

Entangled Endeavors: Ethnographic Histories and Untouchable Pasts

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This paper draws upon my wider construction of a history of an untouchable community over the past 200 years.¹ It underscores a mutual logic shaping ethnographic histories and untouchable pasts as connected subjects, entangled endeavors. This shared logic is premised upon a reading of the past and the present that brings together three recent and distinct theoretical tendencies: innovative renderings of ethnographics of the historical imagination and histories in the ethnographic grain; skillful constructions of pasts that seize upon the “subaltern” as a critical perspective;² and imaginative writings that place a conceptual emphasis on the “everyday” as an analytical terrain for tracing the production, transaction, and contestations of meaning and power, ever in play with each other, within the many “imaginative pathways” of historical practice.³ Once an implicit critical dialogue is set up between these overlapping but diverse analytical perspectives, the entangled subjects of ethnographic histories and untouchable pasts work to elaborate central analytical questions and key theoretical issues involving reasons of myth and rituals of history, colonial modernities and postcolonial traditions, contestations of authority and containments of power, and the meanings of subalterns and the margins of Hinduism. Before I turn to these themes that run as connected strands through this paper, a brief introduction to the protagonists of this story is in order.

Brief Beginnings

Satnampanth was initiated in the early 19th century by Ghasidas, a farm servant, primarily among the Chamars (etymologically, leather workers) of Chhattisgarh, a large cultural region bound through linguistic ties in the south-eastern Central Provinces (present-day Madhya Pradesh). This group formed a little less than one-fifth of the total population of Chhattisgarh.⁴ Most of its members either owned land or were share-croppers and farm servants. Yet the ritual association of the Chamars with hides and carrion meant that the group and its members, collectively and personally, embodied the stigma of the death pollution of the sacred cow, locating the caste on the margins of the Hindu order. The Chamars — and a few hundred members of other

castes — who joined Satnampanth now became Satnamis, offering a challenge to the intermeshed schemes of divine, ritual, and social hierarchies in Chhattisgarh. The Satnamis had to abstain from meat, liquor, tobacco, and certain vegetables and pulses. They were prohibited the use of cows, as opposed to bullocks, in any of their agricultural operations. There was a rejection of Hindu deities, idols, and temples within Satnampanth. The members were asked to believe only in a formless god, Satnam (true name). There were to be no distinctions of caste within Satnampanth. With Ghasidas began a guru *parampara* (tradition) which was hereditary, and there developed in Satnampanth a stock of myths and rituals that were associated with the gurus. The subaltern religious formation combined in itself the features of a caste and the principles of a sect. These various moves in their special singularity and distinctive detail contested the tenor of ritual power and colonial authority in Chhattisgarh, but they also reproduced forms of inequality within the group. Indeed, these simultaneous processes were part of a wider logic. Over the 19th and 20th centuries, the Satnamis coped with shifts in the agrarian economy and changes in the relationships of power, negotiated various efforts to regulate the community, and drew upon symbols of power to question and challenge their subordination. At the same time, across this period, the Satnamis — who continue to be an important presence in Chhattisgarh — also elaborated schemes of meaning and power imbued with ambiguity and reworkings of domination within the community.

The Satnamis have formed an internally differentiated community. The articulations of property, office, and gender have shaped patterns of authority within the group. After the establishment of new proprietary rights under the *malguzari* (village proprietor) settlement, introduced by British administration in the 1860s, the Satnamis — along with the Chamars — constituted a little over one-fourth of the total tenant population of the districts of Bilaspur, Raipur, and Durg. The other members of the Satnami population stood on opposite ends of the agrarian hierarchy: a relatively small number of agricultural laborers and farm servants, and a very few *malguzars*. The power of property was closely

linked with the privileges of office. Important Satnami *mal-guzars* were not only tied to the family of the guru through bonds of kinship, but they also occupied important positions within the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth. The members of the guru family and the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth, who were closely involved in questioning the subordination of Satnamis by dominant castes, also disciplined and regulated the community. These forms of power were compounded by critical gender differentials within Satnampanth. The embedding of specific practices of Satnami kinship in a wider system governed by patrilineal and patrivorilocal principles alongside a contradictory ordering of female sexuality within the group's myths and rituals had very particular consequences. On the one hand, Satnami women earned a measure of autonomy and forms of flexibility to negotiate marriages and men in everyday arenas. On the other hand, there was a double-edged construction of the agency of Satnami women, marking them with distinct attributes of marginality, an aggressive sexuality and a deviant femininity, and providing a means for their sexual exploitation by upper caste men and members of the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth.⁵ With this grim reminder of the need to guard against reified romanticizations of communities, I end my introductory sketch of the Satnamis.

Critical Margins

Margins carry geometrical designations and logical entailments. Margins are also contentious terrain and contending categories. Margins are attributes of social space, its ends. Margins are also devices of critical thought, its means. Margins do not merely refer to dispossessed peoples and subaltern groups, but also to domains of human knowledge and arenas of historical endeavor that have been subordinated by scholarly schemes in the social sciences and normalized by distinct disciplines in the humanities — strategies and blueprints of knowledge that have variously turned critical difference into mind numbing sameness and transformed a common humanity into exotic otherness. Margins are fluid terrains that have come to be rendered as bounded arenas — designated as peripheral by states of erudition, and entailed as disreputable by reasons of governance — but they are also porous borders that interrogate the central claims of dominant knowledge and enlightened power.⁶ In these overlapping but diverse senses, the untouchable pasts of the Satnamis and an ethnographic history of the community fit the bill of margins as an analytical perspective.

The past few years have witnessed a vigorous debate around the question of the colonial origins of the categories of Hindu and Hinduism. While one set of scholars has seized upon etymological and philological issues to suggest that these categories are creations of colonial imaginings, the products of the 19th century, other historians and anthropologists have emphasized the precolonial basis of religious (and caste) categories which provided a means for colonial representations. Both sides have tended to privi-

lege questions of the origins or foundations of these categories, and defined the meanings of Hindu and Hinduism rather exclusively in relation to other religions, mainly Islam. A history of the Satnamis constructed in the ethnographic grain serves to recast the debate around this question in terms of perspectives drawn from the pasts of a group which stood on the margins of these categories — categories that were elaborated within wider cultural processes defined by power. Here a focus on the multiple negotiations and interrogations, reworkings and challenges that went into the production of different meanings of Hinduism — I speak not merely of the word, but equally of the social relationships made up of domination, subordination, and resistance that it describes — at once shows the limitations of a primary concern with the origins of the categories of Hindu and Hinduism and the dangers of reifying them as static entities.⁷

Through the filters of untouchable pasts, the categories of Hindu and Hinduism emerge as descriptive and analytical shorthands that make possible an understanding of the constantly changing patterns and fluid lived arrangements of religious meanings and ritual practices, practices which have variously elaborated and contested the mutually intermeshed divine, ritual, and social hierarchies of Hinduism under precolonial regimes, colonial rule, and independent states in South Asia (and beyond). From the perspectives of analytical margins, these categories are equally revealed as critical resources that were worked upon in selective and contending ways by various castes and communities in their articulations of religious and political identities, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. On the one hand, the growing rigidities of hierarchies of caste — particularly, the norms of purity and pollution — that worked against the Chamars in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were not fabricated by the colonial regime. Rather these developments had their beginnings in precolonial Chhattisgarh ruled by the Marathas, only to be intensified under colonial rule. These historical processes came to underlie the formation and elaboration of Satnampanth, a subaltern religious endeavor that fashioned its distinct identity by questioning the ritual power embedded within caste and by constructing hierarchies of otherness — and not merely the Other — within the Hindu social order in the 19th century. On the other hand, from the 1920s, as we shall see, the Satnamis went on to variously negotiate different constructions of the Hindu order under the regime of caste associations, within the wider context of culturally and politically constituted understandings of Hinduism by nationalists and social reformers. These dominant understandings of Hinduism were elaborated alongside measures constructed by the colonial government in relation to religious communities, and their negotiation by the Satnamis involved fashionings of novel identities, which had contradictory and unintended consequences for the group's articulations of community and nation. Indeed, such critical implications of the meanings gleaned from these margins also extend to other central questions in the history and ethnography of South Asia.

It is often the case that studies of religion and ritual in South Asia tend to underplay considerations of political economy and concerns of state formation.⁸ At the same time, analyses which seek to redress this imbalance often privilege the determinations and transformations of economic structures and political processes, and render religion as epiphenomenal (or at any rate derivative upon the brute realities and underlying dynamics of political economy). The difficulties with both procedures are evident: the first veers toward bracketing religion from wider historical processes, implicitly casting it as a static repository of timeless traditions; and the second tends toward reifying the abstract workings of subterranean structures, virtually exorcising the mediation and influence of religious meanings and human practices upon processes of the past and the present.

I have no ready solution to an enduring problem of social theory. Instead of a singular answer, what is offered here are working suggestions. If we dispense with overriding teleological schemes and overarching theoretical models, the linkages between the analytical arenas of political economy and religious formations do not appear as predetermined verities, but rather as complex connections and conjunctural relationships whose protean forms and emergent patterns need to be unraveled and specified in particular contexts and determinate domains. If we further acknowledge the enormous extent to which the archival record for South Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries was shaped by the preoccupation of the colonial state and indigenous regimes with the extraction of revenue and the maintenance of law and order, it becomes clear that the difficulties of tracing the interconnections between (heuristic fields of) political economy and (analytical configurations of) religion are further compounded by the idiosyncrasies and perversities of the archive, particularly regarding quotidian subaltern endeavors and untouchable religious initiatives. Once more, the perspectives drawn from untouchable pasts suggest other possibilities — at once theoretical in scope but modest in scale, astutely analytical in their efforts but acutely aware of their limits — of attending to changes and continuities in the domain of political economy while elaborating the fluid but constant interplay between cultural schemes, social relationships, religious meanings, and ritual power. Such modes of analysis run through my wider renderings of the pasts of the Satnamis over the last 200 years — quite as they inform my other projects of research and writing on the evangelical encounter in central India and the dynamics of state-modern law and indigenous-popular legalities in Chhattisgarh in the 19th and 20th centuries — but a single example should suffice here.

The formation of Satnampanth was informed by the wider context of Maratha rule (1742-1854) in Chhattisgarh, located within the broader processes of state formation and revenue practices in the region. We know that during the past few years imaginative historical accounts of economic and social institutions and processes in Maratha polities have revised our understanding of the 18th and early 19th

centuries in India. The crude caricature of Maratha rule as a predatory empire of the saddle has been replaced by a nuanced picture which shows significant continuities between the Mughals and the Marathas, an expansion in agricultural production in Maratha territories, and a complex and sophisticated system of revenue collection in the shaping of Maratha administration.⁹ Chhattisgarh as a frontier province within the Maratha dominions shared features of this wider picture, but the region also had its own peculiarities. The administrative measures of British superintendents who governed Chhattisgarh between 1818 and 1830 compounded these complexities. Satnampanth was a response to cultural and economic processes which had a contradictory dimension for the Chamars in the region. These processes allowed members of the group to establish their own villages and thereby to negotiate and partly escape the authority of upper caste officials. But they also led to an increasing subordination and further marginalization of other Chamars in villages dominated by higher castes in the face of a growing rigidity of the norms of purity and pollution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. As I have shown elsewhere, the formation of Satnampanth occurred within the interstices of two simultaneous movements: the processes of continuity and change at the frontier of Maratha polity and the Company's dominions; and the centrality of conflict and innovation in the arena of popular religious practices.¹⁰ Indeed, it is the processes within political economy and the elaborations of state formation — both centering upon revenue practices — in Chhattisgarh that provide meaning to the symbolic construction of a subordinate religious initiative, which carved for itself a distinct religious identity in relation to the ritual power of the social and divine hierarchies within the caste order in the region. I have noted that Satnampanth has combined the features of a caste and a sect. The subaltern religious formation thus confounds the logical schemes of historians and anthropologists who generally conceive of caste and sect as binary categories, even as they include the possibility that sects “degenerate” into castes. This influential understanding is a legacy of Louis Dumont's dominant model, which is based upon a Brahman householder's construction of renunciation and asceticism.¹¹ The work of Richard Burghart, Peter van der Veer, and David Lorenzen has shown that this model tends to ignore the perspectives of the ascetic and the non-twice-born caste. It thereby overlooks the permeable boundaries of the householder and the renouncer, and the interpenetration in practice of principles of caste and sect.¹² Such intertwining of the principles of these simultaneously distinct but overlapping categories has been evident in Satnampanth. I will elaborate these issues soon, but two points are pertinent here. It is not only that Satnampanth is a sectarian formation governed by an unalloyed logic of reconstituting the untouchable status of its members. It is also that the founder of this subaltern religious endeavor, Ghasidas, remained an ascetic householder guru, and from the time of his son, Balakdas, the guru as the head of the organizational hierarchy and the formal owner-

proprietor of the village of Bhandar simultaneously embodied the truth of *Satnam* and the symbolically constituted attributes of royalty of the raja and the dominant caste.

Yet a wider cultural acceptance of such redrawn ritual boundaries is not merely rare but often quite impossible, particularly when the protagonists are overwhelmingly lower caste men and women. It is a truism that the Satnamis functioned within the schemes of power of the caste order in Chhattisgarh. We know now that Louis Dumont's vastly influential statement of the nature of caste society in South Asia encompasses power within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and renders it epiphenomenal.¹³ More recent studies by Nicholas Dirks, Gloria Raheja, and Declan Quigley have opened up possibilities for discussions of the interplay between caste structure and ritual dominance: but they have all tended to locate power, virtually exclusively, in constructs of kingship and the dominant caste constituted by cultural, ideological and ritual attributes.¹⁴ Here the very marginal status of the Satnamis — their lowly position in the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, and their exclusion from the web of relationships defined by service castes — suggests a rather different understanding of the nature of power in the caste order. An ethnographic history that draws upon Satnami myths and practices and the group's oral accounts about the late colonial period reveals that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the ritual centrality of kingship and dominant caste(s) were both symbolic schemes that elaborated modes of domination and power. These intertwined hegemonic axes worked together to secure the subordination of the Satnamis and other lower-caste groups in Chhattisgarh, and — lest we forget — elsewhere in South Asia too. The perspectives of untouchable pasts also clarify that these symbolic schemes were further entangled with the signs and metaphors of colonial power. Indeed, the colonial presence in Chhattisgarh after the 19th century compounded the forms of ritual dominance in the caste order: the symbols and practices of colonial governance were reworked in quotidian arenas; the upper-caste *malguzar* came to be widely fashioned as the raja of the village; and there were novel articulations of ritual power in the elaborations of caste in village life. Clearly, there was much in the local configurations of dominance that was weighted against the Satnamis.¹⁵

The Satnamis negotiated and resisted these relations of power in diverse ways. There is a larger analytical issue here. Rather than reifying "resistance" and "hegemony" as immaculate conceptions, it is important to understand their several renderings as historical practice in particular cultural contexts, and to endorse their various elaborations as signifying action in determinate historical arenas. Instead of privileging hegemony and resistance as fully finished strategies, it is crucial to realize that they are social processes. In place of hypostatizing resistance and hegemony as starkly opposed entities, it is critical to recognize that the two mutually entail each other through provisions of power and containments of domination, always uncertain in their effects, already questioned by divergent imaginings.¹⁶

The creation of Satnampanth initiated the challenge to ritual power within caste society in Chhattisgarh. The subaltern religious endeavor at once drew upon popular traditions and the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, rejected the divine and social hierarchies that centered on the Hindu pantheon, and repositioned the signs in a new matrix to question the ascribed ritual status of Chamars as lowly untouchables. At the same time, in the new sect, the rejection of distinctions of caste among its predominantly Chamar constituency and a few hundred Teli and Rawat members was accompanied by prohibitions that governed the transactions with other castes, reproducing the significance of meanings and patterns of power embedded within the ritual schemes of the caste order. From the 1850s the formalization and elaboration of the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth — presided over by the guru who combined the twin, inextricably bound characteristics of the raja and the embodiment of the truth of *Satnam* — constituted an alternative to the formidable network of relationships of village proprietors and dominant landholding groups with service castes: but this organizational structure also worked together with other institutions of the Satnamis (particularly *ramat*, the tour of the guru) to provide the gurus with means of control over the community. In the latter part of the 19th century, the Satnamis responded to their expropriation and exploitation under the new system of proprietary rights and *malguzari* settlement — established by the colonial regime in the 1860s — by deserting villages, continuing with the practice of *lakhbata* (the periodic redistribution of land) in Satnami villages, and revealing their solidarity in challenges to upper caste *malguzars* over high rents and loss of land in the 1890s.

The enduring contestations of power by the Satnamis continued to be rooted in familiar arenas. The Satnami structure of beliefs, modes of worship, and social organization allowed the group to negotiate and resist the principles of ritual subordination and forms of discrimination that pervaded everyday life. Here the repertoire of myths of the Satnamis powerfully elaborated the group's imaginings of its heroic histories and current predicaments. For the purposes of the present discussion, these myths, a part of the community's ongoing oral traditions, ordered the past of Satnampanth. The Satnami gurus underwent trials, overcame obstacles, and displaced figures of authority to define the boundary and orchestrate the symbolic construction of Satnampanth. The myths of community interrogated the intermeshed principles of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, the ritually and culturally constituted centrality of kingship and landholding dominant castes, and the modes of power derived from colonial administration in the region.¹⁷ Finally, in the midst of efforts, often initiated by upper caste benefactors, to recast the identity of the Satnamis along the lines of recently constructed authoritative blueprints of Hinduism in the 1920s and 1930s, the group fashioned distinctive uses for the key emphases of the Hinduism(s) on offer, and its reworkings of Hindu identities were accompanied by a challenge to the upper castes. Yet, these

moves were predicated on the fact that the very making and elaboration of Satnampanth had carried forward the meanings embedded within the hierarchies and centers of ritual power in the caste order. Indeed, if the pasts of the Satnami reveal varieties of resistance, particularly in their refigurings of ritual forms and the fashionings of mythic meanings, it is also true that Satnami contestations, often conducted in a religious idiom, engaged with as well as subverted but were equally contained and enabled by the hegemonic processes of caste and colonial power in Chhattisgarh.

Much more than univocal projects of overriding control, hegemonies — note that I render this critical category in the plural now — often work through saturated signs, dripping with dominance, which find their way within the interstices of subaltern communities. I am speaking of blinkers that clouded the Satnamis' visions in different directions and of binds that constrained their practices in several fields. At the same time, the saturated signs that lie at the heart of hegemonic schemes and authoritative projects are also reworked in everyday arenas by subaltern subjects. I am now writing about blinkers that left the Satnamis' sight clear along various paths and about binds that enabled their actions in diverse arenas. It follows too that the forms of resistance of subordinate groups are often contingent upon wider symbolic and substantive schemes of domination, but these contestations of authority also continuously redraw the boundaries of meaning and power. I have in mind here the fact that in the nitty-gritty of historical practice the Satnamis' fashionings of oppositional identities often reproduced the dominant meanings of Hindu hierarchies, quite as the group's reworkings of colonial power worked to trip a contradictory and chequered modernity in its own disorderliness.¹⁸

These processes were inseparable. We forget at our own peril that power at once constrains and enables. We overlook at our own cost that these containments and engenderings feed each other. For long now, fantasies have circulated of unimpaired political visions and unhampered cultural practices of social actors, fictions that constitute truly "autonomous agents" in wide varieties of contemporary discourses on empowerment and current politics of identity. These imaginings reify human agency by rendering it as the purposive activity of purely individual actors, exorcising the conditions of power that make social action possible. At the same time, the notion of pure power holding its sway over subjectless processes is an equally disabling device, quite possibly a sign of our times of "epistemological ennui and ethical exhaustion." Against the lingering enchantments of these contemporary fables that feature relentless reifications of agency and increasing inflations of power, let me illustrate the key themes that I have discussed by turning to a very small part of the much wider body of the untouchable pasts and ethnographic histories at stake here.

Engaging Stories

Around 1850, after the death of Ghasidas, the *guru*

gaddi (seat of guru) of Satnampanth came into the hands of Balakdas, the founder's second son.¹⁹ Balakdas institutionalized the practices, defined the organizational hierarchy, and elaborated the regulations of Satnampanth. The first seat of the gurus was established in Bhandar. Ghasidas lived in the village during the last years of his life and cured and healed the bodies of Satnamis with *amrit*, water in which he had dipped his toe or thumb. Thus, Balakdas inherited a very considerable legacy of ritual power: the absence of idols of gods and goddesses in Satnampanth meant that the guru, the only anthropomorphic icon, had become the living symbol of worship and belief for the Satnamis. Here the *darshan* (vision) of the guru carried the substance of his authority and constituted a distinct mode of worship, and *amrit* purified and regenerated the bodies of Satnamis, continuously integrating them into Satnampanth. Balakdas also built upon this legacy. He institutionalized the practice of *guru puja* (worship of the guru) on the sacred dates of the Satnami ritual calendar — Dashehra, Bhad Aathon, and Maghi Puno — that attracted ever large numbers of Satnamis to Bhandar. Moreover, the tightening of the rules of consanguinity and commensality in Satnampanth under Balakdas further swelled the numbers of Satnamis who thronged to Bhandar, as pure pilgrims were joined by those of their impure brethren who had transgressed the norms of the sect and now wished to reenter it by means of the guru. Finally, after the initiation of settlement operations and the grant of proprietary rights in the 1860s the guru became the owner-proprietor of Bhandar, which added further prestige to this pre-eminent site of Satnami pilgrimage. Through the many vicissitudes of quarrels within the guru family, the division of the *gaddi* (seat of the guru), and the acquisition of other villages by members of Ghasidas's patrilineage, Bhandar remained the effective locus of ritual power of the Satnami Guru.

The story repeated itself with the institution of *ramat*, which was the other means for the Satnamis of getting a *darshan* (vision) of the guru and obtaining *amrit*. In the true stories of the Satnamis, embodied in their myths and narrated in the course of conversations and discussions during my field work, *ramat* was begun by Ghasidas but the practice was put on a sound organizational basis by Balakdas. Indeed, under Balakdas, the practice of *ramat* — which involved the gurus' travels every year to different villages so that the Satnamis gained their *darshan*, while the gurus in turn settled matters involving the violation and transgression of the norms of Satnampanth — was turned into an institutionalized work of considerable finesse, even a spectacle. Balakdas outraged the feelings of the Thakurs of Chhattisgarh, who fashioned themselves as a warrior caste by going on tour, riding an elephant, and wearing the sacred thread. We know that in the hierarchies of the caste order, the use of elephants as modes of transport has been reserved for dominant castes, and the wearing of the sacred thread is a mark of twice-born castes. Balakdas's appropriations here expropriated dominant groups of symbols that defined their authority through marks of exclusion and dis-

tion, and also rehearsed the spectacular in *ramat*, which stood fully institutionalized in the later decades of the second half of the 19th century.

Actually, the major fortunes made by the gurus from the offerings of Satnamis in Bhandar and during *ramat*, combined with the acquisition of the proprietary rights of Bhandar and other villages, meant that regal attributes came to be attached to the Satnami guru. The guru was both on a par with, and shared aspects of, a *raja admi* (kingly person). The presence of a large house in Bhandar, the use of elephants, camels, and horses as modes of transport, and the keeping of armed retainers formed part of this picture. Indeed, if Ghasidas was a guru in the manner of a miraculous ascetic householder, Balakdas was much more a figure in the mold of a conqueror who invested the seat of the Satnami guru with attributes of royalty for his successors to refine and elaborate. A photograph from the late 19th century shows a Satnami guru with his retinue and underscores the twin aspects of the guru's authority: the provider of *amrit* and the raja-like figure with his retinue of advisors, bodyguards, soldiers, and a peon.

The structure of the guru's authority was further secured through the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth. The foundations of this organizational structure lay in Ghasidas's appointment of *bhandaris* in villages. Balakdas went on to considerably develop and formalize the structure which was later refined by his successors. The organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth extended from the gurus at the top, moving on to *mahants*, then to *diwans*, and finally down to *bhandaris* and *sathidars* in villages and to the body guards and peons in the guru's entourage. The *mahant* represented the guru in a group of villages; the *diwan* was an advisor to the guru; the *sathidar* fetched Satnamis on ritual occasions and helped the *bhandari* within the village. By the late 19th century, Satnampanth had a firmly entrenched organizational hierarchy, which served as an alternate ritual and symbolic power center to dominant groups and their network of relationships with service castes.

This organizational network contributed to Satnampanth combining the features of a caste and a sect. In brief, the guru regulated the prohibitions on food and controlled matters of marriage to maintain the boundedness of the Satnamis. In both these arenas, the rules of Satnampanth were tightened under Balakdas. A Satnami who broke the prohibitions and rules of commensality and consanguinity had to drink the guru's *amrit*, make an offering of a coconut and money to him, and feed the other Satnamis within the village. The guru's control was exercised through *mahants* and *diwans*, *bhandaris*, and *sathidars*. The Satnamis were simultaneously the incorporated members of a caste and the initiated followers of a sect. Among them, concerns of *jati* (caste) and *panth* (sect) were fused together to be closely regulated by the guru.

By the middle of the 19th century, specific symbolic markers defined the boundary of Satnampanth, and Balak-

das added to this process of symbolic construction. The guru distributed the *janeu* (sacred thread), a sign of the twice-born within the caste hierarchy, among the Satnamis. The appropriation of the sacred thread, which was worn by a male Satnami after he came of age and started following the rules of Satnampanth, challenged the upper caste monopoly over a sign of ritual purity which was constitutive of their domination. Moreover, there is a further twist to this tale. Satnamis argue that the combination of *janeu* and *kanthi* — the string with wooden beads that was appropriated by Ghasidas from Kabirpanth and was worn by members of Satnampanth after their rite of initiation — distinguished them from Kabirpanthis and Vaishnavas (who wore the *kanthi*) and from Brahmins and other upper castes (who wore the *janeu*). Finally, in the second half of the 19th century the Satnamis elaborated another marker in the form of *jait khambh* (victory pillar), a high pole with a small white triangular flag on top. The *jait khambh* in each village reminded the Satnamis of their boundedness as a group. A symbol of the guru, the piece of white cloth was changed on the occasions of *guru puja*. The markers within Satnampanth underscored the centrality of the guru who was the representative of Satnam.

This past is played out in ever-interesting ways in the oral mythic tradition of the Satnamis. In the period up to the 1850s, Satnampanth was still marked by considerable fluidity, which is indexed by Satnami myths about Ghasidas that bear upon the making of Satnampanth. Here if Ghasidas initiated Satnampanth on the command of Satnampurush, the embodiment of Satnam, the guru also questioned and offered a challenge to Satnampurush. Indeed, Satnami myths, in tune with a specific logic of oral traditions, simultaneously distinguished between the figures of Ghasidas and Satnampurush but also conflated the identities of these divine beings through a metaphoric juxtaposition of their mythic attributes and ritual power. At the same time, Ghasidas's encounters with the other major figures who populated the cosmic and social order were marked by a greater degree of caution. What was of essence here was a displacement of these figures, not by eclipsing them but by demarcating their separate spheres of authority to constitute the emergent boundaries of Satnampanth. Thus, in his encounters with the Gond king of Sonakhan and *angrez raja* (English king) of Raipur, even as Ghasidas demonstrated his superior, just and moral authority, he also humbly acceded to the unjust demands of these regal figures. Similarly, this demarcation of separate and complementary spheres of authority was also evident in Ghasidas's encounter with Danteshwari Devi, the goddess to whom human sacrifices were made in the chieftdom of Bastar, only now it was worked out through a play upon configurations of affinal kinship in the cosmic order.

These primary pasts that cautiously displaced mythic figures in the making of Satnampanth were to be replaced by rather more heroic histories as the sect acquired a firmer organizational and institutional basis in the second half of the 19th century. In the myths of the community, the sway

of Satnampanth and the solidarity of the Satnamis are represented through Balakdas's rounds of *ramat*, which are rendered as successful conquests, triumphs over rival figures of authority. The forms of the guru's power are clear. Balakdas's spectacular entourage consisted, on the one hand, of two mythic gladiators, who wielded swords and guns with equal ease, accompanied by 4,000 other warriors, and, on the other hand, of 1,000 *sants* (holy men) of Satnampanth. The guru himself rode on a decorated elephant, carrying a spear, a gun, and a sword: but Balakdas also wore the sacred thread across his chest, and a holy ash mark on his forehead. During his travels, cast in the myths as akin to the *daura* (official tours) of kings and colonial administrators, Balakdas left the imprint of his authority upon the rajas of feudatory states and the heads of rival ascetic orders, particularly the Bairagis and the Kabirpanthis. Indeed, the ritual and moral power wielded by Balakdas, a law unto himself, also articulated an alternative legality. The sacral authority of the Satnami guru was just and true, but it was embedded within the interiority of faith. The colonial government was unjust and untrue (and corrupt and ignorant), but its orders had to be obeyed. In the myths of Satnampanth, the early caution of Ghasidas in demarcating the boundaries of the sect was replaced by Balakdas's more direct measures to vanquish rival figures of authority. Balakdas's courage and recklessness bore the hallmark of a conqueror, bequeathing much to posterity. And so it was that in the repertoire of Satnami myths, even as narratives of heroic history came to be replaced by more fragmentary tales — of quarrels within the guru family, the division of the *guru gaddi*, and the increasing importance of women in the affairs of the guru family — the later gurus continued to retain their regal attributes.²⁰ The major changes lay ahead, linked to the work of the newer forms of politics in the 20th century.

Contending Modernities

Binary categories do not merely come in pairs. They also imply other homologous oppositions. The overarching opposition of tradition and modernity is often accompanied and animated — at the very least implicitly — by equally grand divisions between myth and history, ritual and reason, and magic and the modern. These binary schemes are actually rooted in reified representations of a singular modernity. They lie at the heart of the various traditions of social and political thought in Western and non-Western arenas. Elsewhere, I have questioned the persuasive power of such overriding oppositions in different institutional contexts, diverse intellectual domains.²¹ My purpose here is merely to point out that totalizing renderings of a singular modernity, by both its proponents and its critics, tend to remain trapped in self-representations of the idea of the modern. Understood as transformative processes featuring capital and consumption, industry and empire, nations and colonies, citizens and subjects, public spheres and private spaces, normalizing states and secular societies, and circumscribed religion(s) and disenchanting knowledge(s), the

period since the 17th century has seen many modernities. These plural modernities have been deeply contradictory, decisively chequered, and densely ideological. They give a lie to the self-image of modernity — now understood as an ideological construct — as a self-realizing project of progress, a self-evident embodiment of development, and a self-contained incarnation of history, inexorably propelling states and relentlessly pushing societies from the traditional (and colonial) past to the modern (and postcolonial) present, and increasingly today onto the postmodern (and global) present-future and future-present. This self-image sees its reflection in the mirror of the West to lay claims upon immaculate imaginings, insidiously ignoring its own fabrications of the likeness of a singular tradition, the essential other of the modern. The past and the present of the non-West, indeed of all that is not quite the authentic West — the enduring Third World and the erstwhile Second World, but equally an earlier Portugal and an anterior Spain — are cast as irremediably narrow illustrative material, the dark curiosities of a durable otherness or the modular forms of a universal history which exemplify as exceptions and rules the *ur* passage from tradition to modernity.

The binarism of social thought extends beyond the dichotomies of the traditional and the modern.²² It is not surprising, therefore, that all too often historical accounts, basing themselves on classical social and political theory, set up an overarching opposition between state and community. What is missed out here are the many different ways in which the symbols and metaphors of the state and governance are drawn upon and imbricate themselves in the construction of communities, including communitarian fashionings of order and identities, legalities and pathologies. It seems to me that a recognition of this interplay and interpenetration between symbols of state and forms of communities is critical for a bid that seeks to think through the universalizing reason of binary oppositions, rather than merely stressing the singular exceptionalism of untouchable pasts. In closing this paper, I turn briefly to the fabrications of a colonial modernity and the makings of postcolonial traditions, involving a critical interface between state and community in central India in the 20th century.

We know of the vigorous politics of caste associations and movements that emerged in late 19th century India. The Satnamis were late entrants to this elaborate negotiation of colonial political forms and indigenous structures of authority. It was, in fact, illiteracy among the group that created the cultural and discursive space for mediations of reform and change by those empowered by writing. These moves, in turn, found a niche in the structures of authority within Satnampanth. Thus, in the early 1920s a few influential Satnami *mahants* who were also village proprietors got together with Sunderlal Sharma, a local Brahman nationalist deeply influenced by the activities of the Arya Samaj, and G. A. Gavai, a leader of the Depressed Classes Association in the Central Provinces, to set up the Satnami Mahasabha. Soon the Mahasabha found a formidable ally in Baba Ramchandra, the former leader of the Awadh Kisan Sabha

movement in the United Provinces countryside, and also enlisted the support of Agamdas, a guru of Satnampanth. The aim of this organization was to “reform” the Satnamis, and to participate in the organizational and constitutional politics within the region and in the Central Provinces. The activities of the Satnami Mahasabha led to the community’s participation in the elaboration of a contradictory and conquered colonial modernity.

The initiatives of the Satnami Mahasabha, shaped by the interventions of powerful figures who stood outside the community, led to reworkings of the shape of Satnampanth in several significant ways. First, under the auspices of the Mahasabha, the “traditional” symbols of Satnampanth were deployed to discredit and marginalize a section of the Satnami leadership that challenged the authority of the organization, and there were efforts to connect the *janeu*, *kanthi*, and *jait khambh* with the veneration of cows and a redefined and refurbished Hindu identity for the Satnamis. Second, in the period between 1926 and 1930, under the leadership of Baba Ramchandra, the Satnami Mahasabha drew upon the signs and resources of the language of law and order of colonial administration and the schemes of Brahmanical authority such as the *Manusmriti*, situating them next to the symbols and figures of authority within Satnampanth to fashion a new legality, the true *kanun* (law) of Guru Ghasidas. Third, the casting of the activities of the Mahasabha in an idiom of law and command led to a restructuring of the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth and a tightening of the institutional forms of the Satnami panchayat, bids to secure effective modes of intervention within the community. Here colonial administrative categories provided a blueprint for an enlargement of the earlier organizational structure with the introduction of new gradations in the ranks of *mahants*, where the *rajmahants* (a position created for the leaders of the Mahasabha) were followed by *jila* (district), *tahsil*, and *sarkil* (circle) *mahants* in a descending scale of jurisdiction, status, and power. The corollary to this was a more rationalized economy of power that replaced the somewhat fluid arrangements of the past in measures to choose the Satnami *panchas* at the level of the village, and in the constitution of the *athgawana* (committee of eight villages), a firm institutional form to settle matters that could not be settled by a Satnami panchayat within a village. Finally, the orientations of the members of the community were shaped within the crucible of these wider interventionist measures. They came to recognize the centrality of the newer idioms of legality, authority, and governance within the community as the altered organizational structure of Satnampanth was established by the mid-1930s, and the reworked categories of colonial law and administrative organization became enduring features of the efforts of the Mahasabha leaders to discipline and control the group. But once the authority of these leaders waned, the newer idioms and categories were deployed to construct other notions of order, legality, and deviance within the community. The Satnami response to Hindu impositions and strains in the activities of the Mahasabha took the form

of situating a rehearsal of some of the key texts of Hinduism — for example, the *Gita* and the *Ramacharitmanas* — alongside the *kathas* (stories) of the gurus in some of the group’s modes of worship. They also embarked on a spate of temple building, which was defined by the group’s distinct ritual emphases and meant, for instance, that no idols of Hindu gods and goddesses were installed in these structures. These measures — two examples from a larger picture — simultaneously worked toward underscoring the solidarity of the Satnamis and establishing the group’s claims of superiority over upper caste Hindus.²³

This wide ranging interplay between meaning and power among the Satnamis has continued into recent times. Some years ago, the internal conflicts between rival politicians and power brokers in the Congress (I) party led Arjun Singh, a seasoned political leader from Madhya Pradesh, to sponsor a government initiative to celebrate Guru Ghasidas as a messiah of the poor and the downtrodden. This was part of a bid to counter the influence of politicians from Chhattisgarh in the party and the province, and to use the Scheduled Castes, particularly the Satnamis, as a political constituency. Guru Ghasidas was accorded the dignity of history when December 18, 1757 was declared as his date of birth to locate him in written and fixed, linear and chronological time. The naming of a university in the town of Bilaspur after the guru was a recognition of Ghasidas’s immense knowledge and wisdom. But arguably the most major initiative here was the support extended by the state to a *mela* (fair) held at the village of Girod, the birthplace of Ghasidas, which has served to turn a small affair featuring a few hundred Satnamis into a mammoth event involving tens of thousands of members of the community.

These state initiatives have led to unintended consequences for social organization among the Satnamis. The members of the community have found their own uses for the government sponsorship of Ghasidas. The written form and the printed word, marks of authority in local cultures still defined by attributes of orality, have been pressed into the service of the worship of the founding guru. Today, the recitation and rehearsal of these newly fashioned texts — part of a collective telling and listening to songs and stories within idioms of popular religious discourse — is increasingly situated alongside modern modes of orality, technically sophisticated aural and visual messages, to constitute novel forms and attributes of Ghasidas. Indeed, the guru has been accorded a novel centrality in the belief structures of the Satnamis. Even as fresh legends accrue around the figure of Ghasidas, the myths about the later gurus, particularly Balakdas, are slowly being erased from a once widely known picture to become more esoteric forms of knowledge. All this underlies novel processes of the constitution of truths and the fashioning of traditions among the community. Thus recent years have witnessed an ever widening spread of the performance of the Satnami ritual of *chauka*: on the one hand, the ritual has been steadily invested with ever newer meanings as it has undergone innovations, modifications, and transformations at the hands of Satnami

specialists of the sacred; and, on the other hand, its novel forms are elaborated as essential parts of a timeless tradition of the community. Similarly, there are fresh fabrications of communitarian forms of worship, an eclectic and redefined ordering of time that simultaneously draws upon the Satnami myths and ritual calendar and on official histories and Hindu almanacs, and increasing investments in creative cultural imaginings of the meanings of the fair at Girod alongside other initiatives, variously shored up by the state, all of which refigure the senses of the self and solidarity of the community. In the midst of dominant interventions, the Satnamis continue to construct new meanings of the group's pasts, boundaries, and identities.

Conclusion

In these concluding remarks, I wish to tie up the different strands of this paper by addressing two seemingly rhetorical but rather real questions. Should we regard the entangled endeavors of untouchable pasts and ethnographic histories as empirically and analytically limited fields, and agitate about the possible pitfalls and the epistemological dangers of generalizing on wider theoretical issues from within this restricted realm? Or should we consider these endeavors as part(s) of a singular venture, a tribute to engaged scholarship whose moral solidarity and intellectual achievements derive from the fact of being part of "dalit studies," a self-contained ethical project and a self-realizing political knowledge? Clearly, these questions refer to rather different assumptions about studies of untouchable communities. Yet, these separate assumptions are also bound to each other through a common presupposition and a shared oversight. They both imagine that in the humanist disciplines and the social sciences, the ostensible object of inquiry is the main arbiter and the key determinant of the theoretical and political possibilities of bodies of knowledge(s). They both underplay the fact that the problems and potentialities of humanist endeavors and social scientific practice can lie rather less with what is studied and much more with how we cast our inquiries and the ways in which we write. Indeed, in different ways these questions and assumptions are rooted in an epistemological claim that the object of knowledge is already in place, always a given. If the presuppositions underlying the first query point toward studies of untouchables as an inherent condition of limits for wider theoretical inquiry, the assumptions behind the second question hint at "dalit studies" as a sufficient realm of possibilities for an essentially ethical and a necessarily novel scholarship. A singular mutual logic governs these apparently dissimilar understandings.

In this paper, I have written against the grain of implicit understandings that seize upon apparent objects of intellectual inquiry, setting them up as the singular yardstick for judging the scholarly novelty and the theoretical validity of intellectual endeavors.²⁴ Here I will cast aside my suspicion that these conceptions have something to do with a broader context of acute academic overproduction, saturated seminar schedules, and severe limitations of time on

scholars. More critically, it is important to recognize that there is nothing intrinsic to accounts of untouchable communities that prevents them from elaborating wider theoretical issues beyond the proximate field(s) of studies of dalits, but it is also crucial to realize the limits of celebrating "dalit studies" as a domain that inherently generates ethical inquiries into marginality and inexorably engenders critical knowledge of the dispossessed. In both cases, much depends on the questions asked, the concepts chosen, the categories evoked, and the narratives brought into play. These questions and concepts shape the objects of inquiry, framing the larger sets of relationships and wider matrices of interconnections in which they are embedded, and these categories and narratives can also lead to the objects (of a singular consciousness) being rendered as subjects (with a different consciousness), involving revisions of monologistic analyses and elaborations of plural understandings.

It is in this spirit that my work draws upon and develops but also extends and exceeds several of the earlier, important studies of untouchables and untouchability. Most anthropological writings on the dynamics of untouchable groups are primarily based on field work, severally rooted in the ethnographic present. These studies have variously elaborated questions of changing customs and "subcultural" personhoods and issues of ideological innovation and religious resistance among dalit communities.²⁵ Marked by rather different points of entry, a great deal of historical work on untouchable and non-Brahman castes has discussed the "caste movements" launched by these groups, focusing on the organization and leadership of such initiatives, which in turn have left behind different bodies of written sources. These writings have revealed that untouchable and lower-caste endeavors played out the tensions and rivalries within caste society, where religion provided the means of negotiating an oppressive social order and the forging of new caste ideologies involving a complex dialogue with the symbols and identities within popular traditions and local cultures.²⁶

My work on the Satnamis takes up the salient emphases of this anthropological and historical scholarship on caste conflict and religious innovation, historical changes and ritual transformations in untouchable arenas: but it equally brings together varieties of both written sources and oral testimonies to discuss these issues over a much longer time period, also casting them in a dialogue with other critical questions. Indeed, distinct readings of archival and non-official sources in an ethnographic mode, the conduct of field work in an engagement with the historical imagination, and considerations of wider theoretical issues in anthropology and history are inextricably bound to each other in my project, which addresses key analytical relationships between sect and caste, myth and history, orality and writing, religion and power, gender and order, community and hegemony, and resistance and domination over the last 200 years, from the late 18th to the late 20th centuries. Here the entangled endeavors of ethnographic histories and untouchable pasts unravel processes involving myths and the

making of modernities, orality and the construction of histories, and writing and the fashioning of traditions to interrogate the place and persistence of binary categories — of modernity and tradition, state and community, rationality and ritual, and reason and emotion — within influential strands of social and political theory. These entangled endeavors elaborate an alternative space beyond two influential and competing conceptions, questioning dominant Eurocentric imaginings without succumbing to facile strains of anti-Enlightenment rhetoric in Western and non-Western arenas.

Notes

¹ The larger project is embodied in Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998). It is also contained in different papers, and some of these will be cited at appropriate moments in this essay.

² I use the category of “subaltern,” derived from the writings of Antonio Gramsci and reworked by the Subaltern Studies project, as a metaphor for sustained attributes of subordination in South Asian society, whether expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, or office. I recognize, of course, that it is in the very nature of the catch-all dimensions of the category that rather more than a nuanced heuristic device, “subaltern” can acquire the attributes of a homogeneous and singular historical and social entity. Against this tendency, I elaborate the category of “subaltern” as an analytical shorthand, always relational and ever plural, which provides the means and possibilities of sustaining analyses that elaborate the articulation of different, interlocked principles of social division and cultural domination, including community and class, caste and race, and gender and nation. It should be clear that in such usage, “subaltern” also comes to be rendered as a critical perspective in ethnographic and historical understandings of untouchable groups and dalit initiatives, empire and nation, state and modernity.

³ I elaborate these analytical perspectives in a critical dialogue with one another in my work on the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh referred to above, but also through my other projects on evangelical entanglements and legal encounters — both in colonial central India — and in discussions of wider cultures of history writing. For example, Saurabh Dube, “Paternalism and Freedom: The Evangelical Encounter in Colonial Chhattisgarh, Central India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 29 (1995):171-201; “Traveling Light: Missionary Musings, Colonial Cultures, and Anthropological Anxieties,” in John Hutnyk and Raminder Kaur (eds.), *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (Zed Press: London, forthcoming); “Telling Tales and Trying Truths: Transgressions, Entitlements, and Legalities in late colonial central India,” *Studies in History*, 12 (1996):171-201; *Historical Cultures, Ethnographic Pasts* (manuscript, n.d.); and Saurabh Dube (ed.), *Everyday Encounters. A Diary of an Indigenous Christianity* (manuscript, n.d.).

⁴ Firm estimates of population in the region are available only from the 1860s. In 1866 the Chamars (and Satnamis) numbered 362,032 out of a total population of 2,103,165 in Chhattisgarh.

⁵ These conceptual themes are spelled out in dialogue with evidence in Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*.

⁶ See also the related discussion in the section on Contending Modernities below.

⁷ A deeper and wider elaboration of these issues of the margins and meanings of Hinduism is contained in Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*.

⁸ It seems to me that the problem here is not one of an oversight on the part of a few studies of religion and ritual in South Asia. It has

deeper methodological roots that go back to approaches in the history of religions that implicitly seek to explicate a universal grammar of religions, adducing parallels and similarities among rituals and ideologies, beliefs and practices to the neglect of processes of symbolic construction within wider relationships of power, and to the tendency in earlier ethnography of treating caste as primarily a matter of the endless play of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, an ideology divorced from power. Individual works are too numerous to mention here, but for a “classic” that has exercised enormous influence upon the study of religion in South Asia through its demarcations of the separate domains of *dharma* (ideology) and *artha* (economic and political power) in the Hindu caste order, see Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970).

⁹ See particularly, Andre Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India. Agrarian Society and Politics under the 18th Century Maratha Svrajya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Stewart Gordon, “The slow conquest,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 11 (1977):1-40; and C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*.

¹¹ Louis Dumont, “World renunciation in Indian religions,” in *Religion/Politics and History in India: Collected Papers in Indian Sociology* (Paris and the Hague: Mouton, 1970):33-60.

¹² See, for example, Richard Burghart, ‘Renunciation in the Religious Traditions of South Asia’, *Man* (n.s.), 18 (1983):635-53; Peter Van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); and David Lorenzen, “Traditions of non-caste Hinduism: The Kabirpanth,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), 21 (1987):263-283.

¹³ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*.

¹⁴ Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Gloria Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

¹⁵ These themes of sects and asceticism, caste and power are discussed in much greater detail in Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*, but see also the section on Engaging Stories below.

¹⁶ See, for example, John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Post-colonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); Sherry Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37 (1995):173-93; E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1993). See also footnote 21 below.

¹⁷ See Saurabh Dube, “Myths, Symbols and Community: Satampanth of Chhattisgarh,” in Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey (eds.) *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992):121-56.

¹⁸ This brief discussion of hegemony and resistance brings together the work of several thinkers. In addition to the work referred to above, I would particularly like to mention here, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* Trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. Trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988) and

“Governmentality,” in Graham Burcell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Mills (eds.) *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991):87-104; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) and *Selections from Cultural Writings* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985); V. N. Voloshinov [Mikhail Bakhtin], *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Trans. L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); and Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977). On wider analytical elaborations of colonial mimicry in discursive arenas and as embodied practice see Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” and “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994):85-92, 102-122; and Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See also Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁹ This section takes up issues elaborated in greater detail — and somewhat differently — in Saurabh Dube, “Rite Place, Rite Time: On the Organization of the Sacred in Colonial Central India,” *Calcutta Historical Review*, 17 (1995):19-37; and Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*.

²⁰ On Satnami myths, see Dube, “Myths, Symbols and Community,” and *Untouchable Pasts*.

²¹ Dube, “Traveling Light” and “Telling Tales.”

²² For different, recent questionings of the logic of binarism, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), particularly pp. 165-173; and Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*.

²³ These processes are elaborated in Saurabh Dube, “Idioms of Order and Engendered Agendas: The Satnami Mahasabha, Chhattisgarh, 1925-1950,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 30 (1993):383-411.

²⁴ Three clarifications are in order here. First, my arguments are not meant as mere refutations of positions which hold that objects of inquiry descend upon scholarship as already given entities and fully fabricated artifacts. After all, today only endemic empiricists will deny that social reality is concept dependent, and none but puritanical positivists will dispute that objects of inquiry are shaped by — even as, upon certain readings, they critically influence — the social and historical processes of knowledge construction. Second, I am not putting forward a proposal regarding the radically individually constructed nature of knowledge that underplays the manifold material effects and the extraordinary enduring enchantments of academic disciplines. Yet, I am also not endorsing positions — deemed “conventionalist” and “super-idealist” in typologies of philosophy — that deny the existence of social reality outside of conceptual conventions and disciplinary discourses. Finally, mine is not yet another implicit plea for the increasing disenchantment and progressive control of an unprocessed, pristine world through a meaning-legislating reason. I am acutely aware that we still need to think through the many implications of the arguments of what might be deemed the Other Europe — Vico and Heidegger, but also the non-official Marx and the radical Durkheim — in critical arenas: on the one hand, the charmed place of the magic of the modern and the enduring play of enchantments within modernities; and, on the other hand, apprehensions of the capacity of “existence to project its most proper possibilities inside the fundamental situation of being in the world” so that understanding is recognized as “the mode of being before defining the mode of knowing,” whereby in the understanding of history, for

example, “the consciousness of being exposed to the labors of history precedes the objectifications of documentary historiography.” In this final point, I have in mind Heidegger’s “second Copernican revolution,” interrogating the artifice of modern reason. The exegesis is that of Paul Ricoeur, cited in Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (Routledge: London, 1992), pp. ix-x. For a succinct discussion of the typologies in philosophy alluded to above, see George Steinmetz, “Critical Realism and Historical Sociology,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40 (1998):170-186.

²⁵ See, for example, James M. Freeman, *Untouchable. An Indian Life History* (London, 1979); R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable as Himself: Ideology, Identity and Pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars* (Cambridge, 1984); Lynn Vincentnathan, “Untouchable Concepts of Person and Society,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, (n.s.) 27 (1993), pp. 53-82; Bernard Cohn, “The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987):255-83; Owen M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

²⁶ Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low-Caste Protest in 19th Century Maharashtra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th-Century Punjab* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India: 1873 to 1930* (Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976); Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India. The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969); Eleanor Zelliott, “Learning the Use of Political Means: the Mahars of Maharashtra,” in Rajni Kothari (ed.) *Caste in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970), pp. 29-69; Lawrence A. Babb, “The Satnamis — Political Involvement of a Religious Movement,” in Michael J. Mahar (ed.), *The Untouchables in Contemporary India* (Tuscon, 1972), pp. 143-51.