

Colonial Archive versus Colonial Sociology: Writing Dalit History

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More than three-quarters [of Jatavs] work in agriculture and less than a quarter [of Jatavs] work in artisanal and other kinds of occupations.

Skills: Except their knowledge of agriculture and artisanal industry, the Jatav community does not have skills in other professions. Their livelihood is dependent on artisanal [industry], agriculture, and day wages, and they [the Jatavs] have lost the business of leather work that has been usurped by Muslims, Kayastha Khatri communities.

—PANDIT SUNDERLAL SAGAR, *Yadav Jivan*

Outlining his community's conditions in 1929, Pandit Sunderlal Sagar, a major Jatav publicist from Agra and founding member of Jatav Mahasabha, an untouchable community association established in 1917, stated that more than 75 percent of Jatavs (untouchables) were engaged in *krishi karya* (agricultural work). Indeed, on the next page he lamented the unfortunate condition of Jatavs because they knew no other occupation except agriculture (*krishi vidhya*). During my fieldwork in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), many Dalit activists, belonging to a prominent Chamar untouchable community that consists of several regional communities such as Jatavs, Jatiyas, and Kurils, made similar claims about their community,

indicating that this is still a widely shared sense among sections of Dalits. Sagar of course was drawing on his personal experience in representing the Chamar community of Jatavs as cultivators, but census data support his claim. According to the 1911 census, 96 percent of Chamars were agriculturists, and of these, 40 percent were occupancy tenants with legal rights to the land, 40 percent were rent-paying nonoccupancy tenants at will with customary rights, and 14 percent were landless laborers. By 1961 the percentage of occupancy tenants had increased to 50 percent.¹ In UP the majority of Chamars belong to two prominent castes, the Jatavs in the western part of the state and the Jatiyas in the eastern part of the state.

Sagar's 1929 book and scores of other Hindi-language Dalit publications dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century have proved to be a valuable source of information that I collected during the course of my fieldwork spanning the past fifteen years. The Hindi-language books by Dalit writers that I found in the personal collections of activist families have been the most useful in providing both a perspective and information that is generally absent in historical and archival sources. In contrast to the dominant assumption that Dalits in the early part of the twentieth century did not write histories of their community, it would be more accurate to say that their works are not available in the traditional sites such as libraries and archives. Dalit activists in small towns in northern India have collected and proudly maintained personal collections in their homes. One Dalit activist, Mr. J. Kanaria, from Gawalior, a small town in northern India, explained the reason to me on March 3, 2009. On that pleasant morning, he told me Chamars, like Brahmans, earn income to read and write books and consider themselves as an intellectual class in India.² The personal collections of Dalit activists in small towns in northern India have played a crucial role in my research, emphasizing the value of local, nonmetropolitan sources.

Writing the history of Dalits in northern India was made possible by recognizing the differences between the regional or local archives and the more centralized all-India archival collections. This distinction offers an important corrective to the way we think about the project of colonial sociology and its relationship to different types of colonial-period archives. My research and interactions with Dalit groups in Lucknow, Kanpur, Agra, Etawah, Allahabad, and Mainpuri raised new questions for my project, which I took to the provincial- and district-level archives for further study. This approach yielded extensive material that illuminates the regional character of the Dalit struggle in UP. It also meant that I did not need to focus on the more commonly used National Archives of India or the British Library collections lo-

cated in metropolitan centers. This methodology provided me with material to consider a new approach to Dalit history, offering a striking corrective to stereotypes about Chamars that are found in the kinds of projects of colonial sociology produced with an emphasis on all-India framework (including the all-India Census, the imperial gazetteers, and caste and tribe surveys). The land revenue records became the most significant body of evidence to offer a contrasting representation of Chamars and their lives in different parts of UP. These sources have been used to write agrarian history, typically of dominant groups in a locality, but rarely to write Dalit histories. This essay draws attention to the role of settlement and land tenure surveys as crucial sources for writing Dalit history. Recognizing local- and district-level archival sources was an enabling and productive alternative to the argument of a hegemonic colonial sociology of the last two decades that has deemphasized the conflict, dissension, and debate evident in the colonial archive and adopted the perspective of the metropolitan centers of Delhi and London.

A key assumption relating to the colonial archive underscores the role of colonial sociology, particularly influential documents such as the census and caste and tribe surveys, in producing dominant representations of Indian society and history around the *varna* model of social division, consisting of four castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra), and the untouchables, who were outside the *varna*. In 1987, Bernard Cohn demonstrated the role of the census in “classifying and making objective to the Indians themselves their culture and society,” in which the category of “caste in terms of social precedence” played a key role.³ By the 1870s “the ethnographic state,” taking “caste as the primary object of social classification and understanding,” created a new archive “from miscellaneous collections and volumes, office manuals and gazetteers, to the census.”⁴ Such accounts of colonial sociology draw considerably, if not primarily, from caste and tribe surveys and all-India decennial reports, but rarely from district settlement reports. In *Castes of Mind*, Nicholas Dirks has argued that caste emerges as an organizing principle of colonial knowledge in the late nineteenth century when the colonial state transitioned into “an ethnographic state.” Dirks contrasts this with the absence of caste in any “kind of systematic and autonomous sense” in early colonial practices, and to support this he discusses at length Colin Mackenzie’s ethnographic survey from 1799 to 1809.⁵ This survey was part of the larger concern of the early colonial state with questions of land tenure, as the state sought to maximize and stabilize its revenue base and understand the rural society for purposes of taxes. By the late nineteenth century, especially after the 1857 rebellion, the colonial state had shifted its attention to caste

because several ethnographic surveys and the census increasingly began to rely on caste to tabulate and regulate Indian society. In organizing the vast data, the colonial state paid particular attention to the varna model.⁶ There is no doubt that a focus on colonial sociology has informed our current understanding of what Dirks has described as the “modernization of caste” by historicizing the impact of the colonial encounter in producing the practices and politics of caste identities.

An undue focus on colonial sociology has reduced the diversity of colonial archives to a single imperial monolith. I intend to substantially modify this postcolonial understanding of the archive, and by extension the new representation of caste located in the caste and tribe surveys (colonial sociology). We might want to emphasize the distinctive qualities of local archives in contrast to colonial sociology to highlight the role of locally embedded ethnographic investigations in constituting the former. By distinguishing colonial knowledge from the sources of local knowledge we can problematize the homogeneous assumption about the colonial archive implicit in postcolonial studies. It may be more productive to underline the unique strengths of district and provincial repositories in contrast to imperial archives based in the metropolitan centers of Delhi and London. Documents of local conditions, such as the land revenue surveys, often contained details that were not concerned with sustaining the objectives of all-India colonial sociology and provided strikingly contrasting perspectives on caste and Dalits. According to Dirks, caste as a category was absent in colonial archives of the early nineteenth century, but he acknowledges that it “was important in relation to debates over historical forms of land tenure.” As he writes, “many learned Orientalists made major contributions to this debate, as for example in the substantial treatise by Francis Ellis on *mirasi* [land tenure] rights in southern India.”⁷ Ellis discusses the proprietary rights of the Vellar community near Madras to locate their role in the revenue regime being instituted by the incipient colonial state. To be sure, the relationship between land revenue and regimes of proprietary tenures relied substantially on the role of dominant local caste groups, or *jatis*. Revenue reports in the late nineteenth century for the first time recognized the role of jati kinship connections in the collection and distribution of rent and revenue. *Jatis* acquired importance not because of the varna model of the census but because they were so deeply implicated in the land revenue regime. It is this aspect of the late colonial archives, I would insist, that provides a very heterogeneous and at times contradictory representation of Indian society that stands in contrast to the homogeneous portrayal of that society in colonial sociology.

The locally embedded (district-level) revenue reports offer a representation of caste (and Indian society) that may in turn offer a different representation of caste and untouchable histories (as I will show) than the normative varna model that the colonial sociology seeks to construct. The meticulously detailed land revenue records contain details about the rich social and cultural history of a district precisely because the district office had to tabulate and assign the rent and revenue obligations of various social groups. In his introduction to William Crooke's 1879 glossary of northern Indian agricultural life, Shahid Amin has emphasized the importance of Crooke's glossary in providing a "compendium of agricultural and rural terms" and "offer[ing] a meticulous report on the rural society." Addressing the reason for issuing a new edition of the glossary in 1989, Amin claims that it "will aid a fuller understanding of rural North India, past and present," because it "contains a wealth of very useful information."⁸ Comparable to this is the well-known Dufferin Report of 1888 (*Inquiry in the Conditions of Lower Classes of Population*), which collected information about peasant households belonging to different social groups from district officers and others such as Crooke, who wrote a detailed report of nearly a hundred pages from his district in Etah. This enquiry provides valuable information about Dalit peasants in northern India.⁹ It identifies Chamars in four categories—peasants with occupancy and nonoccupancy rights, agricultural laborers, and artisans—but never mentions them as leatherworkers. The report discusses thirty-one Chamar families, eleven of which are identified as occupancy peasants, eleven as non-occupancy peasants, five as weavers, and four as agricultural laborers and part-time leatherworkers. Such repositories of local knowledge, especially the settlement and revenue reports, created opportunities for district-level officers to contradict and challenge dominant frameworks and conventions that might not accurately represent their local society. Attention to these sources made it possible to write a different Chamar history, highlighting their nuanced but solid position within agrarian society as occupancy and nonoccupancy peasants in UP. Such a perspective endow us to document their relationship with significant events in northern Indian history, such as the history of the Awadh Kisan Sabha movement. Chamars' participation in the peasant movement was one example of their sustained engagement with mainstream politics in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

Instead of assuming that the colonial archive is an imperial monolith, it might be more productive to recognize it, to use Ann Stoler's term, as an "archival form" that contains "genres of documentation" generated by a diversity of motives.¹⁰ In considering the colonial archives as the site of "surplus

production,” Stoler acknowledges the infinite possibilities contained in the supporting documents that formed part of *Mailrapporten*, the mail report generated by the governor-general of Batavia.¹¹ The mail report was an official request for information on a particular issue, generated from the office of the minister of colonies. Similarly, Carolyn Steedman has warned us about thinking of any archive as a source of power, particularly the colonial archive.¹² In the context of colonial Peru, Kathryn Burns has suggested that an emphasis on the “centripetal movement: the bureaucrats’ data-gathering impetus, and their tendency to draw things in toward imperial institution” or “the Foucauldian panopticon writ large” prevents us from recognizing the fact that the colonial state “not only couldn’t oversee all instances; it never tried to.”¹³ Burns’s study historicizes and reconstructs the practices and local stories of colonial *escribanos* (notaries) and the archives they constructed in the colonial context. Given these cautionary notes on colonial archives in diverse contexts, we should recognize that the imperial archive contains genres of documents motivated by multiple, and often contradictory, objectives and concerns. We can recover and interpret Dalit histories by discriminating between all-India sources such as the census and local sources, which represent district-level society very differently. The varna or occupational representation of Dalit groups in colonial sociology can be contrasted with the spatially distinct jati or caste neighborhood, or *jati mohalla*, in the district-level settlement and revenue sources. The motivations and compulsions of the latter body of sources are starkly different from those of the all-India census.

A unique feature of the local revenue reports is the attention given to local space and village clusters or jati villages—for instance, detailed discussions of varieties of land ownership rights and acreage of cultivated and uncultivated land—because they affect the revenue projections. This attention to space and the spatial distribution of various jatis is also very helpful in thinking about caste. Dalits’ autobiographies pay particular attention to the role of jati experience in localities. Indeed, Vasant Moon and Mohan Dass Namishray underscore the spatial character of Dalit jati mohallas or *vastis* and *bastis* (neighborhoods or villages) as crucial to the formation of Dalit consciousness. Emphasizing the lived experience of growing up untouchable in the Dalit jati mohallas of Nagpur in Maharashtra and Meerut in UP, Moon and Namishray help us grasp the role of space as a crucial signifier in understanding untouchability and exclusion as opposed to the determining role assigned to occupation in the varna model of studying caste in South Asia.¹⁴ I have developed this point centrally elsewhere, and here I want merely to

suggest possible conversations between the two contrasting sets of sources, conversations that may not be possible with sources of colonial sociology.¹⁵

Attention to local level sources and the likely conversations with the jati mohalla experience should also take into account the promise of vernacular sources as the third node of local archives. Prachi Deshpande has argued that “an analysis of colonial discourse and colonial policy regarding ‘Maratha’ [caste] indicates that colonial sociology was not homogeneous”; rather, regional motivations from diverse localities influenced the accounts of colonial officers and members of the Maratha elite in explaining the latter’s identity formation.¹⁶ In particular, Deshpande demonstrates that the continued relevance of numerous Maratha *bhakhars* (chronicles) in shaping the discussion around the identity of the Rajputs and the military. Similarly, Sagar’s 1929 book along with several other Hindi-language Dalit books, local colonial sources, and an ethnographic engagement with active agendas of Dalit activists enable us to question academic assumptions about Dalit history. Dalits’ Hindi-language writings are one form of evidence of their stoic activism over the past century, which has become visible to us in the political and electoral success of the Bahujan Samaj Party in the past two decades.

Settlement Reports and New Perspectives on Dalit Histories

District settlement reports, *tehsil* (revenue block) assessment reports, and land tenure enquiries are the new promising sources for writing Dalit history. The first of these detailed reports from the 1870s and 1880s, and revised reports from the 1910s and 1930s, provide a representation of Chamar society and culture that is largely absent in the more homogeneous sources like the census and the caste and tribe surveys. Many of these settlement reports stand out as fine ethnographic surveys with details that you can correlate with contemporary research and fieldwork. The questions relating to Chamars’ peasant status were first articulated during my conversations with activists in the cities of Lucknow, Kanpur, Agra, Meerut, and Allahabad and in comparatively small towns like Etawah, Mainpuri, Gawalior, and in the revenue reports—but not in mainstream academic accounts. In the 1891 *Report of the Settlement of the Basti District*, J. Hooper argued that Chamars should be recognized as one of the chief cultivating castes in the district. He wrote, “Many of the Chamars are genuine cultivators, that is to say, they earn their subsistence entirely by farming on their own account, but a great many are ploughmen or labourers depending chiefly for their living on wages.”¹⁷ He

noted that 49,728 Chamar peasants owned 74,280 acres of land, and he commented on the presence of twenty-nine Chamar proprietors in Bansi *Pargana* (administrative unit) of the district. These sentiments were echoed in the settlement reports of Aligarh, Shahjahanpur, Etawah, Kanpur, Bheraich, Azamgarh, and Gorakhpur. The Etawah settlement report expressed its authors' unease with a classificatory regime in the census that created confusion about the position of Chamars by classifying them as "non-agricultural."¹⁸ On the basis of this data generated by the settlement reports, we can make a few general statements about Chamars as cultivators: (a) in most districts of UP they held land as occupancy and nonoccupancy tenants, and many were also plowmen and laborers; (b) depending on whether the zamindari and the *bhayachara* (coparcenary) land tenure system was in place (explained below), in most cases Chamars either maintained or increased their share of land; (c) in very few cases they had proprietary rights; and (d) they were unanimously recognized for their skills as one of the best groups of cultivators. Revenue inquiries in the nineteenth century into the status and rights of peasants of UP show evidence of Chamars' presence and claims of occupancy and nonoccupancy tenure rights.¹⁹

The Chamar peasants of Moradabad District paid an annual rent of about Rs (rupees) 324,571 in 1909. Out of the total rent of Rs 3,021,394, Chamars' payment in 1909 represented the highest rent paid by any caste in the district. In the same year the Jat tenants paid Rs 281,268 in rent, while the Sheikhs paid Rs 313,733, the Thakurs paid Rs 164,419, and the Brahmans paid Rs 142,597. Given their 107,525 acres of land, the Chamars were the third largest peasant caste after the Jats and Sheikhs.²⁰ Many settlement reports in western UP, like those from Saharanpur and Bareilly Districts, noted Chamars' excellent skills as cultivators of sugar, basmati rice, and wheat. In Saharanpur they were the sixth largest community of occupancy tenants, and their annual rent of Rs 263,260 in 1921 put them in the fourth position—after Gujars, Garas, and Malis or Sainis, but ahead of well-known peasant groups like Jats, Ahirs, and Rajputs.²¹ They controlled a good percentage of land both as tenants and as proprietors. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Chamars held 7 percent (49,506 acres) of the land in Bareilly, and they paid an annual rent of Rs 209,905.²² In the 1880s the Chamars of Agra District held 60,286 acres of land, amounting to 7.1 percent of the total land under cultivation. By the 1930s they had managed to increase their land to 65,000 acres, out of which 40,000 acres were held under occupancy rights and the rest (25,000) under nonoccupancy rights. Their gain of 5,000 acres was the highest among all the castes.²³ Their strongest position as tenants in the western part of UP

was in the Bulandshahr District, where they held 81,179 acres. Most Chamar cultivators also owned a pair of bullocks.²⁴ These examples are representative of the strength of Chamars as one of the largest rent-paying caste in much of western UP and in the central and eastern districts of the state. Furthermore, they were among the top six rent-paying social groups, a point reiterated in many settlement reports of various districts of UP.

The rights of Chamars over land were shaped and conditioned centrally by the nature of proprietary tenures. This was particularly the case under the bhayachara tenure, in which the dominant peasant groups belonging to a shared lineage were recognized as proprietors of land, and responsible for the collection and payment of revenue to the state because they were also actively engaged in the management and cultivation of land. Peasant proprietors in the bhayachara tenure valued skilled occupancy tenants such as Chamars who contributed centrally to sustaining the revenue obligations. In the bhayachara region of western UP, from Jhansi in the south to Saharanpur in the north and west of Kanpur, Chamar peasants not only possessed occupancy rights but also acquired, in very small percentages, proprietary rights. The settlement officer of Jhansi District in the Bundelkhand region noted in 1893 that the Chamar peasants were the most sought cosharers by the peasant proprietary groups.²⁵ By 1921, the Chamars in Saharanpur District had gained more land under bhayachara tenure as well as a bit of proprietary share, because the proprietors considered them good tenants.²⁶ In Agra District, too, bhayachara tenure enabled Chamars to acquire occupancy rights, because the proprietary bodies “are always slower to move, and have not sufficient unanimity to carry out any sustained measures for preventing the acquisition of occupancy rights.”²⁷ The settlement officer of Muzaffarnagar District succinctly observed in 1896 that because of their skills, the Chamar peasants gained proprietary rights, living alongside the dominant cultivating castes, which included Jats and other groups.²⁸

The settlement reports of the 1870s and 1880s from central UP (the Awadh region) draw our attention to the presence of Chamar and Pasi peasants in the area. These reports also help us rethink the social history of the region, especially from a Dalit perspective. For instance, the dominant historical perception of the Awadh Kisan Sabha movement is that it was a “lower-caste” peasant struggle, against landlords’ illegal and excessive rent demands, in which Dalits’ participation was always relegated to the role of looters and rioters. It was assumed, because of the Dalit occupational caste stereotype that they were landless laborers, and their participation was therefore viewed as marginal or exploitative of the situation (thus the charges of looting). In

Rae Bareilly, for example, the key theater of the Awadh Kisan Sabha movement, we can see that Chamars paid an annual rent of Rs 75,820 in 1898 for 19,005 *bighas* (7,602 acres) of land held under occupancy rights.²⁹ Similarly, members of the Dalit Pasi caste paid an annual rent of Rs 198,546 and cultivated 49,729 *bighas* (19,891.60 acres) of land. Compared with the Kurmis' 42,380 *bighas* (16,952 acres) and the Muraos' 45,574 *bighas* (18,229.60 acres), the Chamars' cultivation of 19,005 *bighas* and the Pasis' of 49,729 *bighas* is impressive and attests to their position in the area as cultivating peasants, rather than simply landless laborers. Even the 1867 inquiry into the rights of the nonproprietary tenants of Awadh (in central UP) documents the claims made by Chamars and Pasis of their right to the land they cultivated, similar to claims made by "lower-caste" peasants like Kurmis, Muraos, and Ahirs.³⁰ The settlement officers of all the districts in the Awadh region, who wrote reports for this inquiry, recorded claims made by Dalit peasants (Chamars and Pasis) of the right to cultivate their land and contested the right of anyone else to dispossess them from their holdings. Despite the two Oudh Rent Acts of 1868 and 1886, only 1 percent of the vast body of tenants held rights of occupancy, with the rest only provided with security of tenure for a period of seven years.³¹ These figures also indicate that many Dalit groups had very good reasons for joining the Awadh Kisan Sabha movement not just as looters taking advantage of a disruptive situation, but as invested members of the movement with much at stake. In the famous police firing on Kisan Sabha activists in the Rae Bareilly District in January 1921, the majority of the peasants killed were Dalits. The battle between protestors and the state took place in the town of Rae Bareilly at the Fursatganj bazaar and led to a police action that resulted in the deaths of twenty-five peasants.³² Eighteen of the dead were Chamars and Pasis, suggesting that groups regarded as untouchable made up a large, rather than a marginal, percentage of the overall participants.

Baba Ramachandra, the renowned peasant leader of the Awadh Kisan Sabha movement, mentions the role of Chamar and Pasi peasants in his accounts of the movement in his diaries. In his diary on the movement, Ramachandra notes the presence of Chamars and Pasis prominently in the Kisan Sabha committee meetings at Rure Village in Partabgarh, suggesting that they were part of the movement from the very beginning in 1919 and not just from 1921, when other scholars have claimed that they first appear.³³ The names of thirty-five participating castes are mentioned in the following order by Baba Ramachandra in his diary: "Brahman, Thakur, Baniya, Chauhan, Kurmi, Koeri, Teli, Pasi, Chamar, Barhi, Kahar, Ahir."³⁴ By listing them alongside other peasant groups, he underlines the important position that the Pasis

and the Chamars occupied in the region. He also notes their contribution to the movement in the form of provisions. Baba Ramachandra's description of peasant groups is in sharp contrast to Gyanendra Pandey's description of the Kisan Sabha movement as a movement of Kurmis, Muraos, and Ahirs. Baba Ramachandra stresses the role of Chamars and Pasis not because he sees them as landless laborers whose interests converge with those of peasants, but because he recognizes them as important peasant groups in Awadh region. The settlement reports of Rae Bareilly District, the key theater of the Kisan Sabha struggle, attest to the substantive position of Chamars and Pasis as cultivating peasants in the area rather than simply as landless laborers.

It should not surprise us that sections of the Chamar elite that claimed Jatav status (pure Kshatriya identity) and established Jatav organizations in the western UP in the first two decades of the twentieth century belonged to well-off agrarian families. Ramnarain Yadvendu's 1942 book *Yaduvansh ka Aitihās* provides short biographies of dozens of Jatav Mahasabha activists based in Agra and the surrounding region and mentions that many of them, such as Seth Jivan Ram of Mainpuri, were zamindars. Equally notable is that almost all the fifty-nine activists mentioned in the book were high-school graduates who belonged to diverse occupations. The most prominent of these Agra-based activists were "building contractors" and state and federal employees. These activists led the Chamar movement for a Jatav identity during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Seth Sitaram Mansingh, who belonged to "a family of contractors," established the first Jatav organization in Agra City in 1889.³⁵ He also became a zamindar of the villages Milavda, Agra, and Pingri in Mathura District. The Jatavs of Agra take particular pride in having played an important role in the building of Delhi as the new capital by the British during the first decade of the twentieth century. In the words of one Jatav, "we supplied them with labor and stones."³⁶ Ram Dayal Jatav, a Chamar contractor of labor and red Jaipuri stones, provided financial support and also chaired the first meeting of the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha (movement to claim Dalits as the original [Adi] inhabitants of India), held in the town of Etawah on October 16, 1923, under the leadership of Swami Achhutanand.³⁷ We can take this date—thus far unknown in Indian history—as the founding date of Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in UP.³⁸ The Chamar elite that emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century in Agra were contractors who acquired wealth by supplying labor to the construction sites in Calcutta and Delhi.³⁹ These vernacular-language local sources allow us to rethink the dominant explanation of the emergence of an educated and prosperous Chamar elite in the first two decades of the twentieth century to

the leather industry.⁴⁰ The Jatav literature on the subject offers a starkly different representation of the social origins of the Chamar elite in Agra City and outlines several reasons for Jatavs' investment in claiming a Kshatriya Yadava identity.

The Jatavs of western UP and Jatiyas of eastern UP—along with thirteen other major jatis like the Azamgarihiyas, Aharwars, and Jhusiyas—were categorized as part of the Chamar caste. Given that the category Chamar covered diverse groups of communities who primarily were peasant and, according to the 1911 census, less than 4 percent of whom were leatherworkers, it is unclear on what principle these diverse groups of people were incorporated within the generic term. Despite the Jatavs' preference for a name that identifies their distinctive geographical location, the official classification grouped them with the generic Chamar occupational category. Perhaps equally if not more important was the centrality of village as marker of their identity, producing names like Chamrauli or Chamrauti that gave residents of the village a way to enter the official classificatory regime. We should be cautious in associating these village names with leather work because of the prefix *cham-* as a derivative of *charma* (hides/skins). For instance, it is assumed that the term *Chamrai* refers to a tax on leather, but according to B. T. Stoker, it referred to a range of agricultural taxes on Chamars' plows, land, irrigation, and crops. A seasoned civil service officer who retired as secretary of the UP government, Stoker, in his 1889 assessment report of block Khurja in Bulandshahr District, noted that Chamrai, one of the nine important taxes, was levied at the rate of 1 rupee per plow from tenants who did not render unpaid labor.⁴¹ It is district-level settlement reports like Stoker's that provide detailed information about Dalits that challenge a simplistic understanding of their status and position.⁴²

A reliance on colonial sociological sources has reinforced the Hindu textual representation of Chamars as leatherworkers. By emphasizing the role of census and colonial classificatory regimes, the field of postcolonial studies has, unwittingly, reinforced the image of the colonial archive as an imperial monolith. In addition, this understanding has also mapped caste centrally on the varna status. In striking contrast, the district-level revenue reports, embedded in local relationships, offer new ways of thinking about caste and untouchability—especially in spatial, economic, and political terms. Chamars emerge in these reports not as leatherworkers but as peasants who also participated in UP's major peasant movement of the early twentieth century.

Chamars and Dalit Agenda:
Vernacular Narratives and Police Reports

Prioritizing land revenue records over typical caste history sources of colonial sociology—such as the caste and tribe surveys—paid handsome dividends in enabling me to understand claims made in Chamar publications of the 1920s and 1930s and their activism as noted in the police reports of the period. Such an approach empowered me to move beyond the stereotypical representation of Chamars as leatherworkers, demonstrating their substantive relationship to agricultural production and their role in the rural political economy. The issues raised in Dalit publications resonated, quite remarkably, with official descriptions of Chamar political activities recorded in Criminal Intelligence Department reports from 1922 through the 1940s. The land revenue records were important in my understanding of trajectories of Chamar and Dalit histories in northern India, drawing my attention to the groups' agrarian context and their distinctive tenure position in UP. Jatavs' claim for Kshatriya status was not unique but rather was comparable to similar assertions by the "lower-caste" peasant groups such as the Gujars, Jats, Ahirs, and Kurmis in the 1920s.

The 1883 *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North-Western Provinces of India* noted that the Chamars of Shahjahanpur District of UP traced their genealogy to the noble Kshatriya Raghubansia family belonging to "the race of Raghu, mythical King of the Solar race."⁴³ Explaining the context for such claims, Robert Currie noted in 1874 that most of the 101,227 Chamar tenants who possessed occupancy rights were well located in a cultural scenario for asserting a noble Kshatriya identity.⁴⁴ These themes were also addressed in four Chamar histories published in northern India in early decades of the twentieth century: the anonymous *Suryavansh Kshatriya Jaiswar Sabha* and works by U. B. S. Raghuvanshi, Pandit Sunderlal Sagar, and Ramnarain Yadvendu.⁴⁵

Most recently, *Chamar Jati ka Gauravshali Aitihas* (A glorious history of the Chamar community) by Satnam Singh rehearsed the stories and accounts mentioned in those histories.⁴⁶ The objective of the histories was to engage and challenge Hindu and colonial histories available in the census reports and caste and tribe volumes. Instead of viewing these Chamar jati histories or *vanshavalis* as obscure, representing autonomous voices of subalterns produced in isolation, we should view them as offering us evidence of Chamars' engagement with caste Hindu agendas. The histories' methodological

and ideological agendas enlighten us about Chamars' solid engagement with northern Indian literary history.

Claiming a Kshatriya status for Chamars, authors of the Chamar histories were borrowing from the popular *itihasa-puranic* tradition (a collection of genealogical, myth, and historical narratives in Sanskrit); that is, viewing the *Puranas* as historical narratives of writing history, used in numerous caste histories by various social groups around the beginning of the twentieth century. A recognized mode of historical writing employed in Puranic literature, the *itihasa-puranic* tradition has been described as “embedded histories” used by non-Kshatriya groups to acquire ideological legitimacy by seeking Kshatriya status “embodied in the *itihasa-puranic* tradition.”⁴⁷ The northern Indian middle-class urban Hindu literati based in towns such as Lahore, Kanpur, Allahabad, and Benares drew from the *itihasa-puranic* tradition, folklore, and colonial ethnography to question colonial interpretations of the Hindu past.⁴⁸ Bharatendu Harischandra, the founder of the modern Hindi language and a leading Hindu notable of Benares, wrote several caste histories in Hindi by borrowing from puranic sources.⁴⁹ In terms of their methodology and agendas, the four Chamar histories drew heavily from the *itihasa-puranic* tradition of writing caste histories. Such a methodology also helps us question the dominant stereotype created by much of anthropological and historical literature that Dalit groups like Chamars were isolated and living on the margins.

In “*Khatriyon ki Utpatti*” (Origins of the Khattris), Harischandra laid out evidence to uphold claims made by the Khattri community of the Punjab of upper-caste Kshatriya status to challenge the 1871 census classification as Shudras. As an ethnographer, Harischandra borrowed from popular folklore, puranic sources, and Orientalist accounts to claim that even though the Punjabi Khattris were not occupationally Kshatriyas, they were nevertheless still Kshatriyas.⁵⁰ He borrowed from colonial accounts to argue that Punjab was the original home of the Aryans and that the Khattris were their descendants, recounting many popular stories to strengthen his claim. Second, Harischandra argued that by adopting the Shudra practices, such as eating meat and taking up menial occupations, Khattris escaped the persecution against Kshatriyas launched in the third century BCE, by the Mauryan Emperor Chandragupta, who was of Shudra or “lower-caste” origin.⁵¹ According to the third story, when Prashuram, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, launched the war to eliminate the Kshatriyas, the Punjabi Kshatriyas went underground, so to speak—protecting their lives by taking the name Khattri and taking up impure artisan occupations of the “lower castes” and adopting their customs.⁵² Harischandra also wrote a history of his caste, a trading

community titled “Aggarwaloin ki Utpatti” (Origins of the Aggarwal caste) in which he used a similar methodology to claim that the Aggarwals gave up their Kshatriya status to protect their community from annihilation.⁵³

There are noticeable similarities in the methodology employed in Harishchandra’s histories of the Khatris and Aggarwals and the histories written by Chamar publicists three decades later. Raghuvanshi used the discovery of a new Chanvar Purana to claim a *suryavanshi* (royal) past by creating a story from the familiar tropes of Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata: the birth of a son, a sage’s prediction of the threat to the royal lineage from the son, a maid’s sacrifice of her own son to protect the son of the queen, the son’s penance (in this case, after he became King Chamunda Rai), penance to achieve *moksha* (salvation), the curse of Lord Vishnu (that in this case led to the loss of the Chamars’ Kshatriya status and the recovery of that status in the *kaliyuga* [present time]). In the context of the Ramayana, Sheldon Pollock has described these narratives as “offering us an established constellation of mythological components.”⁵⁴

The Chamars claimed in their accounts that they had lost their true Kshatriya status because of persecution or punishment. Sagar innovatively draws evidence from contemporary sources and strengthens his claim by borrowing from the Puranas and folklore. He quotes from an 1882 work by the well-known colonial ethnographer J. C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, which states that Jatavs “may be an occupational off-shoot from the Yadu tribe from which Krishna came,” thereby elevating their status through association with the god Krishna.⁵⁵ He also quotes from volume 4 of the 1881 *Statistical Descriptive and Historical Accounts of the North-Western Provinces of India* which discusses the Jatavs’ claims of a superior status. By claiming a pure Kshatriya status, Chamar publicists were also contesting the colonial formulation of their history that defined them as defiled and unclean. The urban-based caste Hindu literati like Harishchandra were writing within a framework that drew from the Puranas and folklore. In their efforts to contest dominant colonial and Hindu narratives of their past, Chamars used the same puranic and oral myths to offer an alternative interpretation of their past, with the immediate political objective of convincing the colonial state of their Kshatriya upper-caste status. The methodology evident in the Chamar literary histories enables us to recognize that they were embedded in an established genre of writing Hindi-language caste histories. In claiming a pure and noble historical past, these histories represent the Chamars’ intellectual engagement with a prominent theme of the time.

The weekly police intelligence reports from 1922 to 1949 have been used for writing histories of the anticolonial nationalist movement, and peasant movements, but not for writing the history of the Dalits' struggle for dignity and equality. More than any other colonial source, the police reports provide the most valuable notes on the Dalit movement. By documenting Chamar protests and meetings, these reports provide sociological evidence for claims of noble or Kshatriya status made in Chamar histories. These protests were first noticed in 1921–22 in the western districts of UP, but by 1924 such protests had extended to central and eastern districts as well.⁵⁶ I have discussed these protests extensively elsewhere, but here I will give a few examples.⁵⁷ For instance, at a vast meeting of four thousand Chamars in the town of Mowane, Meerut District, in November 1922, a series of resolutions was passed claiming a Kshatriya status and vowing to purify their lifestyle.⁵⁸ In Mainpuri City, a Chamar association was formed in May 1924 explicitly to claim Kshatriya status for Chamars.⁵⁹ Similar meetings were organized by Chamars in different parts of western UP between 1922 and 1932 to assert a noble identity and adopt a pure and clean lifestyle. In addition, other demands were also outlined. From early on, Chamars were eager to show their loyalty to the British government, a fact reflected in the nature of resolutions passed at these meetings. Access to education, the opening of municipal schools for their children by the colonial government, and the starting of their own independent private schools constituted a very important part of their struggle. The agrarian context of the lives of Chamars, which I discussed above, played a very important role in their desire to acquire a new noble identity because the “lower castes,” such as the Jats, Ahirs, Gujjars, and Kurmis, were also making similar assertions in UP in the 1920s.

By engaging with puranic and the colonial forms of writing history, and by articulating agendas of social reform, Chamar organizations were involved in debates with various sections of Indian society. One example was the organizations' engagement with Arya Samaj's agenda of Hindu religious reform. In this respect Jatavs' concerns were similar to those of “lower-caste” peasant groups whose members were also involved in religious and social reform activities, in which Arya Samaj played an active role. Arya Samaj addressed the Chamars' agendas of reform and activism. The methodology of Jatav claims for a clean Kshatriya status provided what David Hardiman has called a “meeting point” between Chamar agendas and reformist Hindu organizations such as the Arya Samaj.⁶⁰ In his study of *adivasi* (tribal) protest in Gujarat, Hardiman argued that the *adivasi* sought to deprive the dominant Hindu classes “of their power of domination” by appropriating their value

systems instead of rejecting them outright.⁶¹ In UP the Arya Samaj facilitated the creation of such a “meeting point” with the Chamar protestors. From the Chamars’ point of view, the Arya Samaj certainly played a crucial role, because it criticized Hindu practices like untouchability and organized efforts to open temples and wells to Chamars.

Chamar organizations had first raised two issues of reform—temple entry and access to public wells—between 1917 and 1924, and the Arya Samaj responded to their agenda of social religious reform.⁶² Mainstream Hindi nationalist newspapers like *Pratap* and *Abhyudaya* in UP began to report the Arya Samaj’s *shuddhi* (purification of untouchables using Hindu religious ceremonies) activism-related activities in March 1924, as did the weekly police reports.⁶³ A typical Arya Samaj drive would involve purifying Chamars through a *shuddhi* ceremony, which would be followed by a procession of Chamars to the public well to proclaim their rights to use it and enter a temple. Such initiatives were undertaken in most districts of western UP, from Pilibhit and Dehradun in the north to Jhansi in the south, Meerut in the east, and Mainpuri in the west.⁶⁴ Northern India’s two recognized liberal newspapers, *Pratap* and *Chand*, published editorials congratulating Arya Samaj for its agenda of reforming the Hindu religion and putting untouchability on the agenda of caste Hindu society.⁶⁵ The right to enter temples and bathe in the Yamuna River during the Garhmukteshwar fair was first demanded in March 1923, in Meerut City. In Benares, Chamars demanded access to the Vishwanath temple and to the Dashavmegha ghat for bathing.⁶⁶ In Allahabad, Purshottam Das Tandon and Madan Mohan Malaviya led Chamars to the temples of Alopi Devi in Prayag. Both temples were later purified by priests. The Arya Samaj also used the Hindu festivals of Holi and Dussehra to incorporate Chamars into an imagined Hindu community of equals. Such functions were organized in Meerut City, Bulandshahr, Agra, Moradabad, Pilibhit, Bijnor, and Muthra, where Hindus were urged to embrace Chamars in the festivals.⁶⁷

The agenda of the Arya Samaj found a very receptive audience among Chamars, a relationship that was further cemented by opposition from orthodox Hindus that put the Arya Samaj and Chamar reformers on the same radical plane. The first and second generations of activists belonging to the Jatav community were educated in schools run by the Arya Samaj. The early Chamar advocates Pandit Sunderlal Sagar and Ramnarain Yadvendu were both educated in those schools, and both of their families were members of the Arya Samaj. Swami Achhutanand, who was educated in an army school, joined the Arya Samaj in 1905 and worked with it until 1918. He established

and taught in an Arya Samaj school in Manipuri District and was an active participant in its activities. Jatav organizations in Agra and other parts of western UP advocated vegetarianism and Vedic style rituals. The ideals of the Arya Samaj had a particular appeal to Chamars because they strengthened Chamar claims to superior status.

By recognizing the embeddedness of Chamar Hindi-language histories and their political activism in the northern Indian cultural and political milieu, we can move beyond the stereotypical representations of Chamars as a marginal and isolated group. The Hindi-language Chamar histories, as well as the cultural and political meetings reported by the police reports, inform us about a Chamar elite that was well informed and participated in debates that concerned other groups of Indians. Chamars were not passive recipients but active agents of social and political change.

Conclusion

The notion of a unified colonial archive rests primarily on the sources of colonial sociology, the census and caste and tribe surveys, which inform much of the debate on the subject, including the study of caste. A reconsideration of archival sources for writing Dalit histories by emphasizing the role of local-level revenue records turned out to be a major unintended methodological innovation. Land revenue records have rarely, if ever, been used to write Chamar histories. In addition, the ethnographic approach of engaging with Dalit activists during archival research in different parts of UP illuminated new connections and linkages with the themes embedded in the revenue reports. A focus on the district-level settlement reports of the 1880s, with their detailed revenue and rent information, allowed me to grasp Chamars' locations in the different regions of UP. My focus on this strategy was motivated and inspired by the kinds of questions and discussions I had with Dalit activists in different towns of northern India. My second strategy of engaging with Dalit activists proved most beneficial in assisting me with getting documents (the local caste histories) from their personal collections that are not usually available at metropolitan archives. It also connected well with my third priority, creating connections with the accounts available in police intelligence reports, the only source of Dalit activism for the early twentieth century. The police accounts provided detailed information that resonated with the claims of Kshatriya status made in Chamar Hindi-language histories. These nontraditional sources, like settlement reports or police reports, are rarely emphasized in the writing of Dalit histories, in contrast to a solely ethnographic live-in methodology to search for authentic voices.

The postcolonial notion of the colonial archive, although useful in many ways, relies far too much on the sources of colonial sociology. There is a real danger of ignoring land revenue records of localities, which we must recognize as new sources for writing Dalit histories. We must register a substantive distinction between the notion of the colonial archive and colonial sociology to avoid merging the two into one. Instead, we may want to think of colonial archives as a form that is informed by the “genres of documentation” that were generated by diverse motives. We may want to underscore the heterogeneity of the colonial archive, informed by the local-level motivations that shape land revenue documents but markedly absent in the sources of colonial sociology. Recognizing these motivations encouraged me write a new history of untouchability in northern India.

NOTES

1. *Census of India, 1911*, vol. 15, part 2: *Tables*, 756–62. See also, *Census of India, 1961*, vol. 15, part 5, 4–7.
2. Interview with J. R. Kaniria, resident of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, March 3, 2009.
3. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, 230 and 250.
4. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 44–45. See also Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, chapter 3; Pant, “The Cognitive Status of Caste in Colonial Ethnography.”
5. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 94.
6. This is the main point of difference between parts 2 and 3 in *ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 118.
8. Amin, introduction, xxxix.
9. *Collection of Papers Connected with an Inquiry into the Conditions of the Lower Classes of the Population*, 8.
10. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 20.
11. *Ibid.*, 11.
12. Steedman, *Dust*, 12–13.
13. Burns, *Into the Archive*, 11–12.
14. Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, 175; Namishray, *Apne-Apne Pinjare*, 17.
15. Rawat, “Occupation, Dignity, and Space.”
16. P. Deshpande, “Caste as Maratha,” 32.
17. Hooper, *Report of the Settlement of the Basti District*, 28; see also 18–22.
18. Crosthwaite and Neale, *Report of the Settlement of the Etawah District*, 20. See also Clark, *Report on the Revision of Settlement of the Bharai District, Oudh*, 66; Currie, *Report on the Settlement of the Shahjehanpore District*, 61; Reid, *Report on the Settlement Operations in the District of Azamgarh*, 31; T. Smith, *Report on the Revision of Settlement in the District of Aligarh*, 130; Wright, *Report of the Settlement of the Cawnpore District*, 46.

19. *Further Papers Relating to Under-Proprietary Rights and Rights of Cultivators in Oude; Collection of Papers Connected with an Inquiry into the Conditions of the Lower Classes of the Population; Collection of Papers Relating to the Conditions of the Tenancy and the Working of Present Rent Law in Oudh.*
20. Boas, *Report on the Eleventh Settlement of the Moradabad*, 10.
21. Drake-Brockman, *Report on the Settlement Operations of the Saharanpur District, 1921*, 25–26.
22. Fremantle, *Report on the Settlement of the District Bareilly, 1903*, 4–5.
23. Evans, *Report on the Settlement of the Agra District, 1880*, 28–29; Mudie, *Report on the Settlement and Record Operations in District Agra, 1930*, 20.
24. Stoker, *Report on the Settlement of Land Revenue in the Bulandshahr District, 1891*, 16–21.
25. Impey, *Report on the Settlement of the Jhansi District, 1893*, 91.
26. Drake-Brockman, *Report on the Settlement Operations of the Saharanpur District, 1921*, 12.
27. Evans, *Report on the Settlement of the Agra District, 1880*, 57.
28. Atkinson, *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North-Western Provinces of India*, 3:560–61.
29. Fremantle, *Report on the Second Settlement of the Rae Bareli*, 19.
30. *Further Papers Relating to Under-Proprietary Rights and Rights of Cultivators in Oude*, reports by Maconochie, Settlement Officer, Oonao [or Unnao], March 16, 1865, 386 and 407, Harrington, Settlement Officer, [block] Durriabad, Lucknow District, April 4, 1865, p. 518, Settlement Officer, Hurdui [or Hardoi], April 30, 1865, p. 154.
31. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in Northern India*, 10–15.
32. “Report on the Awadh Peasant Movement,” 687–93, F. No.50/1921/B. No. 133–4 General Administration Department, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow (hereafter UPSA).
33. “Papers Relating to Peasant Movement of 1921,” 21, File No. 1, Baba Ramachandra Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Yadvendu, *Yaduvansh ka Aitihās*, 133.
36. Interview with Puttulal Jatav, September 12, 2002. Born in 1927, he has been involved since the mid-1940s with Jatav politics in Agra, where he now lives as a retired district judge.
37. See chapters 4 and 5 in Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*.
38. *Ibid.* And, Jatav, *Shree 108 Swami Achhutanand ji ka Jeevan Parichay*, 14; R. Singh, *Achhutanand Harihar*, 41.
39. Yadvendu, *Yaduvansh ka Aitihās*, 206–31. Yadvendu was an important member of the Jatav Mahasabha and a founder of the All India Jatav Youth League in 1932.
40. Briggs, *The Chamars*; Wiser and Wiser, *Behind the Mud Walls*.
41. Stoker, *Assessment Report of Tahsil Khurja of the Bulandshahr District*, 27.
42. “Rasad and Begari Agitation in UP, 1920,” 1 and 3, file no. 694, box no. 153/1920, GAD, UPSA.
43. *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North-Western Provinces of India* 9:88.

44. Currie, *Report on the Settlement of the Shahjehanpore District*, 61.
45. Raghuvanshi, *Shree Chanvar Purana*; Sagar, *Yadav Jivan*; *Suryavansh Kshatriya Jaiswar Sabha*; Yadvendu, *Yaduvansh ka Aitihās*.
46. Satnam Singh, *Chamar Jati ka Gauravshaali Aitihās*, chapters 8–15. The book's publisher, Samyak Prakashan, is a prominent Dalit publishing house in Delhi, and it has published books on Dalit leaders and Buddhism, and posters and calendars.
47. Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, 135.
48. Dalmia, "Vernacular Histories in Late Nineteenth-Century Banaras," 60.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, 78.
51. Harischandra, "Khatriyon ki Utpatti," 247–50.
52. *Ibid.*, 251–53.
53. Harischandra, "Aggarwaloin ki Utpatti," 5–12.
54. Pollock, "The Ramayana," 3;38.
55. Quoted in Sagar, *Yadav Jivan*, 21.
56. I make this statement on the basis of a detailed study of the reports of the weekly police reports from 1922–32. Officially known as the Police Abstracts of Weekly Intelligence, they are available in the Criminal Investigation Department office in Lucknow, UP and are cited hereafter as PAI. The evidence for such protests is available from 1922, when the PAI series starts. The activities mentioned in PAI were not reported in the nationalist press, particularly *Pratap*, *Abhyudhaya*, and *Aj*, which began to report such activities only in 1924 with the beginning of the Arya Samaj's shuddhi activism, or the practice of purifying untouchables.
57. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*, 120–54.
58. PAI, November 4, 1922.
59. PAI, May 24, 1924.
60. Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*, 163.
61. *Ibid.*
62. PAI, November 3 and 10, 1923.
63. *Pratap*, March 3, 1924; *Abhyudaya*, May 17 and June 21, 1924; PAI, March 1, 1924.
64. PAI, January 20, April 14, May 5, May 26, June 2, June 9, June 16, June 26, June 30, October 20, and October 27, 1923; February 9, March 1, April 5, April 19, May 3, May 10, May 17, August 26, September 9, and September 13, 1924; May 23, August 1, August 15, October 17, and December 19, 1925; February 13, May 15, May 29, June 26, July 24, October 9, and November 16, 1926; April 23 and October 1, 1927; July 21, August 18, and October 13, 1928. The records indicate the peak of Arya Samaj activities and a decline from 1926 onward.
65. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability*, 136–44.
66. *Pratap*, April 10 and June 1, 1925; *Chand*, May 1927.
67. *Pratap*, March 24 and August 11, 1924; *Abhyudaya*, August 16, 1924, and March 31, 1928; PAI, March 10 and November 3, 1923; April 5, October 18, and October 25, 1924; April 2 and October 8, 1927.