



PEASANT PASTS

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN
WESTERN INDIA

VINAYAK CHATURVEDI



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INTRODUCTION

I

In the autumn of 1995, I began looking at early-twentieth-century police reports for western India in the Official Publications Room of the Cambridge University Library. I had decided to consider these reports quite by chance while searching for documents on the agrarian economy of Gujarat. I had expected to find the usual cases of local crime, such as robberies, disturbances, crop thefts, and murders, but much to my surprise I came across a comment by a district magistrate that immediately opened up a new direction of inquiry. He had reported that in 1918 village elites belonging to the Patidar community in Kheda district, in central Gujarat, were forcibly extracting labor from peasants known as Dharalas by abusing a colonial law known as the Criminal Tribes Act.¹ The application of the legislation in Kheda district was approved in 1911 and led to the immediate official classification of all Dharalas—approximately 250,000 individuals, or one-third of the agrarian population—as criminals in the eyes of the state.²

The fact that village elites were using extra-economic coercion to extract labor was not something new or unique to this area or time period. However, what stood out for me was that scholars writing on nationalism in India have recognized the same Patidars as harnessing one of the first movements for nationalism in that same year in alliance with Mohandas K. Gandhi—the Mahatma.³ The implications of this seeming paradox were far reaching, especially since these Patidars historically have been celebrated as some of the most dynamic and creative peasant nationalists who led India's independence movement.⁴

Shortly thereafter I came across a similar reference in a speech given by Gandhi while he was campaigning for nationalist politics in 1925: “Patidars tyrannize over lower communities, beat them and extract forced labour from them.”⁵ He had asked the Dharalas to forgive the Patidars for the cause of the nation but had accepted the identification of

Dharalas as criminals and claimed that the community did not have an understanding of politics. The political exigency for Gandhi at the time centered on contesting colonial power and promoting the idea of an independent India in alliance with Patidars, rather than mediating a settlement of the conflicts within the structure of agrarian social relations, which would have certainly antagonized his primary support base in Gujarat. Patidar nationalists welcomed the coming of the nation-state, not simply as an end of colonialism, but as an opportunity to consolidate their own power in the countryside in an independent India. It came as little surprise when most Dharalas—primarily poor peasants, agricultural laborers, and servants—refused to participate in the Patidar-led nationalist movement in the locality from the 1910s to the 1940s. In fact, many actively opposed it.

It was evident that the narratives I had come across during my preliminary research had linked Dharalas to a history of criminality without considering alternative pasts. Dharala opposition to the nationalism led by Patidars (or even Gandhi) did not mean that these peasants lacked an understanding of politics or an ability to imagine a political community that was separate, if not independent, from the emergent form of the nation. I was convinced that the silences within the narratives had their own story to tell.⁶ After all, nationalism was not the only articulation of politics in India or elsewhere in this period. My interest turned to further researching and explaining the nature of Dharalas' peasant politics in the shadow of British colonialism and against the background of an emergent nationalist movement. In many ways the idea for this book began here.

II

While considering the implications of such a conflict in the making of a nation within a colonial context, I began thinking about a theoretical question raised by Partha Chatterjee about nationalism: “Whose imagined community?”⁷ It was clear that these nationalists were not saying that those subordinate to them were not going to become “Indians” in a postcolonial India, or that they would be excluded from the nation. Rather, it appeared they had conceptualized a nation in which they would continue to consolidate power and control of agrarian social relations. These nationalists understood what it meant to be dominant. Yet the project of nationalism required something more: those committed to nationalism had to convince and persuade the Dharalas to accept how *they* imagined the nation. In other words, the nationalists understood the

idea of establishing hegemony within the nationalist project. Even Gandhi had argued that the problems within agrarian society would be resolved once India achieved its independence, at which time everyone would forge a national identity. His pronouncement anticipated an end to identifying oneself as a subject of the British raj, while offering hope for a future in which individuals could claim to be citizens of a postcolonial nation that was not mired in conflict. It remained unclear what independence from colonialism or freedom within a nation would mean for Dharalas, who were identified as criminals without politics by both the colonialists and the nationalists. In the meantime, Dharalas had asserted their own ideas, sentiments, and practices as a way to protect their everyday world while resisting the nationalist movement.

Chatterjee formulated his question in direct response to Benedict Anderson's explanation of the origin and spread of nationalism in the modern world. For Anderson, the idea of the nation as a political community had been imagined into existence in the age of the Enlightenment and Revolution in which other imaginings of community (namely, religious community) were already on the decline.⁸ The nation acquired its shape through the emergence of what Anderson called "print-capitalism," which enhanced the rapid spread of newspapers and novels and allowed individuals to identify and conceptualize themselves as members of the same community. Anderson posited that the emergence of a "modular form" of this new political community first occurred in the Americas and western Europe; later nationalisms then adapted and replicated the modular form in their own respective projects of nation building.

For Chatterjee, the arguments on nationalism proposed by Anderson were situated within a "universal history of the modern world" which did not take into account that anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa fundamentally differed from the modular form.⁹ Chatterjee's objection was that anticolonialism was simply subsumed as part of a normative history of nationalism originating in the Americas and Europe, without considering the "creative results of the nationalist imagination" present in the struggles against colonial power.¹⁰ If the nation was indeed an imagined community, then what was left to imagine for the formerly colonized who were reduced to choosing their nationalism from the modular form? Chatterjee argued for a "freedom of imagination" that exemplified the differences within the historical experiences of nationalism.¹¹

I understand that Chatterjee's purpose of asking "Whose imagined community?" was to disrupt the interpretations of normalized processes of nationalism in the modern world. What was at stake, of course, was

assessing whose imagination was being considered in the making of the nation. In addition, his claims for creativity and freedom within the nationalist imaginary served the function of illustrating that nationalism in India was not simply a derivative discourse, nor was it a derivative imagination.¹² Yet Chatterjee points out that, while nationalist elites in India provided multiple ways of thinking about political community that differed from the historical experiences of the Americas and western Europe, they nonetheless adopted the form of the nation-state. Why did this happen? For Chatterjee, it had less to do with a lack of imagination about how to conceptualize community and more with what he calls “surrender[ing] to the old forms of the modern state.”¹³ Inscribed within anticolonial nationalism was a demand that “Indians” be treated as equals within the domain of the state. The ideas of liberal democracy were taken as necessary by nationalists in conceptualizing the postcolonial state in which all Indians would be treated as citizens of the nation.

I do not fully accept Chatterjee’s arguments. My objection has less to do with rethinking the modular form of the nation for the study of nationalisms in Asia and Africa than with his specific claim that nationalists ceded statecraft to the West in the “material domain.” For Chatterjee, anticolonial nationalism divided social institutions and practices into two domains within colonial society—the material and the spiritual. The economy, statecraft, science, and technology were all part of the material domain—a domain, according to Chatterjee, where “the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed.”¹⁴ On the other hand, anticolonial nationalism maintained a domain of sovereignty within colonial India in the “spiritual domain”—a domain of cultural identity that remained out of reach of the colonial state. It is within the autonomous spiritual domain where nationalism was “brought into being,” thereby making it a distinct part of a “non-Western national culture.”¹⁵

In thinking about the implications of Chatterjee’s claims, I questioned the idea that nationalists had actually accepted a freedom of imagination *within* anticolonial nationalism. In fact, what appeared to be creative results of the nationalist imaginary in relation to the modular form, as argued by Chatterjee, were simultaneously expressions of nationalist dominance and hegemony over other political imaginings within the making of the nation. I suggest that the nationalists accepted the coming of the modern state, not as a form of surrender, but as an opportunity to continue dominating agrarian social relations within the postcolonial nation. In other words, nationalists like the Patidars sought to establish control within the material domain. The distinctions between the mate-

rial and spiritual domains were far more blurred than Chatterjee allows for within his argument. Moreover, it was evident that in order to maintain power in the transition from the colonial world to the postcolonial one, the nationalists had to ensure that alternative forms of political community remained marginalized, or were simply silenced in relation to the idea of the nation.

A central feature of this book is a consideration of the multiple ways Dharala peasants resisted both colonialism and nationalism, all the while continuing to conceptualize political futures. The outcome of the story is well known, in that India became a nation in 1947 and Dharalas its citizens. In order to achieve victory, Patidar nationalists, and other nationalists throughout the country, fought against the British and their “Indian” detractors and opponents.¹⁶ They were victorious, not simply because the nationalists convinced the masses to accept the idea of becoming Indian in what Chatterjee calls the spiritual domain, but also because they had established controls within the material domain. Dharalas ensured that these processes were full of conflict for the nationalists, because the fight was not simply over who controlled the means of production but also whose imagined community would come into being.

III

My research took me to local and regional archives in western India, where district-level documents have been processed and filed since the early-nineteenth century.¹⁷ For a historian, these are the obvious places to begin. I was aware that the type of information I was looking for was difficult to collect.¹⁸ The documents that fill the vast imperial archive reflect a colonial administration established to maintain political stability and generate revenue from the countryside. Officials did not intend for historians to write political or social histories about peasants based on their administrative letters and reports. In fact, there is often no consistency or regularity within the sources—that is, if the files are not missing or destroyed. Peasants generally appeared within official documents under extraordinary circumstances, contesting the legitimacy and authority of colonial power or local elites in the form of revolt, rebellion, and robbery.¹⁹ During these moments of violence and conflict, the anonymous tillers of the land were transformed into criminals within the official record, but they never figured as political actors or intellectuals. Many such peasants were prosecuted and convicted of crimes against the state, but subsequently were never mentioned again in official documents. At

the same time, peasants also wanted to stay out of the imperial archive.²⁰ They were aware of the functioning of the colonial state and did their best to avoid the attention of officials. To have one's name and activities entered into the pages of an administrative report had potentially dire consequences.

Thus, from the outset of my research, it was evident that I would be confronted with materials that were largely fragmentary and episodic.²¹ This situation is certainly not unique to scholars of colonial India; it is a difficulty facing nearly all historical research on peasants. In thinking about writing histories based on fragmentary sources or writing fragmented histories (I will say more about this distinction later), I found Carlo Ginzburg's writings on historical methodology particularly useful, especially his point that "the occurrence of a phenomenon cannot be taken as an index of its historical relevance."²² The minor presence, or major absence, of any given set of ideas or practices in the official record, for example, did not necessarily mean that their impact in society was actually minor or absent. Ginzburg also points out that a discovery of "small numbers of texts" can be "more rewarding than a massive accumulation of repetitive evidence."²³ What was significant was the quality of the evidence, not the sheer quantity.²⁴ In my reading there was great potential even within the fragment.

Ginzburg warns, however, that sources are not "open windows" to the past, but function more like "distorting mirrors."²⁵ For a historian to acknowledge that distortions exist within historical records and are a characteristic of all sources does not make the records necessarily "useless."²⁶ In fact, Ginzburg claims that the scarcity of evidence still provides an opportunity to "reconstruct a fragment."²⁷ In other words, the discovery of a fragmentary source could lead to the making of a fragmentary narrative.²⁸ The point was not to expect a complete picture in the historical record—an impossibility in any case—but at the same time not to be deterred from researching and writing historical narratives about peasants.²⁹

IV

The first part of this book is based on materials that I located shortly after my arrival at the Maharashtra State Archives in Bombay. Within a judicial department file, I read a description of a peasant named Ranchod Vira who declared the end of the British raj and proclaimed himself a king of a new polity in 1898.³⁰ He wrote letters that circulated through-

out the region. He collected books and papers. He was a priest and a medicine man. He had a complex understanding of political identities in rural Gujarat. He was captured by the police following an armed battle with colonial authorities and subsequently tried and convicted for sedition and murder in a court case entitled *Imperatrix vs. Ranchod Vira and Others*. Needless to say, from my point of view a new direction for the study of peasant politics immediately suggested itself and opened up fresh questions about the ways in which Dharalas were thinking about their world within a colonial context.

Ranchod and his supporters spoke in court and offered insights into their thoughts sentiments about everyday life. Yet this extraordinary case is certainly not complete, despite the extensive testimonies and detailed reports provided by government officials. In addition, it is clear that some of the confessions and testimonies of the peasants who appeared in court were coerced by the police and magistrate involved in the case. However, the rich material presents important clues about how peasants conceptualized political identity and ethical government while refusing to cede statecraft to the British.³¹ By carefully combing through the details of this particular case and the statements made by the peasants in court, I have reconstructed Ranchod's story, which constitutes the first part of this book. I provide a narrative that places Ranchod and Dharalas at the center of this history. My purpose is to illustrate how peasants participated in the production and circulation of political ideas. I argue that Ranchod sought to reinvent a form of governance considered by peasants to be legitimate. His discourses and practices of kingship provide a way to look at a peasant imagining of a political community.

I knew that it was impossible that Ranchod's ideas had existed autonomously within a larger peasant world. He was neither the first peasant to declare himself a king, nor the first to announce the end of the British raj.³² The difficulty, of course, was finding evidence that would allow me to establish larger intellectual and political connections with Ranchod and his Dharala supporters. Although officials had alluded to the fact that Ranchod's ideas were spreading throughout Gujarat even after his death, there was no interest in pursuing any leads until an individual named Daduram attracted the attention of the district magistrate.³³ I came across documents that described Daduram as popular priest and a reformer who had regularly attracted thousands of Dharalas to his meetings. The sheer number of these peasants posed a threat to the stability of the countryside, but more important, officials were concerned that Daduram had been influenced by Ranchod. Consequently, the district

magistrate set up an extensive surveillance network to monitor Daduram's activities for a period of three years, between 1906 and 1909.

The reports produced by the district magistrate were the most extensive I had read about one single peasant. In many ways Daduram was similar to Ranchod in establishing critiques of colonial power and the dominance of local elites, but his methods and strategies were fundamentally different. I illustrate the fact that, even within a small locality, peasants and their leaders offered multiple ways of thinking about politics. Daduram did not propose that his Dharala supporters establish a new polity. Rather, he demanded a political future in which they would break their patron-client bonds with Patidars. Daduram was a public figure who encouraged debate and dialogue at his meetings rather than armed conflict.³⁴ He denounced emergent forms of popular nationalism while participating in public discourses on conceptualizing a political identity for Dharalas. While Daduram did not claim to be a king, he had nonetheless adopted practices of kingship in relation to his followers.

In the second part of the book, I reconstruct a series of narratives around the theme of Dharala politics in the early decades of the twentieth century. I begin with Daduram's complex story. However, in my attempt to find further connections to Ranchod in 1898, I was confronted with a problem of relying upon official sources. Not surprisingly, local officials stopped their surveillance in 1909, believing that the peasant movement ended with Daduram's death that year. They shifted their attention to nationalist politics in the 1910s–1940s; the focus on Dharalas acquired secondary status in the colonial record. The reports on the nationalist movement increased dramatically in this period, but fewer commentaries about marginal groups and communities were produced, except to discuss the propensity of Dharalas to commit crimes. Ironically, if more Dharalas had actually participated in the nationalist movement, it is likely that they would have garnered more attention in the official record. However, once Dharalas were declared a criminal tribe, any moment of violence or even a minor violation of the law by an individual was interpreted as a crime committed by all Dharalas. One major consequence of such a legal precedent is the absence of specificity and details in official reports and correspondence. In addition, there was a more fundamental problem: the surveillance reports and judicial testimonies were simply not objective or neutral—nor could they ever claim to be. Despite these limitations, I illustrate in part 2 the fact that official sources are neither irrelevant nor meaningless in providing clues that otherwise would have been lost.³⁵

In the process of my research, I was drawn back to the details of how Dharalas were classified as criminals by the colonial state. I was struck by the fact that, only two years after Daduram's death, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911 was imposed in Kheda district restricting the movement of all Dharalas in the locality.³⁶ The impact of the legislation was immediate. Patidar landholders were responsible for monitoring the Dharalas in their respective villages and were required to inform police officials of all gatherings and meetings. In effect, surveillance and control over Dharalas increased despite the fact that colonial officials were not directly involved in the daily monitoring of peasants. Public meetings to discuss political issues, which had been made popular by Daduram, came to an end. Patidars reestablished their dominant patron-client bonds with Dharalas, strengthening their ability to use extra-economic coercion. Interestingly, the most severe application of the Criminal Tribes Act was in Chaklasi, the center of Ranchod Vira's movement, where more than two thousand Dharalas were forced to attend roll call twice a day.³⁷

The first two parts of the book reconsider the nature of peasant politics in Gujarat. Ranchod, Daduram, and their supporters, in their own respective ways, were demanding a new political order in the years immediately before the emergence of Patidar participation in nationalist politics. In fact, the region became a center of anticolonial nationalism only *after* the rise of Dharala politics. Let me be clear: I am not saying that Dharalas were either the first or the only section of agrarian society to raise anticolonial concerns or promote ideas of alternative political futures. Nor am I suggesting that Dharalas directly influenced the emergence of Patidar politics or anticolonial nationalism. Rather debates and critiques about ethical governance, colonial power, and political community were already a central part of the political culture in the region before the rise of mass nationalism in Gujarat now famously associated only with the Patidars and Gandhi.³⁸ There were multiple dialogues existing within contemporary society. The role of Dharalas in the making of peasant politics provides alternatives to the study of the region. Of course, there are many more histories yet to be written.

My argument contrasts with David Hardiman's claim that the impetus for peasant politics was primarily derived from the Patidars. Hardiman's seminal writings have illustrated the ways in which Patidar peasants were able to mobilize as a community in the struggle for nationalism. Hardiman also argues that factors of class structure were central to understanding the rise of peasant nationalism among Patidars. He states, "Although the peasant nationalists were mostly rich and middle peas-

ants, they were also Patidars[, and] besides being a nationalist struggle, this also became a movement by the Patidars for their self-assertion as a community.”³⁹ Hardiman further points out that there was a “rough correlation between class and community” in popular participation in local politics: “The force behind such movements came from the demands of economic classes, the banner under which the peasants fought was, more often than not, communal in form.”⁴⁰ Hardiman correctly locates the crystallization of a Patidar identity in the period between 1917 and 1934 as a dominant force in leading the nationalist movement in Kheda district.

There is a fundamental problem, however, in Hardiman’s analysis: namely, his explanation of the mechanisms by which Patidars dominated as a class and a community during the colonial period.⁴¹ Although he states that Patidar “dominance came through wealth,” there is little to delineate the historical processes that established the dominance of Patidars in agrarian society.⁴² By focusing on the intra-Patidar divisions, distinguishing landlords from rich peasants and middle peasants, as a way to establish the locus of political mobilization, he directs insufficient attention to the long-term processes and political dynamics in the locality that help to explain the rise of Patidars in the nineteenth century. Why is this point relevant? Although Hardiman emphasizes the class-based divisions of the Patidar peasantry—arguing that middle peasants influenced rich peasants, who then influenced landlords to participate against colonial rule—there is little on how internal patron-client relations (or the nature of a surplus extraction relationship) functioned in agrarian social relations that allowed Patidars to collectively dominate Dharalas and other subordinate groups during the period of colonial rule.⁴³

Throughout the nineteenth century, colonial policies had generally privileged Patidars—both landholding elites and peasant cultivators—to acquire wealth and power in the locality, while *all* Dharalas were systematically marginalized from access to the means of production. By the end of the nineteenth century, Patidars had replaced traditional moneylenders in the credit market, providing loans for fellow community members at favorable rates not available to others. The colonial state, moreover, provided loans for investments in setting up Patidar villages, in colonizing new lands, in building wells, and in purchasing cattle. New legislation implemented in the twentieth century gave Patidars the ability to exploit other peasants. However, dual crises at the turn of the century—a plague epidemic and a famine—devastated the entire region, in which nearly 20 percent of the entire population perished. For many

Dharalas, the period of crisis confirmed that a transformation in their everyday lives was absolutely necessary.

This period witnessed the emergence of organized peasant politics challenging the authority of local elites and the legitimacy of the colonial state, and offered alternative conceptualizations of political community. Some peasants demanded changes regarding land and labor rights within agrarian society, while others opted to create their own polity. The colonial state was facing its own fiscal crisis at the start of the twentieth century because it could not generate revenue from the countryside in Kheda district at the rates it had grown accustomed to during the second half of the nineteenth century. Patidars were unable to simply extract a surplus from the Dharalas because of the nature of peasant politics in this period. All the while, colonial officials continued to demand complete payment of taxes from the entire agrarian society. Patidars began questioning the legitimacy of the colonial authorities' decision to forcibly extract revenue payments in the midst of a crisis. Further, Patidars claimed that the colonial state was not ethical in its treatment of its subjects—an argument that Dharala peasants had already voiced in the late nineteenth century.

Hardiman is correct in noting that political mobilization in response to nationalism was dominated by Patidars without the large-scale participation of other parts of agrarian society, especially the Dharalas.⁴⁴ Hardiman believes this reflects a general lack of political awareness or formal organization by poor peasants. Furthermore, because many Dharalas did not own land, unlike their Patidar counterparts, he claims they could afford to be militant and violent in expressing discontent and redressing injustice.⁴⁵ More crucially, Hardiman states, “it was the movement of [substantial peasant] castes and communities which provided the initial challenge to authority and which triggered off the more revolutionary movements of the poorer peasantry.”⁴⁶

I do not fully agree with Hardiman's claims, especially when considering the ideas and practices propagated by figures like Ranchod and Daduram. The colonial state had prevented Dharalas from participating in organized politics by making public meetings and gatherings illegal with the implementation of criminal tribes legislation. Hardiman notes that Patidars had the greatest success in their movements in the villages of the Charotar tract. Not surprisingly, the Criminal Tribes Act was applied most stringently in this area of Kheda, which helps to explain why many Dharalas decided to move their politics underground at this point. Dharalas were not willing to participate alongside Patidars amid such conditions; instead, the peasants took up alternative forms of

protest. Some Dharalas engaged in conceptualizing a new political identity, some organized labor strikes against Patidar landholders, some simply migrated, and others challenged aspects of colonial legislation. The most prominent form of peasant politics taken up by Dharalas in the early twentieth century involved underground activities, such as raids on villages, as a way to obstruct nationalist politics.

I argue that these efforts were not inspired by Patidar protests against the colonial state, but were a reflection of the limited options that remained to Dharala peasants. Gone were the days when hundreds and thousands of Dharalas could gather for days at a time to discuss everyday concerns about colonialism and nationalism; instead, what remained were small raids and fragmented politics. Yet the concatenation of Dharala efforts forced the nationalists to reconsider their strategies. Still, any small Dharala victories were short-lived, as it was becoming evident that the British raj was inching closer to its end, and the nationalist project led by Patidars was going to be realized. Had Patidars accepted the ideas and critiques of Dharalas, it would have meant an end to their control of the social relations of production and a reconfiguring of their understanding of an imagined community. Instead, Patidars chose to use the colonial legislation as a way to control Dharalas while simultaneously contesting colonial power in collaboration with Gandhi.

V

In the process of researching and writing this book, I made the decision not to accept the judgments of colonial officials—the judge, the magistrate, the collector, and so forth. Perhaps this is an obvious point. Had I accepted the verdict that all Dharalas were criminals, there would be no reason to continue: one could read either the colonialist narratives or the nationalist ones. Yet in order to construct my narratives and provide my own interpretations, I had to learn how the officials reached their decisions—to learn how to judge the judges.⁴⁷ I return to Ginzburg on this point, who advocates that the historian must “learn to read evidence against the grain” and “against the intention of those who produced it.”⁴⁸ For Ginzburg, the method of the historian, like that of the judge, is based on evidence or proof required to reconstruct a truthful account. He does not say that proof is a “simple mirroring” of reality, which he states would be naïve, but rather that proof provides a way to understand what is possible or probable between the representations in the sources and “the reality they depict or represent.”⁴⁹

Despite the convergence between the historian and the judge, Ginzburg notes that there are fundamental differences. To begin with, historians, unlike judges, do not produce evidence.⁵⁰ Judges use evidence to make decisions, and simultaneously they participate in the making of evidence for the state in the form of the judgment, which becomes the proof later used by historians to construct historical knowledge. Historians may use proof to write about human actions and contexts in which there does not need to be a final outcome and the matter at hand can remain an “open problem.”⁵¹ In most instances, such an approach would be unsatisfactory and unacceptable in a court. The historian can choose which position to take in the process of reconstructing the narrative without having to produce an outcome or decision to conclude a case. History by its very nature suggests that there can be no conclusion to the process: there is no end of history. Ginzburg accounts for the fact that both historians and judges make errors, but the judicial errors can have more immediate and serious consequences, especially for the innocent who are convicted of crimes based on contextual circumstances that cannot be confirmed, despite the use of evidence. For Ginzburg, what remains integral for the historian is using proof and making a choice not to write like the judge, all while understanding the relationship of power involved in the making of all evidence.⁵² Only then can the historian successfully use the evidential paradigm for locating the fragments within the sources and, in the words of Walter Benjamin, “brush history against the grain.”⁵³

I have chosen to write narratives in this book in which Dharalas are interpreted as political actors, rather than adopting the colonial classification of “criminal tribe.” Yet throughout the book, I use the category of *Dharala* with great caution, recognizing that it is a term of generality and at times imprecision. I refer to the vast majority of Dharalas, who were poor peasants, agricultural laborers, and servants, rather than the few who were educated elites or even large landholders. While colonial officials sometimes made distinctions based on class, status, and power within the Dharala population, it is worth noting that *all* Dharalas were classified as members of a criminal tribe. The problem of imprecision is also compounded by the fact that early-nineteenth-century officials sometimes referred to Dharalas as *Kolis* while adding the caveat that not all *Kolis* were Dharalas. For purposes of clarity, I have alerted the reader to these discrepancies in the text. By the early twentieth century, some peasants shed their Dharala identity by claiming to be “Baraiyas” or “Kshatriyas.” In the end, there may not be a term that is altogether sat-

isfactory or free from bias. I have mostly used *Dharala* throughout the book, following Ranchod's declaration in court, "I am a Dharala"⁵⁴ and Daduram's critique of both *Baraiya* and *Kshatriya*.⁵⁵

There are two further aspects on the issue of judgment that require explanation. The first has to do with a question of form; the second with the idea of the political. My book is a narrative history, or more appropriately, a book of historical narratives. I have not shunned fragmentary sources when writing these narratives, with the result that some of the narratives themselves are fragmentary. It is important to keep in mind that this decision has permitted me to include evidence or proof that would otherwise remain outside the pages of history. In some archival sources, Dharalas are mentioned as part of a footnote or are simply mentioned in passing as an irrelevant administrative detail; but what the colonial official classified as marginal had relevance for me. I have made many such references central to my text. They are required to construct the series of narratives in the book; some may look complete, but in reality they can never be. Yet what was revealed in the process of finding the fragments within the sources was a complex world in which peasants were articulating ideologies, forming organizations, and promoting programs for a transformation in agrarian society. Of course, this was not the language used in the sources, but my own adoption. I have inserted the realm of the political in my own narratives about Dharalas, although in doing so I am not asserting that the world of the Dharalas of the nineteenth or twentieth century is the same as the world today. At the same time, their world is not incomprehensible to us.⁵⁶

Claiming that peasants are political is not new. I build upon the ideas developed in writings on agrarian society within the tradition of political Marxism, especially Ranajit Guha's intervention.⁵⁷ Guha's study of peasant insurgency in colonial India focuses on the many forms of agrarian disturbances, from small-scale riots to warlike movements in the long nineteenth century. Guha argues that through insurgency peasants demonstrated they were not only the subjects of their own history but also the makers of their own rebellions. In Guha's words: "For there was nothing in the militant movements of [colonial India's] rural masses that was not political."⁵⁸ Central to Guha's argument is an understanding that the social relations of production within agrarian society were necessarily political, because they were not dependent on strictly economic forces. Specifically, the elite in agrarian society could at any given time extract a surplus from peasants by force or extra-economic coercion based on their position and status in local society and in the colonial

state. The peasant insurgent, who is the central actor in Guha's story, appears at regular intervals to "destroy the authority of the elite."⁵⁹

Guha notes, however, that there were limitations to peasant insurgencies. To begin with, nineteenth-century movements lacked the "maturity" and "sophistication" of more advanced movements of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ Peasant leaders did not conform to the ideals of a secular or national state, because the movements were constrained by "localism, sectarianism, and ethnicity."⁶¹ Guha attributes a political consciousness to the insurgents as a way to affirm that peasants were aware of their own world and had a desire to transform it by challenging the dominance of elites. Yet at the same time, Guha identifies peasant consciousness as an "imperfect, almost embryonic, theoretical consciousness" that was "conservative" at the core because it adopted the existing culture of elites, in spite of demanding change.⁶² As a result, Guha turns to a formal study of what he identifies as "elementary aspects" of peasant consciousness, which existed in a "pure" state in colonial India prior to the emergence of the politics of nationalism and socialism.

As I have pointed out, the start of my research began with a particular discovery of a moment in the political relationship between Patidars and Dharalas. I later learned that the use of extra-economic coercion by Patidars did not first emerge in the early decades of the twentieth century but, rather, had a long history. It is important to note that while Patidars were able to extract surpluses from Dharalas beginning in the seventeenth or eighteenth century (and perhaps earlier), the nature of their relationship fundamentally changed because of the establishment of colonial power. In fact, the ability of Patidars to use extra-economic coercion actually increased with the support of colonial institutions. Implicit in this circumstance is that the nature of politics also changed in this period. Yet this point is not evident in Guha's interpretation of politics; what remains a constant in his analysis is the ability of peasants to rebel and their inability to develop a "full-fledged struggle for national liberation."⁶³ Peasants are recognized as being political for participating in insurgencies, but still politically limited.

While I accept that peasants are political, I do not fully agree with Guha's arguments that peasant politics were primarily based on violence in the form of an insurgency, revolt, or rebellion. Other forms of politics were possible in agrarian society. Further, I disagree with the idea that all politics must necessarily lead toward the making of a nation or revolution.⁶⁴ Through a study of peasant practices and discourses, I argue that peasant politics were complex, dynamic, and contingent. By expanding

the idea of peasant politics, I show that many peasants (like other sections of Indian society) had alternative imaginings for a political community *before* the creation of the nation-state. My purpose is neither to celebrate their politics nor to suggest that these politics were unique. On the other hand, I do not claim that the peasants necessarily *failed* because their politics did not coalesce into something larger in scale. By telling this story, I illuminate a world in which peasants made normative judgments by relying on practices and discourses already sanctioned by local custom.⁶⁵ I argue that peasants were keenly aware of the changing nature of society and articulated their concerns based on contemporary considerations.

VI

In order to understand the political realm, it is also necessary to consider the nature of peasant religion, not least because both Ranchod and Daduram gained their authority as leaders through their positions as *bhagats*, or village priests.⁶⁶ More important, the two men imagined a future in which they themselves did not distinguish between the political and the religious. This is no surprise. I say this not as a critique of how peasants understood their world, or to suggest that all politics in India are necessarily religious, but to indicate how most polities in the world functioned during most of the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ After all, the nearly six hundred princes and kings—the rajas and maharajas—of the existing princely states claimed that within the traditions of kingship they were the representatives of one deity or another. Similar arguments were made by thousands of smaller kings and minor rajas scattered throughout the countryside.

Religious thought, practices, and rituals were central to how Ranchod and Daduram contested the relations of power in colonial society, but also to how they conceptualized a world in which they were not exploited by local elites, nationalists, and colonial officials. What is unclear, however, is why peasants like Ranchod would turn toward the discourses of kingship, and why Daduram would function like a king in patronizing his subjects in the midst of a conjunctural crisis. Perhaps the answer has something to do with the fact that, in a world being transformed by colonial power, on one hand, and nationalism, on the other, the governance associated with kingship, though not perfect, was considered more ethical in relating to the everyday concerns of peasants.⁶⁸

My point here is not that *bhagats* and their supporters simply adopted

the traditions of kingship without an internal critique. In the first place, it is doubtful that the rajas and maharajas, or the high priests who performed rituals legitimating the authority of the rajas and maharajas, would have actually accepted *bhagats* as equals of kings or priests—something Ranchod and Daduram would have known. Instead, the *bhagats* built upon the ideas of kingship—political and religious—for their own purposes of creating new types of social order for Dharalas that reflected the changing nature of their world. For Ranchod, the creation of his polity did not mean that other polities, including the British raj, ceased to exist, but rather that the authority of the colonial state ended in his newly confiscated territory. In fact, he preferred to coexist with other polities, but at the same time he wanted to protect his supporters—poor Dharala peasants—from further exploitation and subordination. Daduram did not formally proclaim himself to be a king or chart out a territory as his polity. Rather, he served the functions of a king in relation to his supporters.

Despite taking different approaches, both leaders relied upon the *bhagat* ideology already accepted as legitimate among their supporters, while simultaneously interpreting and incorporating a range of elite ideas within their respective discourses. It is impossible to know when such moments of transformation took place. But what is known is that inscribed within the discourses are various critiques—of colonialism, of nationalism, of power, of domination—and indications of how the poor, the marginalized, the subordinated could coexist in a world where even a peasant could achieve leadership as a *bhagat* or assume the position of a king.

The difficulty of writing about *bhagat* ideologies is that they were transmitted as part of an oral culture. To rely upon colonial documentation in order to write about such ideas presents a problem. *Bhagats* tend to appear in colonial sources only when they posed a direct threat to the state, but of course this was not the primary function of these village priests.⁶⁹ The complexity of what *bhagats* articulated in both religious and political terms during the nineteenth century may be irretrievable. What remains in the official record are small fragments indicating that peasants, like their elite counterparts, were engaged in discourses and practices to rethink and reimagine their world.

I do not suggest here that these peasants maintained an autonomous domain of ideas, either political or religious, that could ever have been entirely separate from the domain of elite ideas. This is not to say that the

ideas of peasants and elites were the same. I have adopted two separate but compatible concepts in addressing this issue. The first is the notion of circularity, as proposed by Ginzburg, which indicates that there was a “circular relationship composed of reciprocal influences, which traveled from low to high as well as from high to low.”⁷⁰ In my understanding of this circularity, the production and distribution of ideas were processes that influenced one another over time, especially with the presence of new technologies that linked oral and written cultures. This does not, however, mean that there was equal acceptance or acknowledgement by elites and peasants that their respective ideas were literally in constant dialogue with one another. The second concept that I have adopted is Chatterjee’s argument that the domains in colonial society were “mutually conditioned,” especially at the height of the “hegemonic project of nationalism.”⁷¹ However, Chatterjee notes, even within these domains there existed “resistances to the normalizing project.” I argue that, despite, or perhaps because of, an awareness of the range of ideas already present in society, Dharalas chose alternative futures because they were aware of the impact of colonial power and what nationalism offered them with the coming of the postcolonial state. Both the nationalists and colonialists, in their respective ways, ensured that such futures remained marginalized.

VII

Part 3 of this book begins with a discussion of my engagement with official archival sources in constructing the narratives found in this book. During my research, I was not convinced by those officials who declared the end of the peasant movements involving Ranchod, Daduram, and other Dharalas. Colonial power may have stopped one movement after another by force or other means, but I knew it was impossible for officials to prevent the production and circulation of political ideas even if criminal tribes legislation was strictly enforced.⁷² I went to rural Gujarat in search of the legacies and memories of these early peasant politics. I traveled to villages and towns in Kheda district to locate individuals who could provide narratives of Dharala movements, especially those led by Daduram and Ranchod. But more specifically, I was looking for the intellectual descendants of the two peasant leaders and their supporters. The point was not to simply juxtapose the oral materials with the official written ones, or to search for an authentic interpretation of the past as

told by today's Dharalas. My aim was to find oral sources that would suggest alternative ways of thinking and writing about Dharala pasts that were unimaginable or unknowable through the official record.⁷³

In part 3, I offer an account of this historical fieldwork, which took place in the Gujarat countryside in 1996. Oral sources gave me new insights into writing historical narratives. I did not expect to find autonomous voices that would provide completely independent narratives, but in the process of conducting interviews I discovered new directions of inquiry. I discuss here only select encounters in a condensed form that provide new meanings for the earlier narratives in the book.⁷⁴ Some interviews took many days and many trips to complete, while others took less time. Many individuals whom I spoke to have been left out of the story, while the ideas of others have been discussed extensively. I include encounters that appear complete, as well as mention others that illustrate the problems I came across in the process of using oral materials.

I returned to rural Gujarat in 2004 to discuss my writings with those whom I had met in 1996. My aim was to get a critique of my own interpretations of colonialism and nationalism. My trip took place two years after central and northern Gujarat experienced some of the worst communal violence in India, in 2002, when an estimated two thousand Muslims were killed. I was aware that it would be impossible to expect that the descendants of the Dharalas were not affected by the violence. While many individuals noted that horrific things had taken place, most were unwilling to discuss specific events or how the violence may have affected the ways in which they remembered the past. Although I have discussed the nature of violence and conflict in the making of nationalism, the history of Hindu-Muslim relations and its impact on postcolonial nationalism remains outside the scope of this book.

My travels in Kheda district were extensive, but in conducting the interviews I confronted further obstacles. My reliance on colonial sources was met with a good deal of concern, because many individuals believed that the British must have lied in their records. When I was asked how I had come to know so much about figures like Daduram and Ranchod, I explained that I had read the information in documents kept in the government archives in Bombay. On a few occasions, I was accused of being a policeman. It did not matter that the records in my possession were from the colonial period; it was assumed I must hold an official position in the government that would allow me access to such sensitive information. In a state that maintained criminal tribes legislation for part of the

postcolonial period and continues to prosecute peasants for distilling alcohol or cultivating marijuana and opium, anyone resembling an official is met with suspicion.

In spite of these concerns, most individuals agreed to speak with me about Daduram and Ranchod after I explained that I was writing a book in which Dharalas were at the center of the history, not at the margins. However, most individuals were unwilling to discuss the underground movements that involved large raids on rich agricultural villages, except in the most general terms, fearing that even cursory details that I might mention could potentially bring new criminal charges or punishment. As a result, I have not discussed these details in the book. Some individuals agreed to share their thoughts only on the condition that I not reveal their identities. I have maintained their anonymity in my book, but for the others I have included the names they gave me at the outset of the interviews. (I do not distinguish between actual and pseudonymous names in the text or footnotes.)

I also take account of the relationship between popular religion and politics that was of no interest to either the colonialists or the nationalists writing about Dharalas, but which is central to the concerns of today's followers of Daduram and Ranchod. The discourses of nationalism are now central to the way the earlier peasant leaders are remembered. The fact that a figure like Daduram was antagonistic to early nationalism is not mentioned; instead he is considered the father of the Indian nation and a deity in the Hindu pantheon. Peasants in Chaklasi still consider Ranchod a protector in the village and still criticize nationalists and colonialists. The descendants of Dharalas have adopted a new political identity, which lets them erase the old criminal label and assert their rights as citizens of India. The nature of politics has changed in the postcolonial period, but so too has peasant religion. The hegemony of the nationalist project continues, as it needs to ensure that new generations understand how their nation came into being. All the while, resistance to the project also continues. The descendants of the nationalists still dominate the means of production; the descendants of those who resisted the nationalist project remain marginalized. It would be impossible to expect that the memories of peasants would not be transformed by the discourses of nationalism.⁷⁵ Yet while peasants today elect their own representatives, they also remember a time in which they claim to have lived autonomously, free from all forms of domination. Perhaps such a memory provides hope for the future. In the meantime, peasants have to tend to their everyday lives within the nation.

VIII

I have chosen to write a history of what Benjamin calls “minor” acts, of “inconspicuous transformations” rendered irrelevant except for those who posit that “nothing should be lost for history.”⁷⁶ My research began with an untold story from one of the most celebrated areas in India, where nationalism developed. If all nationalist politics in India, and perhaps beyond, includes such hidden histories, then only extensive historical details can illustrate how individuals, classes, groups, and communities were marginalized from the promises of the nation. These ideas may be familiar to some readers, but others may find something new in this book. Not all histories within a nation are the same. Neither are all peasants.