CHAPTER 5

Informality and Dispossession

Kathy le Mons Walker (2008) has estimated that as a result of land acquisition, over 3 crore Indians have been dispossessed in the name of "development" since independence; she argued that land is the most prominent site of struggle in the subcontinent. Moreover, a significant body of literature has highlighted how India's economic liberalization has intensified dispossession by generating an intense scramble for land for, among other things, large-scale real estate projects and special economic zones (Levien 2011, 2012, 2018), industry (Levien 2013; Strümpell 2014), mining projects, and hydroelectric dams (Padel and Das 2010; Sundar 2016; Baviskar 1999).

Although this chapter briefly engages with large-scale land acquisition in Punjab, its primary focus is on the less conspicuous but pervasive and mundane processes of land grabbing that also result in widespread, albeit largely unrecorded, cases of dispossession. Building upon Kanchan Chandra's (2015) insights, this chapter elucidates the central role of state actors in these processes. Chandra has detailed how the intensified competition for land in India's post-liberalization era has presented bureaucrats and politicians with increasingly lucrative rent-seeking opportunities. As such, she argues that liberalization, far from resulting in the state's withdrawal from economic life, reinforced its role as the key facilitator in land acquisition processes. Extending these insights, this chapter examines how individuals used their state connections to engage in micro-level processes of land acquisition and dispossession.

This chapter contributes to existing scholarship by connecting the literature on dispossession to some of the literature on informality. It explores how personalized modes of governance—where access to state institutions is mediated through personal relationships rather than through

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impersonal, rule-bound bureaucratic procedures—serve as a crucial mechanism through which dispossession occurs. While a growing body of scholarship has explored how informal access to the state through brokers, party workers, and personal networks may contribute to the expansion of citizenship rights and state responsiveness (Berenschot and Van Klinken 2018; Björkman 2021; Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Piliavsky 2014, 2020; Manor 2000), this chapter argues that informality is better understood not as a mechanism that creates—even if imperfectly—democratic accountability or inclusion, but rather as a mode of governance associated with what Harriss-White (1997) calls "shadow states": durable networks of elite actors that sap state institutions of resources, redirect public goods toward private ends, and blur the boundary between formal governance and informal appropriation.

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, in the case of Punjab, these networks include rich farmers who collectively dominate institutions such as *panchayat*s, agricultural cooperatives, procurement bodies, and marketing societies. It is such embedded institutional capture that gives rise to informality—providing elites with the discretionary power to bypass formal procedures, obscure lines of accountability, and dispossess others through the informal appropriation of both public and private land. Rather than broadening citizenship, here informality entrenches asymmetries of access and facilitates elite accumulation.

This is not to deny that brokers and patrons are necessary wherever state institutions are inaccessible, understaffed, unresponsive, or dysfunctional. In such contexts, people have no choice but to access the state through personal connections (Martin 2018b). However, as this book highlights, when personal ties become the primary means to access the state, it disadvantages those who have none and allows those who do to gain a disproportionate share of resources. Furthermore, when people are able to exploit their personal connections to get state officials to violate rules and regulations to benefit people based on personal allegiances—be they familial, ethnic, or political—they actively deprive others of their rights as citizens.

Thus, the previous chapters illustrated how well-connected individuals were able to appropriate a disproportionate share of state resources, thereby simultaneously depriving Dalits of access to their state entitlements. Chapter 4 illustrated how well-connected individuals were even able to manipulate elections and deprive others of their political rights. This chapter, in turn, goes on to show how individuals who draw upon their connections to break the law engage in micro-level processes of accumulation by dispossession. Simultaneously, it illustrates how politicians and officials primarily serve

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relatively privileged constituents and how electoral pressures do not necessarily compel them to cater to the broader electorate's interests.

The State and Land Acquisition in Punjab

At the macro level, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) pursued an ambitious infrastructure development scheme to attract private capital to Punjab. As detailed Chapter 4, this scheme encompassed land acquisition for constructing new thermal and hydroelectric power plants, motorways, urban flyovers, and underpasses. Predictably, this development agenda resulted in displacement and dispossession. However, the public did not view displacement and dispossession as the inevitable cost of development. Instead, they regarded it as the consequence of Akali politicians brokering land acquisition deals to benefit themselves and their cronies—in effect, recognizing that the real source of dispossession lay in deeply embedded networks of political and bureaucratic influence.

The academic literature on dispossession in Punjab primarily focuses on land acquisition for power plants (Kaur et al. 2020; M. Sharma 2018; N. Singh 2017). Notably, it highlights the presence of legal irregularities resulting in the denial of rightful compensation to individuals whose land was acquired. One particularly significant case is detailed in Navsharan Singh's (2017) article on Dalit women and their resistance. The case revolves around the village of Gobindpura in Mansa district, where the Punjab government acquired 806 acres of land for a private power company, triggering a prolonged struggle by farmers and workers for fair compensation. According to reports, the farmers received inadequate compensation, while some Dalits allegedly received no compensation.[1] While the study does not dwell on the role of politicians in the affair, public opinion was that they had received kickbacks and, therefore, had little interest in protecting the interests of those displaced. Similarly, newspaper reports indicate that farmers who lost land to motorway expansion projects never received adequate compensation and suggest that politically connected businessmen made money at their expense.[2] These examples underscore the extent to which formal land acquisition processes were distorted by elite shadow state networks that worked to deprive affected people of their rightful compensation. At the micro level, ethnographic fieldwork alerted me to more mundane and pervasive processes of accumulation by dispossession and allowed me to identify some of the actors involved. Thus, I learned how well-connected entrepreneurs, including often *sarpanch*es and party workers, colluded with bureaucrats and even higher-level politicians

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to engage in a variety of predatory practices that allowed them to profit from the exponential rise in real estate prices that had taken place over the previous decades.

In the early 2000s, an acre of agricultural land located a few miles from market towns or larger cities was valued at around ₹2 lakhs (₹2,00,000). However, by 2013–2014, the value had skyrocketed to ₹30 or even ₹40 lakhs (₹30,00,000–40,00,000). Due to urban expansion, farmland closer to urban centers appreciated even more significantly, with values surpassing ₹1 crore (₹10 million). This increase allowed speculators and those fortunate enough to own significant tracts of land to amass substantial fortunes. Moreover, in peri-urban areas near cities such as Chandigarh and Ludhiana, I heard stories about village councilors colluding with state officials to make fortunes by seizing and reselling public common land to urban developers.

At the sub-divisional court complex, lawyers informed me that the real estate boom had attracted not only investors with surplus capital-seeking profitable opportunities but also well-connected entrepreneurs and officials who were eager, by hook or crook, to claim a piece of the windfall. For example, they told me that a couple of years earlier, before the Aadhaar biometric identity cards came into use, property speculators in collusion with public officials had profited from the real estate boom by duping investors into buying real estate that was not theirs to sell. The officials facilitated these deals by fraudulently attesting that the seller was the rightful owner of a plot and then received a share of the profits after the sale. Lawyers told me that the scam victims were left to fight protracted and often futile legal battles to either recover their money or lay claim to the plot of property they had paid for. The legal owners of the plots—sold unbeknownst to them—frequently ended up fighting lengthy cases to prove that they had never sold their property. The scammers, for their part, often apparently got away with their actions, particularly—according to the lawyers—in cases where they had influential political patrons. The impunity of these actors reflected the operation of formal state structures hollowed out by informal elite networks.

The introduction of biometric Aadhaar identity cards starting in 2010 and their use in real estate transactions had reportedly reduced the number of such scams but had not ended them altogether. When I tried to obtain further information about this, my lawyer informants volunteered to introduce me to a young man who had carried out such scams and was willing to explain how they were done. The man explained that because of the more stringent identity checks, property scams required far greater efforts and coordination, including the cooperation of high-ranking

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officials, and therefore involved far larger amounts of money than they had in the past. The current method involved people like him obtaining records of plots they wanted to sell, scanning them onto their computers, and then, using image manipulation software, replacing the owner's name with theirs. They would then arrange for the *tehsildar* to replace the original record with the photoshopped one. The young man who explained this to me stated that they would undertake such actions only for sums of money above at least ₹10 crores (₹100 million) and that they would generally only get involved in such ventures if they were close to retirement, thereby not risking their career prospects. He said that if a *tehsildar* managed to pull this off, his earnings from the fraudulent transaction would far outweigh the potential loss of income due to suspension and potential legal costs.

The lawyers also made me aware of more violent forms of property acquisition, carried out by local gangsters with high-level political connections. As we saw in Chapter 1, the president of the Youth Akali Dal (YAD), Gurbachan Singh, was the most notorious land grabber in town, and he entertained very close relations with high-ranking state-level leaders. Most notoriously, as we have already seen, he was known to have taken possession of the valuable urban property of an elderly widow. The Bania widow had first asked Gurbachan to protect her from relatives trying to claim her various urban assets—including her home, a bottling plant, several shops, and a few urban residential properties. In a cruel twist, after moving into a wing of her property and gaining her trust, her "protector" somehow managed to get her to sign her property over to him and eventually forced her out of her home. Subsequently, Gurbachan redeveloped the property into a commercial site and sold it for ₹3crores (₹30million).[3]

Beyond that one-off case, Gurbachan was also in the business of acquiring properties whose owners were embroiled in disputes with tenants they could not evict. He purchased these properties at a discount, evicted the tenant—using force when necessary—and then resold them at their market value. From what I gathered, such cases tended to arise because of laws that made it difficult to evict tenants who had proof of residence. As a result, landlords tried to prevent their tenants from obtaining such proof by, among other things, ensuring that water and electricity bills were issued in their names rather than in their tenants' names. During my frequent trips to Chandigarh, the state capital, I learned that many landlords even preferred to leave their properties vacant rather than rent them out. My fieldwork found that the issue had become politically contentious because many wealthy non-resident Indians (NRIs) who lived abroad in the UK,

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Canada, and Australia could not regain possession of properties captured by locals—often relatives—in their absence.

Some landlords wanting to sell such occupied properties either tried to pay their tenants to leave or intimidated and threatened them with the help of goons. Others sold their property to the thugs at a discount. Gurbachan himself told me—on one of the three occasions when I met him in person—that he would sometimes purchase properties with tenant problems at an attractive price and would first gently but firmly command the tenant to vacate by a specific date. If that did not work, he and his men would use force, and Gurbachan even boasted about how they had roughed up quite a few recalcitrant tenants over the years.

Lawyers, once again, told me that they knew of several cases in which Gurbachan's victims had sought but failed to place police charges against him. They told me that while Gurbachan had a couple of cases against him dating from his student days, he had no cases registered against him during the Akali Dal's tenure because he had the full protection of senior politicians in the government. His impunity starkly highlighted the criminal side of these shadow state networks—how actors embedded in political parties could use their connections not only to extract rents and dispossess others but to do so with complete legal immunity.

The Informal Enclosure of Village Common Land

In villages, the rush for real estate predominantly manifested as a widespread trend whereby well-connected farmers informally appropriated common land. While some small and marginal farmers were involved, wealthier farmers seeking an outlet for their surplus capital took the lion's share of this land. As discussed in Chapter 1, farmers without avenues for surplus capital frequently reinvested it in agriculture by leasing additional land. However, as noted, this was not always a good investment because this widespread trend increased lease rates for agricultural land, thereby reducing the potential for profit. To circumvent this issue, many resorted to leveraging political and bureaucratic ties to seize village common land.

As Barbara Harriss-White (1997) notes, such practices not only represent illicit asset transfers, but also drain local governments of vital revenue streams and undermine their capacity to deliver public goods. In this context, the informal appropriation of village common land by well-connected farmers not only deprived local and state governments of crucial resources but also denied many their rightful share of communal assets. At the time of fieldwork, the Akali Dal government had launched initiatives ostensibly

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aimed at reclaiming common land and remedying the situation. Yet even this attempt was subverted by shadow-state networks, as politicians granted personal exemptions to allies and vote-based leaders, allowing them to retain informal control over appropriated land. In doing so, they preserved the very patterns of elite capture and institutional decay that their policies purported to reverse.

Before embarking on a detailed discussion of these issues as observed during my fieldwork, I briefly elucidate the legal status of common land and illustrate the prevalent disregard for the laws and regulations relevant to their use leading up to the Akali Dal's regularization initiative. Village common land can be broadly categorized into two types: *shamlaat zameen* and *nazool zameen*. The former, which is more widespread, belongs to villages, and its management is entrusted to *gram panchayat*s to generate public revenues for development projects. Typically, *gram panchayat*s lease these lands to local farmers through one-year contracts, serving as a source of revenue. As per the Punjab Panchayat Raj Act of 1994, these lands should be leased through annual public auctions under the supervision of block development officers to the highest bidders, with a third reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SC). On the other hand, *nazool zameen* refers to land previously owned by Muslims who migrated to Pakistan during Partition and is reserved explicitly for cultivation by Dalit cooperatives. While both types of land were previously used for grazing livestock, the increasing demand for agricultural land has led to their conversion into irrigated and cultivated fields.

*Gram panchayat*s possessing large amounts of *shamlaat zameen* can generate substantial revenues and help boost state revenues, since some of the income is paid to the state government. A village with 200 irrigated acres should, for example, be able to generate up to ₹80 lakhs per year. Furthermore, the third reserved for Dalits should allow those most deprived to supplement their incomes as laborers by providing them with cash crops and fodder for any cattle they might own.[4]

At the time of fieldwork, however, well-connected farmers throughout the state had taken possession of these lands and were not paying much or any rent for cultivating them. As a result, both *gram panchayat*s and the state were deprived of a potentially significant source of revenue. As observed throughout the previous chapters, formal *panchayat* regulations were often irrelevant in practice. Consequently, just as SCs encountered difficulties utilizing their reserved seats in PRI institutions, they also struggled to benefit from regulations designed to guarantee access to village land. Predominantly, as we will see in greater detail below, it was affluent

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Jat cultivators who seized the land. In several villages, I found that they were paying a mere ₹8,000 per acre of irrigated land annually, even though private land rates hovered around ₹40,000. Moreover, there were instances where farmers had not paid any rent for several decades. Many of these farmers had come to view the land as their own private property because they and their ancestors had worked hard to improve it by leveling sand dunes, clearing scrub forests, and putting in private tube wells for irrigation.

These farmers were frequently able to retain their hold over this public resource because they exerted influence over *gram panchayat*s, often with the support of powerful political patrons. Such influence allowed them to manipulate or entirely avoid the stipulated yearly public auctions (*kulli boli*). Most frequently, *sarpanch*es and their councilors, sometimes in collusion with *panchayat* secretaries and senior politicians, organized these auctions in the privacy of their homes without publicly notifying villagers. As a result, only *sarpanch*es and their allies were given the chance to make a bid and were able to keep lease rates low.

To circumvent the provision that a third of the land was reserved for Dalits, they used dummy candidates to make their bids. In the case of wealthy farmers, these dummies were often attached Dalit servants. This meant that, according to *panchayat* records, the land had been allotted to a Dalit, but in practice, it was the Jat farmer who benefited from it. At the time of fieldwork, few Dalits in my field site protested against this practice, and some I spoke to told me that it would be futile to do so since they did not have the tools necessary to farm and because *panchayat*s had failed to equip village land with tube wells, meaning that only farmers with private irrigation facilities on adjacent plots could cultivate them.[5] It was only in subsequent years, starting in Sangrur District, that they began to organize to gain their rightful share of common land.

To regularize this situation, the SAD sought to ensure that the yearly auctions for the lease of village common land were carried out according to the letter of the law. Moreover, in addition to regularizing the auction process, the government engaged in efforts to equip non-irrigated village common land with tube wells, with the dual aim of expanding Punjab's cultivable area and boosting village and state revenues.

However, these efforts threatened not only to dispossess farmers who had taken possession of village common land and who, in some cases, had made substantial investments to improve it but also to bring lease rates to parity with market rates for private land and thus render common land unaffordable to all but the richest farmers. In 2014, Dakonda Farmers' Union activists told me that in locations where these efforts had been carried out,

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the introduction of public auctions and new irrigation facilities invariably led to higher lease rates and rendered village common land unaffordable to all but the richest farmers. Some of these activists saw what was happening as a sign that the government was laying the groundwork for a corporate takeover of agriculture.

However, as we will see, the very politicians responsible for implementing the regularization process often acted out of political expediency, enabling their allies—both actual and prospective—to informally capture common land. While such actions might appear to illustrate how informal arrangements function as a shield against formal legal mechanisms that often disregard local livelihoods, the cases that follow show that they overwhelmingly served the interests of politically connected elites. Rather than extending rights or securing entitlements, these interventions entrenched a system of opaque, brokered governance on which access to public resources remained contingent—continually reshaped by shifting electoral calculations and producing deep uncertainty around villagers' claims.

Electoral Politics and Village Common Land

I begin this investigation with a case study from a village pseudonymously referred to as Daroli. In this village, between 2008 and 2013, the local member of legislative assembly (MLA), Gurjant Singh, supported the village *sarpanch*, Kuldip Singh Kombhoz, in his attempt to regularize the lease of 60 acres of village common land and to improve their revenue-generating potential. In 2014, for example, Gurjant sent in the police to evict farmers who were refusing to vacate the common land they were occupying illegally and helped facilitate the installation of tube wells on the areas that remained unirrigated. By the time of my fieldwork in 2013–2014, Gurjant and Kuldeep had successfully regularized the lease of 36 acres, tripling village revenues to ₹12 lakhs in the process. However, this achievement sparked considerable conflict and protests, as it dispossessed farmers of land they had cultivated and enhanced over decades and subsequently raised lease rates to levels affordable only to the wealthiest farmers. While this may have signaled a shift toward more rule-bound governance, the conflict it provoked ultimately enabled local elites to pressure the government into backtracking—not primarily to assist dispossessed marginal farmers, but to make selective exceptions for politically valuable or wealthy allies.

In 2014, following the forcible police eviction of numerous farmers from lands they had tilled for decades, I conducted interviews with two farmers who had lost land and whose livelihoods had suffered as a result of the SAD

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regularization policy. One of them revealed that he only owned a small plot of one and a half acres; however, he had been able to sustain his family by farming approximately 10 acres of village common land at a nominal rate of a couple of thousand rupees per year. The regularization process, however, left him with just his own one and a half acres to till. This dire situation was exacerbated by his back issues, which hindered him from supplementing the scant income from his small plot through daily wage labor.

The situation of the second farmer I interviewed was less dramatic, as he was able-bodied and belonged to a comparatively privileged class of farmers because he owned 5 acres. Nonetheless, these 5 acres did not provide a substantial income, and he told me that it was only because he had been able to lease an additional 5 acres of village common land at an affordable rate that he could send his son to a private school. He saw himself as the rightful owner of that piece of common land because his grandfather had cleared it of sandy hillocks (*tibba*s) and established an irrigation system that utilized water from a nearby river to convert them into cultivable terrain. To his chagrin, however, he not only lost this land under the SAD regularization initiative but was also subsequently barred from placing a bid on it in the subsequent yearly land auction. He explained that because he had consistently supported Kuldeep's rival in village elections, the latter had accused him of past rent defaults and used this as a legal ground to exclude him from subsequent annual land auctions. The fact that he had never asked Kuldeep for receipts after making his payments had left him without any evidence to challenge the decision.

Talking with other villagers, I soon discovered that while Gurjant had sacrificed the livelihoods of those two farmers in the name of legal rationality, he had shortly thereafter also sacrificed legal rationality for the sake of electoral support. Some villagers alleged that after evicting the farmers, Gurjant had intervened to allow Kuldeep and his allies to continue illegally benefiting from cheap common land because he wanted to secure their votes for the upcoming elections. Apparently, Gurjant had instructed the government agents responsible for supervising the yearly auctions to overlook the fact that Kuldeep did not convoke Daroli residents to the auction so that they did not attend. This meant that farmers who had lost their land but should have had the opportunity to bid to regain control over it—even at a higher cost—were denied their right to do so, allowing Kuldeep and his allies to agree to a low lease price and share out the land among themselves.

However, shortly afterward, various farmer unions began protesting against the regularization policy, attracting negative media attention for

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the Akalis. Consequently, Gurjant, concerned about his electoral prospects, appears to have concluded that supporting Kuldeep had been a mistake. In an attempt to counter the growing tide of discontent, he decided to assist some Daroli farmers facing eviction orders by helping them secure stay orders in court that allowed them to retain their share of common land for another year.

When I spoke with Kuldeep, he revealed that Gurjant had tried to placate upset farmers by stopping the construction of a new electrical line intended to power more tube wells on Daroli's communal lands. He believed that certain farmers, who used private tube wells to covertly irrigate common land officially marked as unirrigated (and thus cheap to lease), had asked Gurjant to do this to prevent lease rates for the common land from rising. Kuldeep further claimed that Gurjant had also sought to appease farmers by laying the blame for everything on him and even encouraged them to use force against him in case he insisted on pursuing the eviction orders against them. Finally, he alleged that Gurjant assisted some farmers by aiming to entangle him in a groundless court case, accusing him of illegally extending his home onto public land.

Interestingly, Kuldeep viewed these interventions as mere political theatrics (*tamasha*) stemming from short-term electoral motivations. He informed me that the farmers still on the common land would eventually face eviction and that the electrical lines for the new tube wells would also, in time, be completed. He further mentioned that the court case against him was quickly dismissed as baseless. Similarly, when I spoke to the farmers whom Gurjant had tried to appease, they echoed Kuldeep's sentiments. They had no delusions about Gurjant genuinely supporting them or defending what they perceived to be their entitlement to common land. Fully aware that they would soon be deprived of the land, they also believed Gurjant's fickle, electoral-driven behavior could easily return to being adversarial toward them, just as it had with Kuldeep. The case itself demonstrates how villagers were caught in a system of opaque, brokered governance—where rights were contingent, security depended on proximity to power, and the shifting electoral calculations of politicians introduced persistent uncertainty into people's everyday claims and entitlements.

Our second case study takes us to the village of Tulewal. As in Daroli, Gurjant Singh initially backed the *sarpanch*, whom I will refer to as Harpal Singh, in his endeavors to formalize the lease of common land around 2009 and install tube wells. By 2013, 56 of the 96 acres began producing significant revenue, a figure further boosted by the introduction of six new tube wells to previously unirrigated areas. Echoing the events in Daroli,

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the regularization process in Tulewal led to significant disputes, protests, and unwanted media attention. Here as well, in response to the upheaval and mindful of potential electoral repercussions, Gurjant took a U-turn, retracting his support from the *sarpanch*—Harpal Singh—and siding with the farmers he had only recently played a role in evicting.

Large protests flared up as soon as the regularization process got underway, chiefly due to the participation of a farmer union leader, Sukhvinder Singh, who was among those facing eviction. Sukhvinder Singh had taken control of approximately 13 acres of common land. After receiving the court order to vacate, he swiftly leveraged his farmer union connections to coordinate protests. Moreover, he managed to capture the local press' attention and persuade high-ranking Congress Party leaders to issue statements suggesting that the SAD was capitulating to anti-farmer corporate lobbying pressures.

Faced with the potential for negative electoral repercussions, Gurjant swiftly suspended the regularization process and ordered the police to disregard the court's eviction orders. Moreover, beyond merely placating Sukhvinder and his allies, he actively courted their political support. To obtain it, Gurjant publicly endorsed Malvinder, one of Sukhvinder's allies, in the upcoming *panchayat* elections for the position of *sarpanch*. This visible backing suggested to the villagers that Malvinder was a worthy vote recipient. Furthermore, Gurjant supported Malvinder and Sukhvinder in a corruption investigation to tarnish the reputation of his erstwhile protégé, the village *sarpanch*—Harpal Singh—with whom he had only recently collaborated to regularize Tulewal common land. According to Malvinder, a Right to Information (RTI) request they filed revealed Harpal's misappropriation of ₹4,00,000 in *panchayat* funds, severely damaging his public standing. As a result, Harpal lost in the *panchayat* elections and was levied a fine of ₹3,55,000, a fine which he later managed to successfully appeal against.

In his effort to secure Sukhvinder and Malvinder's political loyalty, Gurjant also facilitated their sidestepping of *panchayat* regulations to continue benefiting from advantageous lease rates. Harpal and his allies claimed during our interview that Gurjant had enabled Malvinder and Sukhvinder to bribe the block development officer in charge of auction oversight, ensuring that any irregularities would be overlooked. This tactic allowed them, as well as their friends and allies, to carry out the annual auction in the privacy of Malvinder's home and to secure a substantial portion of the land at below-market rates. Given that a large part of this land had already been irrigated due to Harpal's efforts, it should have been

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leased at a rate of between ₹35,000–40,000 per acre. Instead, through collusion, Malvinder and his allies managed to keep the rates at around ₹20,000.

Harpal further alleged that Malvinder was able to acquire land despite being legally barred from doing so as he was purportedly in debt to the Tulewal *gram panchayat* for hundreds of thousands of rupees in unpaid rent for land he had cultivated over a decade. To circumvent this prohibition, Malvinder enlisted his farm servant as the tenant for the land instead of registering it under his own name.

Harpal, the erstwhile *sarpanch*, expressed significant dismay at Gurjant's political opportunism. He relayed to me that his loyalty to the Akali Dal and, specifically, to Gurjant had never wavered. Over the past decade, he had actively campaigned for Gurjant in several elections. In contrast, Malvinder's political allegiance fluctuated between the Congress Party and the Akali Dal, seemingly contingent on the prevailing electoral trends. However, when Gurjant recognized that supporting Harpal could potentially result in a loss of votes, he did not hesitate to back Sukhvinder and Malvinder instead.

In Tulewal, much like in Daroli, few farmers were under any illusions about the true value of Gurjant's interventions. Those who lost their rights to bid on the village's common land, due to Gurjant enabling Malvinder to privately hold the annual auction within his own home, harbored significant resentment toward him. Even those who seemed to have benefited from Gurjant's involvement saw these as temporary fixes. The farmers for whom Gurjant had delayed police action informed me that the court orders against them were still standing, indicating that Gurjant's aid had not provided them with any real security in the long term. Furthermore, despite gaining substantially from Gurjant's maneuvers, Malvinder and Sukhvinder perceived him as an opportunist and feared that he would in the future just as readily act against them as he had acted on their behalf. As a result, they did not feel they owed him their political loyalty. They even told me that Gurjant epitomized everything that was problematic about the SAD and claimed they had no intention of voting for the party in the upcoming 2014 national assembly elections, instead voicing their support for the emerging AAP. Overall, this case further illustrates how informal interventions enabled elite appropriation of common land, but also how the shifting dynamics of electoral politics added a further layer of uncertainty to villagers' already fragile claims and expectations.

Our final case study leads us to Fatehpur. Contrary to what happened in Daroli and Tulewal, the regularization process in Fatehpur was executed

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without any protests, and Gurjant had not felt the need to make ad hoc interventions on behalf of farmers facing eviction. As a result, beyond boosting village revenues, only the wealthiest farmers in the village were now able to lease common land. Here too, however, Gurjant extended his support to the village notable most capable of mobilizing votes on his behalf and thereby allowed him to benefit from public resources at the expense of fellow villagers. As such, this case most forcefully illustrates the way politicians, both in their official role as policymakers and in their unofficial role as patrons, served the interests of local power brokers rather than those of the public at large.

By 2013, as a result of Gurjant's push, all 180 acres of village land in Fatehpur were being leased through public auctions at between ₹40,000–45,000 per acre, earning the village ₹45 lakhs per year. Khem Singh, the *sarpanch* at the time, boasted to me about how this revenue had allowed him to renovate village alleyways and gutters with expensive cement bricks. The *panchayat*, he explained, had previously received scant revenue from these lands because, as in other villages, a significant portion had been appropriated by farmers who paid little or no rent for their cultivation.

What he omitted, and what I later discovered from other villagers, was that his own family, having had dominant influence over the *panchayat* for decades, was largely responsible for this earlier situation. His family had effectively appropriated almost half of the village land (86 acres), while the remainder was divided among several local farmers. According to villagers, Khem Singh's household, possessing a paltry 4 acres of their own, had been able to construct a large new house, purchase two new four-wheel-drive vehicles, and acquire a tractor thanks to the income generated through this land.

By 2013, however, all farmers were obligated to pay rent for cultivating village common land, and Khem Singh had to battle fiercely to retain the 30 acres he was still cultivating at that time. His family's control over nearly half of Fatehpur's land was initially contested in court in 1986, long before the SAD statewide initiative to regularize the auction and lease of common land. Nirmal Singh, the leader of the rival faction affiliated with the Congress at the time, challenged him in court for encroaching on public land. This initiated a murky, decades-long legal battle that saw Khem Singh lose control over some of the land but not for long. Khem Singh apparently turned the tide in his favor by exploiting a death to file murder charges, allegedly with Gurjant's assistance, against Nirmal Singh, resulting in his incarceration.[6]

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Around 2011–2012, Khem Singh faced a renewed challenge to his remaining hold over a portion of common land when the *sarpanch* affiliated with the Congress Party attempted to obstruct him and his allies from participating in the annual auction. The *sarpanch* organized the event in a private residence without informing anyone except his allies, preventing Khem Singh and others from placing their bids. However, unlike the situation in Tulewal and Daroli, where the *sarpanch*es organized similar actions in coordination with Gurjant and the block-level official in charge of overseeing the auction, the *sarpanch* in Fatehpur acted independently. His tactic was to hold the auction on a Sunday in an attempt to dissuade unwanted individuals, including the relevant block-level official, from attending. This lack of precautionary measures presented Khem Singh with an opportunity. Upon learning of the situation, he promptly contacted Gurjant, who took swift action to have the opposing *sarpanch* suspended in 2012.

Following the suspension, Gurjant extended his support to Khem Singh's bid to complete the deposed *sarpanch's* term and his candidacy for the *sarpanch* position in 2013. During Khem Singh's subsequent tenure, the yearly auctions were conducted in accordance with the rules, and Gurjant Singh assisted by supplying the *panchayat* with multiple tube wells to expand the area of irrigated common land under its control.

While these efforts substantially increased village revenues, they also raised the cost of leasing village land and prevented numerous farmers from doing so. One of Khem Singh's supporters, a financially struggling Jat who worked as a milkman, lamented that he used to rent 3 acres of land for ₹10,000, but the same land was now being leased for ₹45,000. Another farmer echoed similar sentiments, expressing concerns about the high costs and the risks associated with leasing land. He mentioned that even though he had leased some land that year, he deemed it too risky and was reluctant to do so in the future. The high costs meant that any crop damage or failure would result in substantial losses. It became apparent that several farmers had come to the same conclusion, as the number of households leasing village land had decreased from around forty before 2012 to only twenty in 2013–2014.

Khem Singh, however, managed to continue cultivating his 30 acres at only ₹20,000 per acre.[7] One of his supporters explained that this was because the land in question had not officially been equipped with tube wells, and therefore its lease value was close to that of unirrigated land. However, I soon found out that its value to Khem Singh was the same as that of irrigated land because it lay adjacent to his own 5 acres and

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he could use his private tube wells to irrigate it. Naib Singh—the rival faction leader—alleged that Khem Singh had intentionally avoided placing any of the new tube wells near the land to continue benefiting from this arrangement.[8] While, unlike in Daroli, Gurjant had not intervened to allow this, Naib Singh claimed that it was because of him that Khem Singh could get away with it.

Naib Singh also highlighted that because of Gurjant Singh's patronage, Khem Singh was largely unaccountable to his fellow villagers. Like many *sarpanch*es, as we saw in Chapter 4, Khem Singh kept *panchayat* records privately in his home, contravening the rule that these are meant to be kept ready for inspection in a public place. Inevitably perhaps, this gave rise to various speculations not only about whether he was truly paying rent for the 30 acres of village common land that he cultivated but also about how he was utilizing the considerable income accruing to the *panchayat* through the lease of common land. Naib Singh and his allies, for example, confidently asserted that Khem Singh was embezzling *panchayat* funds but admitted that they had no means to prove it. When I asked them why they did not place a RTI request to find out, they alleged that it would be futile and even potentially dangerous. They explained that it would be futile because Gurjant would ensure that any investigation against a protégé would get botched, and that it would be potentially dangerous because Khem Singh might once again resort to using his connections to place fabricated charges against them.

In sum, the Fatehpur case further reinforces this chapter's central claim that informality primarily benefits elites—here most starkly illustrated by the concentration of gains in the hands of a single politically connected actor. It also underscores how informal political patronage networks continuously subvert even well-intentioned efforts to regularize resource allocation and promote institutional accountability.

Conclusion

The central narrative of this book posits that Punjab's rural elite have consolidated their hold over state institutions and public resources to the detriment of the larger population. This chapter contributes to that argument by connecting the literature on accumulation by dispossession to the topic of informality and to some of the recent scholarship on the subject. It shows how informality functions as a mode of governance—one that enables elite actors to circumvent formal legal frameworks and dispossess others through personalized, opaque, and politically mediated

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means. Contrary to the view that such informal arrangements constitute practical solutions to problems caused by unresponsive or inaccessible state institutions, this chapter demonstrates that they are ad hoc, temporary, and unreliable—and that they are neither random nor incidental. To analyze these dynamics, I draw on Barbara Harriss-White's (1997) concept of "shadow states" to argue that informal processes of dispossession are enabled by durable, unaccountable networks of elite actors. These actors operate both within and beyond formal state roles—often simultaneously—and use their positions to sap the state of resources and undermine its capacity to perform core developmental and redistributive functions. By tracing how these networks enable accumulation while offering no durable protection to the less powerful, this chapter underscores how informality entrenches exclusion rather than offering meaningful democratic inclusion.

A prominent example of the view that informality fosters meaningful democratic inclusion is found in Anastasia Piliavsky's 2014 work on patronage. In her introduction to *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*, Piliavsky frames patronage—a form of political informality—as a mechanism that enables participation and redistribution not available to those living under the iron grip of bureaucratic rationality.[9] Rather than viewing patronage as a distortion of democratic ideals, she presents it as a culturally embedded and morally resonant mode of governance through which citizens gain access to state resources via personal relationships.[10]

While this account illuminates how people navigate the state in practice, it plays down the structural asymmetries that underpin such interactions. By emphasizing the moral idiom of patronage rather than the material inequalities that sustain it, she overlooks how such relationships can become coercive (the sorts of coercive relationship highlighted by previous scholars including Geertz (1960), Eisenstadt (1973), Blok (1974), and Boissevain (1969). Thus, her account does not grapple with how coercion and exclusion are not deviations but routine features of informal governance. In contrast, this chapter shows how informality in Punjab enables elite accumulation through the dispossession of others—offering ad hoc and fragile accommodations to the less powerful rather than securing durable entitlements or broadening democratic inclusion.[11]

Other scholars have acknowledged the ways in which personalized access to the state through corrupt cronyism disproportionately benefits elites at the expense of the rest, but they have nevertheless suggested that it can also serve to extend citizenship (Berenschot and Van Klinken 2018; Björkman 2021; Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Manor 2000). Berenschot and

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Van Klinken (2018), for example, use the term "informality" to define a "particular mode of state-citizen interaction marked by the use of personal connections as a means to influence the implementation of state regulations (Berenschot and Van Klinken 2018, 99) and explicitly contest Charles Tilly's (Tilly 1997) assertion that it stands in an antagonistic relationship to citizenship. Based on the claim that informality, in fact, "shapes the capacity of citizens to realize their rights as citizens' (107), they issue a call for scholars to analyze "how and when the character of social networks and embedded norms of reciprocity strengthen (or weaken) citizenship regimes" (Berenschot and Van Klinken 2018, 107). To make their case about how informality can strengthen citizenship, they recount the instance of a woman named Yoma who gains access to a newly expanded subsidized healthcare program through a politically affiliated broker.[12]

But can informal arrangements ever truly expand citizenship? Can state agents who act ultra vires, breaking laws and regulations to serve their clients and personal relations, ever enhance citizenship? Since this form of informality involves extra-legal and illegal agreements, it cannot by definition contribute to the formal, or de jure, expansion of citizenship. However, some might argue that it can extend de facto citizenship to broader segments of the population. For example, one might imagine scenarios in which politicians and bureaucrats do this by disregarding or breaking laws that threaten to dispossess people of their livelihoods and homes. One might also draw on examples from Partha Chatterjee's (2004) work illustrating how state agents who ignore rules and regulations allow hawkers and street vendors to pursue their trades and earn their livelihoods or how politicians intervene to prevent illegal squatters from being evicted. These ad hoc interventions, by preventing pauperization and homelessness, might arguably be seen as fostering some form of minimal de facto citizenship.

However, beyond failing to expand de jure citizenship, such informal interventions invariably place those who benefit from them at the mercy of gatekeepers and patrons who, by virtue of their control over state resources, can exploit them by threatening to withhold benefits unless they comply with financial or political demands. Such an exploitative dynamic has been starkly illustrated by Barbara Harriss-White (2003), who shows how politicians and police, in return for allowing a significant portion of Karachi's population to live in unauthorized settlements, can extort both financial and political support from these residents. Although not explicitly indicating outright extortion, the material in this chapter

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likewise shows how politicians were in a position to exploit farmers for electoral gain based on their ability to strategically grant and withhold the privilege to capture common land. A similar dynamic was also illustrated in Chapter 1, where the *sarpanch* Balwant protected Sansi smugglers from police intervention and used this leverage to extract both material resources and political loyalty.

Wrapping up this chapter, the preceding discussion both underscores and reinforces the book's central thesis: in much of rural north India today, democratic politics perpetuates inequality because it represents the interests of locally dominant classes. This chapter has added to this argument by showing how political actors mobilize informal networks and leverage personal influence to engage in accumulation by dispossession, thereby exacerbating material inequality and even deepening rural poverty. The findings point toward a disquieting conclusion: rather than counteracting inequality and exclusion, democratic politics—when shaped by elite-dominated informal structures—has helped reproduce and intensify them. This, however, is not a call to abandon democratic ideals, but rather to critically examine how they are subverted in practice. The next chapter turns to Dalit politics and protest in Punjab—including religious conversion, electoral participation facilitated by caste-based reservations, and collective mobilization through social movements—to ask why these efforts have not meaningfully challenged the entrenched power of dominant rural elites.

Notes

1. This episode gave rise to a successful protest in which the Bharti Kisan Union (BKU) (Ekta Ugrahan), along with other farmer and farm labor unions, supported an agitation by the Dalits seeking compensation for the loss of their homesteads.
2. One such report (Vasudeva 2016) revealed that property brokers misled farmers by falsely claiming that the government would offer minimal or no compensation for their lands. Exploiting this misinformation, the fraudsters convinced the farmers to sell their land to them at below-market rates. To their dismay, the farmers soon discovered that the government offered a fair price for the land and that they had been conned.
3. In the interim period, before redeveloping the property, Gurbachan had apparently used it to host drinking parties, and there were rumors that Gurbachan had even used it as a sort of brothel for members of the local political elite.

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4. It should also allow SC to better withstand any boycotts in which Jat cultivators deny them the right to harvest wood from their fields, or even the right to parts of their fields as open-air latrines.
5. I also found out that a black market in village common land had developed in at least one village where it was being traded at rates far below the market rate for private agricultural land since it was not possible to obtain legal ownership over it.
6. However, according to several villagers I interviewed, the connection between Nirmal Singh and the woman's death was tenuous, and Nirmal Singh's successor as faction leader believed that Khem Singh had employed his connections with Gurjant and the police to fabricate the charges.
7. One interviewee even alleged that Khem Singh was, in fact, not paying any rent at all for 10 of the 30 acres, but there was—as with many of these allegations—no way for me to confirm this.
8. It was Naib Singh who first alerted me to the fact that during a previous term in office, Khem Singh had purposefully allotted common land that he and his allies had cultivated for the purpose of building a new housing estate for the village SCs. This, as we saw in Chapter 4, had given rise to yet another legal dispute that had prevented the SCs from gaining secure ownership over the plots.
9. Anastasia Piliavsky suggests that the Weberian model of good governance "deprives democracy of its demos and politics of its content: the 'interests' and 'influences' which we call 'corruption', yet without which electoral politics would simply cease" (Piliavsky 2014).
10. She argues that patronage facilitates "social mobility and political participation" (Piliavsky 2014, 6). It facilitates these things thanks to generous patrons for whom "giving was an expression of generosity, the cornerstone value of South Asia's political life" (Piliavsky 2014, 9). She claims that this remains true today and that it is because Indian politicians are generous that Indians turn out in large numbers to vote for them—and that the country can boast such high voter turnouts. This, in turn, leads her to conclude that the ideology of patronage "may be better suited to democracy's central aim—the involvement of the largest number of citizens in the governmental process" (Piliavsky 2014, 174) than the ideology of "contractual individualism."
11. Piliavsky indicates that since she defines patronage as a moral idiom rather than a fixed transactional form, instances of exploitation do not undermine her argument. However, framing patronage as an ideal rather than a practice limits its analytical value—particularly given how often

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asymmetries of power mean the ideal is unrealized, since the powerful cannot be reliably held to account by a moral idiom alone.

12. While compelling, their example might be seen as illustrating how brokers help citizens navigate the formal state rather than demonstrating state actors operating outside legal frameworks. In this sense, it may not fully align with definitions of informality—such as Tilly's—that emphasize extra-legal or extra-vires state action.

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