demand the nationwide expansion of the NREGA scheme.

While it was clear that Sukhbir's mediation in bureaucratic procedures helped Dalits be enrolled in the NREGA scheme, his rallies and public demonstrations, however, were not always particularly effective in fulfilling their stated objectives. Thus, several months after a widely publicized roadblock to protest the late and incomplete payment of NREGA wages, several NREGA workers told me that even though the *tehsildar* had appeared to negotiate with Sukhbir, they had still not received what they were due. One laborer who had been active in the NREGA Union for several years volunteered that Sukhbir's rallies did not seem to achieve much. The yearly rallies in Delhi were arguably even less effective, given that they often revolved around completely unrealistic demands—such as raising daily NREGA wages to ₹1,000 and securing free housing plots for all NREGA workers.

It soon became clear to me that these rallies were more effective in helping Sukhbir financially and in enhancing his public visibility and political capital than in achieving their stated objectives. They helped him financially because, as an ex-associate told me, Sukhbir profited from organizing rallies in Delhi by taking a commission of ₹20 per passenger traveling there with him. They helped him gain visibility and political

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capital because they served as an occasion to boast about his political and bureaucratic connections. Thus, despite claiming to have no truck with politics, his rallies served not only as a source of income but also as strategic platforms for self-promotion. This is because they sometimes forced either the station house officer (SHO), the *tehsildar*, or the BDO to come and negotiate with him in full public view. It was evident that Sukhbir exploited this to demonstrate his influence because during NREGA Union reunions, he would remind people about his long negotiations with these officials and would sometimes even falsely add that all of them answered his calls and even came to see him in his office—explaining that they knew that if they did not, he could mobilize a 50,000-strong crowd "within minutes" if he wanted. Sukhbir had undoubtedly met the *tehsildar*, the BDO, and the SHO repeatedly, but it is implausible that these meetings ever took place in his office, given that Indian public officials tend to displace themselves only for their superiors.

That Sukhbir was seeking to acquire political capital by boasting about connections with influential people was also evident from the fact that—again, like his mentor—he falsely claimed to be on close terms with and to use first names with high-profile individuals such as Rahul Gandhi and Manmohan Singh. In one speech, for example, I heard him share a tale that sought to impress, entertain, and admonish his audience. He recounted how, a couple of months earlier, he had taken 400 locals to a rally in Delhi and had at one point to leave for an hour to meet "Manmohan Ji" and "Rahul Ji" in private. He said that after discussing raising NREGA wages to ₹1,000 per day, "Manmohan Ji" had given him a friendly tap on the shoulder just as he turned to make his way out. The prime minister had allegedly noticed Sukhbir's followers eating stuffed flatbreads (*kulcha*s) and smoking cigarettes (*bidi*s) on the street and advised Sukhbir to instruct them not to do so, as it might give people the incorrect impression that Punjabi laborers were better off than they claimed to be. Manmohan Singh allegedly concluded that if he and his followers wanted to be taken seriously, he should advise his followers to abstain from alcohol, *bidi*s, and even *kulcha*s.

I subsequently met Dalits, who had left the NREGA Union and told me that he had been present at that rally and that when Sukhbir had left to allegedly meet Manmohan Singh, he had, in fact, gone to a fancy restaurant with a mistress. Regardless of whether this accusation was true, it is very unlikely that Sukhbir had ever had a private meeting with Rahul Gandhi because he would have memorialized the event with a photograph to display in his office. Instead, however, the only prominent personalities

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he had pictures with were Captain Amarinder's eldest son and the local gangster Gurbachan.

Another way in which he sought to acquire credibility as an effective leader was by showing official-looking documents that purported to attest to his authority or his ability to get things done. On one occasion, for example, he showed me a signed document that allegedly appointed him as the head of the union for the entire Punjab. He told me it had been written and signed by a Delhi-based SC leader named Archna Singh. However, upon closer inspection, it appeared to have been produced and signed by none other than Sukhbir himself. Similarly, during a speech, Sukhbir waved a document that allegedly entitled people to five years' worth of unemployment benefits for all the time the Punjab government had failed to provide NREGA work. When someone in the crowd asked to see it, Sukhbir handed it over but immediately asked to have it back before the person could read it, claiming that he wanted the person's undivided attention. My assistant later obtained the document and found that it had nothing to do with NREGA unemployment benefits.

What all of these activities—his exaggerated claims, performative rallies, and visible self-promotion—amounted to became particularly clear to me shortly before the 2014 national elections. That is when it became unmistakable that Sukhbir's efforts were part of a calculated attempt to insert himself into local patronage networks and accrue political capital. As we saw above, both Sukhbir and Khushwant pretended to be uninvolved in party politics, and Sukhbir frequently denounced it in his speeches. He claimed that it was an exclusively profit-driven endeavor. This message struck a chord with his listeners, who already believed that people entered politics solely for financial gain. He repeated it at an assembly of NREGA Union members as the 2014 national elections were approaching, saying:

> Now elections are coming, and leaders will come to your villages and homes to ask for votes. But what have they done for you? Did they give you job cards? No, you're unemployed. Go and see if I have a large mansion like your elected leaders. No! The public is with me because I am its servant. I have no desire for votes, you can vote for whomever you want. You can vote for Congress or for the Akali Dal, it's up to you. I'm not interested in votes; I want to fight for your rights.

However, a couple of weeks later, Sukhbir Singh organized a meeting of Union members outside his office, at which the son of an ex-chief minister came to campaign for the Congress Party. Before the latter arrived, Sukhbir sought to assure his roughly 200-strong crowd that hosting the man was

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consistent with his critical stance toward political parties. He told people that he supported neither the Congress Party nor the SAD but had decided to support the Congress Party as the lesser evil in current circumstances. Both parties, he said, were equally rotten, but the SAD's performance over the previous years had made it clear that it was more unfavorable to the poor than its principal rival.

A Jat Sikh Congress Party leader in Sukhbir's home village later told me that the real reason Sukhbir had told his followers to vote for the Congress Party was that Captain Amarinder Singh's son had offered him ₹6,00,000 to do so. The Congress Party leader in question further alleged that Sukhbir had initially approached the SAD to tell them he could deliver thousands of votes to the party, but that local Akali party workers knew he had no more than a couple of hundred followers. He believed that Captain Amarinder Singh's son was probably likewise under no illusion about Sukhbir's ability to deliver votes but must have decided that every vote counted and that having Sukhbir on his side would, at the very least, reduce the number of activists ready to make public declarations against his party. Moreover, in an unguarded moment, Sukhbir confirmed these claims when he boasted to me about how he could deliver large numbers of votes to politicians and that he could do so more effectively than his mentor Khushwant.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted some of the key developments in the Dalit struggle against social segregation and exploitation since the nineteenth century. We saw how this struggle first took place under the umbrella of religious conversion and reform. Subsequently, in democratic India after independence, it extended into parliamentary politics and social movements. As a result of these efforts, Dalits today have growing access to separate cremation grounds and *gurudwara*s and likewise increasingly participate in religious institutions that, in specific ways, operate beyond the reach of the dominant Jat Sikh community. Additionally, Dalit politicians play a central role in the making and unmaking of parliamentary political coalitions, and Dalits' active civil society organizations are demanding their rightful share in revenue-generating shrines, their right to cultivate common village lands, and their right to obtain access to government schemes such as NREGA.

And yet, despite their visible and loud protests, Dalits have not obtained the political and economic inclusion they have been striving for. This chapter indicates that this is because the dominant classes in Punjab have either successfully repressed or subverted their efforts. We saw, for example,

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how they successfully neutralized the social and material demands of Dalit converts. Viswanath (2014), Mosse (2012), and Lee (2021a) all show how Dalit conversions to Christianity were motivated more by the desire to challenge their subordination than by the heartfelt embrace of a set of religious doctrines, and Lee (2021b) suggests that the same was true about Dalit attempts to enter the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh folds. However, Christian missionaries, Arya Samaj activists, and both Sikh and Muslim preachers constrained them to focus on spiritual matters and conferred minor material improvements—generally within the sphere of education. These improvements resulted in cases of upward mobility but did nothing to undermine rich farmers' monopoly over land and coercive force.

Subsequent Dalit religious reform movements succeeded in fostering a larger Dalit consciousness but likewise failed to challenge the root causes of Dalit subordination. The most notable of these was Mangoo Ram's Ad Dharm movement, which sought to create a new religion that would not only unite Dalits spiritually but also politically and thus grant them parity with Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs; however, because the new religion was never fully institutionalized and lacked scriptural, doctrinal, and ritual traditions, it failed to take hold. Moreover, it failed to empower Dalits because establishment political parties co-opted the movement's middle-class leadership. Thus, we saw how, in the early twentieth century, some Dalit leaders even aligned themselves with the landlord-dominated Punjab Unionist Party. More recently, we saw how establishment political parties also used and co-opted the *dera*s to which Dalits are drawn—such as Sacha Sauda—for electoral purposes.

Throughout much of Punjab's political history, Dalit leaders have ended up collaborating with establishment political parties dominated by wealthy farmers and traders. Consequently, they appear to have had to restrict their political agenda to demands that the dominant classes could accommodate, albeit grudgingly. Their agenda generally revolved around three central pillars: (*a*) demands for respect and dignity, (*b*) demands for government jobs, and (*c*) demands for clientelistic provisions. While these demands were legitimate, they were also very limited in scope and failed to address fundamental issues such as labor rights, social security, and the structural inequalities that underpin Dalit subordination. As a result, they did little to alter the concentration of wealth and institutional power in the hands of rich farmers in rural areas.

Work in Uttar Pradesh likewise shows dignity politics can eclipse redistributive demands (Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffrey 2008). It shows how middle-class Dalit local politicians in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) appeared

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principally concerned with helping their fellow Dalits gain respect by inculcating middle-class norms of respectability while paying little attention to issues like wages and access to land. Demands for government jobs were likewise not the top priority for most Dalits because, necessarily, only a small minority of relatively educated or middle-class Dalits would ever obtain them. Finally, as Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2008) likewise illustrate, demands for clientelistic provisions disproportionately benefited the middle-class Dalit politicians who were often able to appropriate a significant portion of the government resources they brokered.

Given these limitations to Dalit participation in parliamentary politics, it is understandable that many Dalits I interviewed had little faith in it. Individuals like Sukhbir and Khushwant even asserted that it was more of an obstacle than a solution. As we saw, however, the NREGA union did not operate in a political vacuum and was therefore likewise not immune to corrupting influences. Thus, we saw how, besides helping Dalit laborers enroll in the NREGA scheme, Khushwant and Sukhbir were also trying to secure private political and financial capital and to insert themselves into local patronage networks.

While Sukhbir and Khushwant's organization was clearly not representative of Dalit protest movements in Punjab or India at large, it nevertheless provides important insights into how power can channel and shape such movements, often rendering them less effective in achieving their stated goals. It illustrates how such movements are constrained to operate within a political playing field heavily skewed against the poor and in favor of state-level elites who control both economic resources and coercive power. John Harriss (2007, 2005) has suggested this point by documenting how associations of and for the poor can at times be subject to subversion and co-optation. Thus, he reports on how organizations like the Tamil Slum Dwellers' Association rarely held together for long because their leaders were politicized by rival political parties or because they were bought off by landlords. Similarly, Akhtar (2018) has shown how economic compulsion, political cooptation, and the very real threat of violence can frequently lead even disciplined and well-organized activist movements to make compromises and to engage in what he, borrowing from Gramsci (1971), calls the "politics of common sense." Through the politics of common sense, people do not generally seek to reform the social and political order; they instead navigate their way through it, making use of patron–client ties to secure particularistic rather than universal interests. Akhtar illustrates this with reference to the notable case of the tenant farmers on the Okara military farms in Pakistan, who successfully struggled against eviction.

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During their struggle, they managed to bridge their class, gender, and religious divides, but having averted eviction, they reverted to politics as usual.

To conclude, then, because the odds have been and remain so heavily stacked against them, Dalits have had to settle for small gains and make compromises with the powers that be. For this to change is likely to require political forces that focus on redressing India's most blatant inequalities and that can create a political coalition, including the non-Dalit poor, capable of challenging them.

Notes

1. These have included the Tat Khalsa, the Singh Sabha, and the Khalsa Diwan movements.
2. Puri (2003) even reports a case in the Ludhiana district in 2002 in which "Ramdasias" sought to prevent Mazhbi Sikhs from entering a *gurudwara* that the two communities had built together.
3. Many SCs openly consume *phukki*, for example, and I even heard them praising its benefits. They told me that it allowed them to work in the fields or on construction sites in the blazing heat without feeling any fatigue and that its only physical drawback was that it caused constipation. Nevertheless, I also heard stories about how opiate-numbed laborers occasionally overworked themselves and died of heatstroke and dehydration. Overall, the primarily male consumption of drugs and alcohol ravages households. Thus, I frequently heard complaints from SC women about their husbands' drug and alcohol consumption habits. They told me that their husbands spent all their wages on poppy husk and booze and that there were times when no money was left to buy food. Some also complained about their husbands turning quarrelsome and violent when drunk, about how they sold household goods to finance their drug habits, and about how their husbands merely lounged about in a stupefied state. One Sansi woman told me that the only hope she had was that her husband would go to Dera Sacha Sauda, and she pressed me to try to get her husband to do so.
4. Khushwant also made several comments about his former associate turned rival that indicated that, contrary to what he claimed, he was deeply concerned with status and hinted at the possibility that the NREGA Union served him as a vehicle to secure it. He said that Sukhbir was corrupt, poor, and uneducated. His parents, unlike Khushwant's, had allegedly been illiterate laborers. As a result, despite completing high

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school, Sukhbir had purportedly never acquired the moral education that, according to Khushwant, could only be obtained in an educated home. Because of this, Khushwant asserted that Sukhbir would never be able to interact with national politicians or successfully lead a movement like the NREGA Union. When I mentioned that Sukhbir claimed to be friends with Manmohan Singh and Rahul Gandhi, Khushwant laughed and told me that powerful leaders did not befriend poor and semiliterate rustics like Sukhbir, who, a couple of years earlier, had not even had enough money to buy a winter coat. Khushwant alleged that he had bought Sukhbir one and financed his household expenses for several months while initiating him into the politics of social mobilization.

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