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Between the Emergency and Mandal: Fieldwork Blind-Spots and other Reflections

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Abstract

This paper reflects back on the preoccupations and omissions of my own doctoral fieldwork over forty years ago, spurred by subsequent ethnographies of Gaddis down to the present. My fieldwork in the Gaddi village of Karnathu took place in the shadow of The Emergency (1975-77). It was a shadow that I was not sufficiently attentive to at the time, especially considering that the very choice of Karnathu as a village fieldwork site owed much to the atmosphere of the Emergency. This fieldwork took place well before the Mandal Commission's recommendations were implemented after 1990. The repercussions of these two signal landmarks in modern Indian history are hard to overstate, and in the second half of this article I explore some of the contrasts between my own pre-Mandal fieldwork and the concerns, themes and insights of later ethnographers working in the post-Mandal aftermath—an aftermath which has yielded a rich seam of possibilities as well as accentuated divisions in the upheavals of a new Gaddi identity politics.

Keywords

Gaddi; Kangra; pastoralism; ethnographic reassessment; inter-generational influence

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Introduction

I started fieldwork for my PhD in late 1976, and the most significant thing about that date was that it was during the national State of Emergency that lasted from 1975-77, casting such a chill over every part of India. Looking back, I am surprised at my neglect of what that momentous time meant in the place I had chosen to settle in – the village of Karnathu and its immediate vicinity, in eastern Kangra. Since one of the major developments reflected in the fieldwork of all contributors to this special issue has been exploration of how Gaddis navigate the apparatus and complexities of the state, this is an occasion for me to look again at my experience from that time (memory, field-notes, photographs), particularly in relation to the interface between Gaddis and the state.

Reflecting back on fieldwork done many years previously has generated a substantial literature in anthropology, much of it related to South Asia. Srinivas (1978) was an early exemplar (and later Bailey 1994, 1996). Clark-Deces put her finger on the evolving relationships and understandings of fieldwork in the apt title of her illuminating book *The encounter never ends* (2007). Often this has been as part of extended fieldwork over decades (e.g. Jeffery 2016). Ways of thinking about a changing field-setting through the lens of a changing discipline in a changing national political climate have recently been explored on a larger canvas by Edward Simpson and colleagues in a set of parallel studies which have ‘shadowed’ (their preferred term) the earlier ethnographies of Adrian Mayer, Fred Bailey and David Pocock from the 1950s (see Simpson 2016; Tilche and Simpson 2017). Simpson describes this as an experiment in intergenerational ethnography where comparison is across time and between places (2016: 14), while Tilche and Simpson (2017) use this experiment to home in on questions surrounding trust in ethnography—as their title, ‘On trusting ethnography’ makes plain. I would portray my own contribution here as being reflection rooted in conversation: an inter-generational conversation with my

successors studying Gaddis. This is more than a figure of speech, for particularly with a couple of the most recent Gaddi ethnographers, conversation has been direct and sustained, a convivial way to get at precisely those questions of trust in ethnography raised by Tilche and Simpson.¹

This article revolves, therefore, around a set of reflections arising from fieldwork several decades ago. Unlike the other articles in this special issue, mine does not advance an argument, as such, though an implicit one is threaded through it. This speaks to the value of intergenerational engagement from the point of view of an earlier ethnographer reflecting on the work of their successors: taking note, for example, of where they locate themselves, theoretically and geographically, what topics seize their attention or no longer seem as salient as once they did, or whose voices they choose to attend to most. As this suggests, such intergenerational conversation has methodological and theoretical ramifications. Both permeate this article. And if the first half dwells on my own personal choices and their methodological implications, the second reflects more on the theoretical direction of some recent Gaddi ethnography, and how that leads me to reassess my own earlier partial understandings. Crucial to this reassessment is new engagement with the ways the state influences or intervenes in aspects of everyday life, as will become clear below.

My own attention to the various ways in which the state made its presence known in Gaddi lives was limited to the Forest Department, a ubiquitous and unavoidable presence to be sure in a village where the shepherding economy was vital to so many. Back then, I historicized that relationship, but I treated it non-theoretically, as a prominent but unexamined fact of Gaddi shepherding life, in which the cat-and-mouse tactics of both ‘sides’—graziers and forest officials—over grazing rights and the regulation of flock numbers loomed large as a topic of conversation. Each side had a wide repertoire of instances of bad faith on the part of the other from which

diametrically opposed conclusions could be drawn: about Gaddi trickery and illicit flock expansion on one side, and Forest Department corruption and the high-handedness of petty officials jeopardizing the viability of a pastoral way of life on the other. One paradox of this inherently unequal entanglement was that each saw the other as having the better set of cards (see Saberwal 1999, especially Chapters 4 and 8).² It was a fraught and often hostile relationship. But despite these tensions, the adversarial relationship with the Forest Department was a known quantity for Gaddis—a familiar arena of contestation with a long history, in which new developments were half-anticipated and tactics were constantly reviewed. Sometimes it provoked amusement in private, especially if there was a small victory over Forest Guards to enjoy, even if frustration or exasperation were more common responses.

By contrast, the Emergency was a different matter altogether. No repertoire of familiar tactics existed. There was little to guide anyone as to how to tread, and fearful rumors abounded, not just about what was going on nationwide but more pressingly at a local level also.

The Emergency ended some four months into my time in Kangra, and three months after coming to Karnathu, with the powerful repudiation of Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister in the suddenly called General Election of March 1977, which resulted in the Congress Party's first national defeat after 30 years in power. From a personal point of view, the Emergency certainly shaped my choice of fieldwork setting—my decision in favour of Karnathu. As I go on to elaborate, that choice owed a good deal to coming too close to the raw exercise of state Emergency power. As a consequence, I sought a village which I hoped would be daunting to reach for all but the most determined officials.

An inauspicious start

I had not set out to study a Gaddi community. My intention, developed with my initial supervisor at Durham, Nick Allen,

had been to make Kullu the district where I would work. (The first PhD thesis he encouraged me to read was Colin Rosser's on the village of Malana.) But I was told, gently but firmly by Prof. S.C. Dube, the director of the Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, on an early visit to Shimla, that during the Emergency I would never get government permission to work in Kullu (too close, he said, to the 'Inner Line'), and that Kangra or Mandi were safer prospects. So not wishing to create any delay by querying the precise boundaries of the Inner Line, I applied for permission to do fieldwork in Kangra, with eastern Kangra, close to Mandi, in mind. That was the point at which I started to think of a Gaddi village as one possibility, having already seen Gaddi shepherds in transit through Kullu on an early visit there. Getting government permission seemed, from my vantage point, a highly personalised process, involving periodic visits to the formidable Miss H.K. Singh in the Department of Education in New Delhi, anxiously waiting for her to give approval.

Along with that formal permission, I had a letter of introduction from an IAS officer I had met at Keele University, which he advised me to present to the local political authority, the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM). This was to emphasize that I had the requisite authorization to undertake research in the area, which he considered all the more essential during the Emergency. In settling on eastern Kangra, it meant an appointment with the Palampur SDM. We (my wife Rachel and I) duly presented ourselves to him, and I recall that it was the letter from an IAS official in the state that seemed to count more than any national permission.

Looking back, I think my blinkers about the presence of the state meant that I had only the vaguest idea of what kind of figure the SDM was and what powers the position gave—especially during the Emergency.³ The initially genial Palampur SDM asked which parts of the area I was thinking of, and hearing that I was hoping to choose a mountain village he promptly offered that

my wife and I could accompany him into Chhota Bangahal the following day. He told us that he had to go to Barot, at the confluence of the two valleys making up this mountain area east of the Kangra valley (an area where Vasant Saberwal researched). Thinking (far too innocently) that we would simply get a convenient lift into an area we knew little about, from where we could head off to get our own bearings, we were unwise enough to accept. The next day we got our lift. Unease at what we were doing quickly grew when by the Uhl River at Barot we saw several jeeps (some of them white). We quickly realized that the SDM was on a mission to twist arms to increase the numbers of men coming forward for sterilization, the campaign (notorious at the time as well as subsequently) led by and nationally associated with the Prime Minister's son, Sanjay Gandhi. And we had gullibly got ourselves sucked into a demonstration of public health coercion that we should have kept well away from. Matters went from bad to worse as the SDM asked us to come with him to the first sizeable village in Kothi Swar, Lohardi, so we trooped along on foot beside the river with a small retinue (there being no road at the time), hanging back like awkward children, discomfort growing by the minute.

Once there, a crowd of around a hundred were waiting—men, women and children. Also waiting were the medical personnel whose jeeps we had seen: two doctors and a nurse, as well as a Block Development Officer. We had heard that two doctors could apparently do up to 80 male sterilizations (vasectomies) in a day, though half that number was seen as a much more realistic target. However, any target proved fanciful on the day that we witnessed. As the SDM started addressing his audience of villagers (haranguing would be a better word), we broke away, partly from sheer embarrassment, thinking we could and should discreetly head off. No such luck, as we took a big portion of the women and children in his audience with us, though he retained the majority of the men. Before we did so, I overheard the Block Development Officer speak to the SDM of the lack of

education in the valley and people's unpreparedness for family planning, and how there were "a few disruptive elements" ("we haven't yet identified the ring-leaders" my notes record). Later in the afternoon, a couple of local teachers in the nearby school where we had sought our own escape, told us that the SDM had not had it all his own way by any means. Villagers had apparently sought to convince him that it was a busy time of year and no-one could spare the week of rest that was advised after the operation. The two teachers were scathing about the prospects of this initiative being 'successful'. At the end of a fraught day (16th November 1976) the final twist was that we found ourselves having to share a room in the Barot PWD rest house with a by then far from genial SDM, his temper not helped by our part in distracting his audience. It was as if we had unwittingly helped in sabotaging the occasion. To say we felt uncomfortable to be sharing a room for the night with this smouldering magistrate, drowning his exasperation with whisky, would be an understatement. We made sure never to go near him or his office again (and once the Emergency was over he was anyway soon removed from his post).

This felt a demoralizing and embarrassing start to fieldwork, and my field-notes reflect an out-pouring of frustration that "I'd walked into a situation that was anthropologically totally untenable", the clutches of the SDM "so claustrophobic we could both have screamed". The event never made it into my PhD. It took me some years, in fact, to see it as something other than a fieldwork horror story of naivete and unintended complicity. I could not grasp at the time that it was also a highly instructive lesson, an illuminating glimpse early in fieldwork into state power as well as local resistance to coercion. Had this occurred a decade later, perhaps the self-scrutiny of the reflexive turn in anthropology would have encouraged me to document and reflect upon it. But equally, perhaps not: after the event it was easy enough to treat it as simply a false start, part of the trial and error of getting into the swing of fieldwork, and moreover as not particularly relevant to a study of

Gaddi lives. Yet in trying to put this behind me I overlooked some important lessons that might have been highly germane in Karnathu.

Reorientation: Did the Emergency impact Karnathu?

Nonetheless, at the time this encounter had two instant consequences. First, the experience put a swift end to any thought that Chhota Bangahal might be a good place to settle on. I feared I might easily be tainted by association with political authority and the sterilisation drive.⁴ Second, as my attention then turned to the Gaddi villages on the southern slopes of the Dhaula Dhar, overlooking the Kangra valley, I became preoccupied—almost obsessed—with how to ensure I found a village out of reach of the sterilization campaign.⁵ I decided that I would feel much more comfortable in a village that was not only without a road but also required a steep climb to reach. I had seen enough that day in Chhota Bangahal to grasp that officialdom disliked walking, and still less climbing. Karnathu met that criterion better than any comparable Gaddi village. I liked the fact that the 700+ foot climb from the valley floor was steep and that there was no alternative to doing it on foot. With relief, I saw it as out-of-reach of the local state's intrusion, and therefore of the possibility we could find ourselves caught up in a further sterilization drama.

But Karnathu also appealed for another reason: as a village it was heavily invested in shepherding. If, as I understood, Gaddis were pastoralists first and foremost, then I should find a village that did justice to that 'traditional' identity. I soon learned in other Gaddi villages that nowhere in the area had such a high proportion of households holding flocks as Karnathu (over two thirds of its households held flocks at the time).⁶ That combination of gut feeling (the steep climb to get there) and academic focus (the strong pastoral identity) clinched the choice. My attention was soon drawn to the ways in which the pastoral cycle and the agricultural cycle were intertwined, though it was some time before I learned of Owen Lattimore's well-known aphorism,

highly apposite in this context, that a pure pastoralist is a poor pastoralist.⁷ As it happened, Karnathu also proved to have some unexpected Bangahali connections. The upper end of Kothi Kohr, the western valley of Chhota Bangahal, lay directly over the mountain behind Karnathu, and the majority of village flocks (as well as many other local flocks) crossed by that route on the way to and from summer grazing in Bara Bangahal. That took them through territory associated with a local deity, Ajiapal, centered on the Thamsar Pass linking Chhota to Bara Bangahal. Consequently, Ajiapal held a prominent place in the Karnathu pantheon of six village deities, very definitely the most important and the most vociferous—the first and the last word was always his at the twice-yearly *jagra*. So in an unforeseen twist I ended up settling in a village that took particular care to keep on the right side of a Bangahali *devta*.

Sure enough, no officials did make that climb to Karnathu. And then within three months the Emergency was over with the General Election of 1977 (although voting in Bharmour was not until May, to allow winter migrants to have returned, and ensuring, so I was told with a twinkle in his eye by a teacher, that Bharmour could safely back the winning side).

The Emergency thus impacted directly on my choice of fieldwork setting. And it did so in a less direct way also, for along the way I had picked up advice from other anthropologists (including Nick Allen) that the information-seeking about family composition (particularly numbers of children) that accompanied the sterilization drive made it very unwise for me to gather census-type household survey data early in fieldwork, lest the purpose was misinterpreted. I duly held back.

In those early months, I remember discussing the Emergency and its impacts much more in Palampur than in Karnathu. National politics seemed easier to discuss in the town. I learned of individuals coerced into sterilization there—including the nearly 70-year old father of a good friend

(who ruefully showed off the radio that was his father's unwanted civic 'reward'), as the local Congress MLA turned the screw on those who might be susceptible to pressure, in pursuit of the targets set from above. By contrast, I never learned of such a thing in Karnathu. But I have to say I don't think I asked either, judging by my notes. Partly this reflected my novice status: I didn't have the language skills at that early point, but nor did I yet have the firm relationships to feel confident raising such a potentially sensitive topic.

But, looking back, I suspect my own tentativeness was only part of the picture. The very inaccessibility I had sought for myself, to keep officialdom at arms' length, also, I now believe, served Karnathu's residents well—something I missed at the time.⁸ In effect, being without road access and therefore out of reach of jeeps provided some protection from the sterilization campaign, putting the village beyond easy reach of this side of state power.⁹ There were many villages much more 'remote' than Karnathu in the neighboring districts of Kullu or Chamba: but Karnathu was remote enough, when other more easily accessible places were like low-hanging fruit to meet sterilization targets. It might be argued that an astute official could have concluded that in a shepherding village many men would be absent, so why waste the effort on a fruitless climb: perhaps that also helped Karnathu in the Emergency. But that in itself reminds us that the shepherds' mobility was, in this context, a protection for them, highlighting how elusive they were to surveillance, and indeed a perfect illustration of why bureaucracies have been habitually suspicious of pastoralists.¹⁰ Even where they could be found, picking off a shepherd or two was neither here nor there—a logistical non-starter, and no way to meet sterilization quotas. The one place in the area where shepherds congregated in any numbers for any duration in the course of a year was Bara Bangahal, during the rains. But this was so remote that it was inconceivable that a sterilization effort would contemplate going there. I suggest that shepherding Gaddis—and a shepherding-oriented

village like Karnathu—were in the end spared the draconian sterilization efforts of the Emergency, though without archival research this can be no more than a tentative hypothesis. It is only in hindsight that I wonder whether Gaddis might also have appreciated their capacity to outwit the state's sterilization efforts, much as they rated their capacity to outwit Forest Department surveillance—and I wish I had more to offer on the subject.

There is also a demographic dimension to consider. Avoiding the scrutiny of sterilization efforts was doubtless a desperate hope and ambition across rural India. But it might be argued to be particularly imperative among pastoralists, concerned to preserve the family sizes of the next generation. Gaddi shepherding families have tended to be larger than those without flocks, necessarily so in order to manage the parallel demands of herding alongside agriculture (Phillimore 1982). (One factor behind the decision to sell a flock could easily be that there were no longer the hands available to continue with this way of life.) While the demographic consequences of shepherd sterilization would not be immediate, they would potentially jeopardize the viability of shepherding in the next generation. This is necessarily speculative, for in asking these questions now I am struck how little comparative material there is on the subject, including on local impacts of the sterilization campaigns of the Emergency period. The subject cries out for archival exploration.

Rather scalded by my inauspicious entanglement with the SDM in Chhota Bangahal, I see now that my own preoccupations recoiled away from exploring the interface between Gaddi lives and the state (the Forest Department excepted). And in looking inwards I settled on kinship and marriage, that anthropological stalwart, as I became aware how separate Karnathu was from the wider Kangra scene, and specifically from entrenched principles of hierarchy in marriage, as described by Parry in his then recent analysis of high caste hypergamy (1979). The inward,

almost involuted, character of Karnathu's egalitarian marriage arrangements itself intrigued me. So it was left to the next generation of anthropologists—Richard Axelby (2007), Anja Wagner (2013), and especially Kriti Kapila (2008, 2022)—to pay attention to what I had overlooked: some of the impacts of the state in Gaddi lives, and one in particular.

From the Emergency to Mandal: reflecting on subsequent scholarship

For something crucial had changed during those years between my research and theirs: in a word, Mandal. As is well known, the Mandal Commission was set up in 1979 by the government that succeeded Indira Gandhi after the Emergency, with an aim to review the coverage of 'reservations' to redress aspects of caste discrimination not already encompassed by Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) reservations. But though the commission reported in 1980, it was another ten years before the V. P. Singh government decided in 1990 to implement what promised to be—and was—a political hot potato. Thus, the generation of anthropologists who followed me came into a transformed and much more volatile political landscape, in which OBC (Other Backward Classes) status in particular became a tantalizingly achievable project, and with it access to a set of reservations and entitlements previously unimaginable for numerous groups outside the existing range of constitutional protections. And as we know, the ferment went beyond putative OBC claimants, its ripples extending to Scheduled Castes and—most relevant in the Gaddi context—Scheduled Tribes. A new 'politics of recognition' came into being (Ruparelia 2008), and Gaddis have been heavily involved in it, as Kapila (2008, 2022) and Christopher (2020) in particular have shown.

The second half of this article revolves around the ways in which I came to look again at my own knowledge and its gaps in the transformed post-Mandal political landscape. In doing so, my reflections have been driven by the new ethnographic

writing produced by my successors in the field, as they explored the fast-changing Gaddi identity politics of this new era. I certainly became aware during fieldwork of the desire for ST status for Gaddis in Kangra, and how it was seen as an unfortunate quirk of history that Chamba Gaddis were recognized as ST while they were not (cf. Kapila 2008). But any campaign at the time (led by those whose wealth was a product of large flocks) did not to my knowledge register much within Karnathu: ST status was simply an aspiration. The neighboring village of Phathahar, 700 feet below Karnathu, might well have been a better place to take the temperature, as it had one or two characters engaged in wider Gaddi politics (Karnathu had no such equivalents). But despite Phathahar's proximity, this was the last gasp of anthropology's village-oriented methodological myopia; and coupled, I should add, with my own ever-growing enjoyment of Karnathu's peculiarities, it meant that I did not look outwards as much as I now wish I had done. In that way I think I also reflected the insularity of Karnathu's own inhabitants at the time. That insularity was not to last. Even when I first returned in 1980, some of those I knew best were planning to move out and away from Karnathu, a process that has continued ever since (though without denting the village's size, which has remained around the 550 mark).¹¹

Kangra Gaddis' ST status ambitions and their pastoralism are not separate facets of their recent history but go hand in hand even now. One crucial aspect of the still-unfolding story surrounding claims for recognition and status in the post-Mandal era—condensed in the question 'Who counts as Gaddi?'—centres on Gaddi pastoralism as the key signifier of their identity. Their pastoralism has been the crucial ingredient in campaigns for ST status in Kangra, with transhumance the key facet of a distinctive (and by implication 'tribal') way of life. It is perhaps telling that low caste Sipis, Halis and others, largely excluded by the high castes from the pastoral economy, should themselves have to make recourse to its symbolic importance in their own claims

for inclusion under the ST umbrella. But that is to jump ahead of myself. The point I wish to make for now is that while pastoralism may be declining economically it is far from dead as a trope of Gaddiness, in the political sphere as much as the cultural, and as long as there remain groups (castes) within the wider Gaddi community seeking ST status it is probably vital that it does not die.

Today, the most recent anthropological writing speaks of Gaddi shepherding as declining in importance, with fewer and fewer Gaddi households having an economic stake in it—and I have myself contributed to this in passing (Phillimore 2014; but more definitively Kapila 2008; Wagner 2013; Christopher 2018, 2020; Simpson 2021). While Kapila, with her Palampur vantage point could still write as recently as 2008 that “(m)ost Gaddis are migratory pastoralists” (2008: 123), a decade or so later Christopher and Simpson, both with a Dharmasala vantage point, depicted pastoralism as a minority pursuit and a vanishing mode of livelihood. The downward trend seems indisputable, and that goes back a long way. Flock census evidence suggested that Gaddis in Karnathu had held substantially larger numbers of migratory animals earlier in the 20th Century than at the time of my fieldwork (perhaps 50 per cent more in 1915 than in 1980) (Phillimore 1982). At the same time, I suggest that this downward trend may well have been considerably more pronounced in the Dharmasala area than further east in Kangra, around Baijnath, where it still seems distinctly premature (at least around Karnathu) to yet consign shepherding to the past (see also Bulgheroni, this issue).

In hindsight, my own efforts to answer the question of who counted as Gaddi came shortly before this was to be put in question so persistently post-Mandal. Critical here—especially in the light of the analyses by Kriti Kapila and Stephen Christopher examining how Gaddi castes have engaged the state instrumentally—was that I took as given the accepted understanding of the dominant caste as to who counted as

Gaddis, failing to recognize that this was contested ground. From the high-caste perspective, there was one Gaddi caste, which claimed Rajput status. No matter that the wider Kangra society saw several castes as Gaddi, and could speak loosely of Gaddi Brahmans (as indeed did government officials). From within, as far as (Rajput) Gaddis were concerned, Brahmans were not strictly Gaddis, however much they shared in terms of language, dress, livelihood or ritual practice. And if that could be said of Brahmans, how much more emphatically could it be said of Sipis and, still more so, Riharas, the two scheduled castes in and around Karnathu. I understood that Brahmans (or Bhatt Brahmans) in Karnathu were themselves content to be distinguished from Gaddis, though it was seen as a small matter, inconsequential outside of marriage arrangements.

I also saw, by contrast, that for Sipis this was not a small matter. They would repeatedly insist that Sipis were indeed Gaddis, whatever any (Rajput) Gaddi might choose to say to the contrary. Sipis would often adduce their quasi-hereditary role as shearers to the flocks to demonstrate their Gaddi identity (to which the high caste retort was that Sipis were not Gaddis because they did not—could not?—actually own flocks). I wish now I had explored whether Sipis saw Riharas as just as much Gaddi as they themselves were, for Sipis’ crucial stake in the shepherding economy through shearing and weaving also enabled their sense of distinction over the community’s other scheduled castes (see Christopher, this issue). But at the time of my fieldwork (1976-1978 and again in 1980), this dissenting Sipi view had no public visibility. It remained a common but private assertion, without evident traction in public discourse.

Kriti Kapila (2008) describes a process of increasing differentiation between Kangra Gaddis and Bhatt Brahmans in the 1990s, fueled by different strategies for pursuing political recognition in Kangra after the national implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. Among various paradoxes that she recounts, the

decision by Bhattas to opt for OBC status is perhaps the most paradoxical, and certainly seems to have perplexed many of her Gaddi acquaintances: why would a Brahman group opt for a status that downgraded them in the eyes of their high caste Kangra neighbors, and also in Gaddi eyes? Equally, why would Bhattas wish to differentiate themselves from their Chamba kin?¹² With Kangra Gaddis pursuing and finally getting ST status (in 2002) this seemed to mark a fork in the road for two groups whose prior distinctions were minimal (Kapila 2008: 126-127). Kapila also highlights the paradox of a quest for ST status that ostensibly celebrates distance from the world of caste in reality turning Gaddis, just as much as Bhattas, into castes.¹³

My own sense, however, from nearly two decades earlier, was that Karnathu residents did in fact see themselves as a set of castes, albeit not in a very insistent fashion.¹⁴ It is hard to be unequivocal on this point so long after fieldwork, but neither my field-notes nor memory suggests that Karnathu's residents framed their identity outside the readily available parameters of caste. At the same time, there was general agreement that they collectively stood apart from, and did not fit within, the caste order of the wider Kangra valley, which I recognize opens up scope for some ambiguity on the question (see Phillimore 2014). Maybe this low key, taken-for-granted acceptance of caste-ness was because the campaign for ST recognition was still to gather momentum in this pre-Mandal era and had yet to concentrate Gaddi minds. Or alternatively, was this another facet of Karnathu's idiosyncratic insularity at the time, reflecting little perceived need among those I knew to hammer on about an identity—tribal or caste—which was still taken as self-evident? It is hard to say with confidence; but posing the question draws attention once again to the limitations of our particular vantage points, as anthropologists, in place and (especially in this case) time.¹⁵

Intrinsic to the question of the caste-ness of Gaddi castes, moreover, is the status

and character of Sipis, Riharas and Halis (although I never came across the last of these groups). In my view, it was—and is—hard to see these as anything other than castes, both in terms of self-understanding and the ascription of others. For surely these castes have never had the luxury of distancing themselves from the world of caste. This is where Stephen Christopher (2018, 2020, 2022) and Nikita Simpson (2021) have enriched our understanding, the former with his focus primarily on the perspectives of these castes in relation to Gaddi identity, the latter encompassing the lowest castes in depicting gendered lives.

Possibly two pressures are working in opposite directions here. On the one hand, does the diminution of caste, and especially its most humiliating features, implied in the shift from speaking of *jati* to speaking of *samaj* (society, association) that Parry (2020) describes in Bhilai, have much salience in Kangra (Simpson suggests it might well do so around Dharmsala (2021: 58))? On the other hand, does pursuit of claims for altered caste status through the apparatus of the state counteract any such diminution, instead reaffirming the centrality of caste as the ultimate measure of all things to do with status? What is clear is that the paths to official reclassification taken by Gaddis and Bhatt Brahmins (as analysed by Kapila) has been followed in the last two decades by a perhaps surprising array of paths pursued by Sipis and especially the more numerous Halis, as Christopher has explored (some of these paths within the logic of post-Mandal politics, some outside it altogether). Such options were not even mooted at the time of my own study.

I want to stay with Christopher's analysis for a moment. He argues that the 2002 award of scheduled tribe status to high-caste Gaddis was itself a considerable blow to the lower castes, and "exacerbated the precarity of SCs in the tribal margin" (2020: 6). He also documents a deep sense of Hali betrayal about the process itself, the 1996 state anthropological survey that led to the award of ST status to the high-castes.

Halis feel like they were part of the tribe for a single day, when their ‘primitiveness’ was on display to state ethnographers...They were exhibit A... passed off as ‘Gaddi’ to win ST status for Gaddis under the arcane criteria laid down by the Lokur Committee Report (Christopher 2018: 101).¹⁶

Christopher likewise points to the ways in which scheduled caste Gaddis have utilised in their recent campaigns the almost-forgotten colonial logic framed in successive Gazetteers, which distinguished between two classes of Gaddis, of upper and lower caste: that very incorporation of the lower castes as Gaddis, even if ‘second class’, is fuel “to refute Gaddi exclusionary practices” (2020: 12). What comes through from his analyses is an almost visceral sense of how much human dignity is at stake here. He quotes one Hali political leader saying with feeling: “When we receive ST status we will truly feel like Gaddis, and we will proudly say that we are Gaddis first, Halis second” (2020: 14).

The upshot has seen individuals or families of Gaddi scheduled castes turn variously to piety movements such as Radhasoami, to the Arya Samaj, even in a few cases to evangelical Christianity, or to *Dalit* politics. One pathway that Christopher particularly charts builds on the last of these: an emerging discourse and campaign around the still-novel concept of Scheduled Tribe Dalits (STD). This seeks “official recognition of degrees of subalternity between ST and STD” (2020: 10). Christopher draws on Scott’s (1999) conception of ‘legibility’ to frame the way in which many kinds of grievance or offence are simply illegible under the law without such formal recognition. This is clearly work in progress, and very much unfinished business, with few precedents to sustain the morale of campaigners that their goal of STD recognition will prove achievable. But what is also striking is how much this is work of the imagination, for each of these pathways out of humiliation is built on an idea and hope of a better future. And it leaves me

pondering how deaf I was to such possible yearnings among the Sipis I knew.

Conclusion

This paper reflects back on the preoccupations and omissions of my own fieldwork over forty years ago, spurred by the opportunity afforded by several illuminating subsequent ethnographies right down to the present time. That opportunity to have extended conversations with one’s successors is in itself a privilege not always available to ethnographers. My own doctoral fieldwork in Karnathu took place in the shadow of the Emergency (a shadow that I was not sufficiently attentive to at the time), but well before the Mandal Commission’s recommendations were implemented. In this article I link the two, to place my own work in relation to both. The repercussions of these two signal landmarks in modern Indian history are hard to overstate. The two present contrasting faces of the impact of the state on people’s lives. The one posed certain kinds of very real threat from an intimidating state—a state that was best avoided or evaded. The other offered—for a time at least—a sense of opportunity from a state that it may be possible to engage with and persuade.¹⁷ Before Mandal, the status anomaly between Chamba and Kangra Gaddis was a problem for Gaddis in Kangra without an achievable solution. After Mandal, the solution was imaginable and achievable, even if not straightforward.

Reading the work of my successors (most particularly those whose fieldwork was, like mine, in Kangra—Kapila, Christopher, Simpson, and Wagner), it is clear that Mandal has also been instrumental in honing and intensifying a question several of us have dwelt upon: who counts as Gaddi? I have explored above how I was insufficiently critical in accepting the high caste Gaddis’ definition of who counted as Gaddis and who did not, unable then to see how much ideology was at play here, and that Sipis (the one low caste I had daily connections with) had an equally strong argument for inclusion in their discursive armoury. However, I also now think that

I was doing my fieldwork at a time when these identity claims and arguments were much less at the forefront of people's daily concerns than they were to become—not because the status quo was unchallengeable but because the tools for challenge were not available. Mandal changed all that. Thirty years' later its opportunities and repercussions are still being played out, with the campaign for Scheduled Tribe Dalit recognition the most striking instance from the present time.

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Endnotes

1. I refer here to Stephen Christopher and Nikita Simpson, who contacted me at early stages of their PhDs. The mutual immersion in each other's work, hugely rewarding in itself, offers another angle on intergenerational ethnography. As I contributed in a small way to their explorations of differences and similarities between our fieldwork settings and times, I of course came to reassess some of my own ethnographic understandings. See also the Introduction to this special issue.
2. Saberwal wrote at some length about Forest Department frustration at the ways Gaddis successfully mobilised politicians to undermine or undo their stipulations (1999: 75-90). He documents growing self-confidence at the time of his fieldwork in seeking to engage with the state and electoral politics. But he also shows that Gaddis on occasions would petition forcefully against Forest Department grazing restrictions even early in the 20th Century (1999: 70-72).
3. See Bob Simpson (2006) for reflections on this kind of naivete and ignorance in the field.
4. A visit to Chhota Bangahal a year later (October 1977) partially dispelled that fear, for near Lohardi we bumped into a man who had been present that day. He indeed recognized us ("Were you not here that day?"), and we took our cue from him in laughing about an occasion that he recalled as quite memorable. He enjoyed regaling us with an account of what had transpired: he told us a story of resistance that had been successful. No man in the valley had come forward to be sterilized, he said, and apparently the SDM had then instructed that sugar supply to the area should be cut off in collective punishment. But our friend dismissed that as a futile gesture for there were myriad of ways around it. This account of seeing off an unwelcome intrusion by the state differed in crucial respects from what I had been told by one of the doctors present on the day, who I had met (also by chance) in Dharmsala a few days after the event. He told me he was about to head

back to Lohardi. The cut to sugar supplies had been instant, he said, and had seemingly produced a degree of compliance, as a number of men had agreed to be sterilized. The doctor said that representatives from Lohardi had been compelled to go to Palampur to apologize to the SDM in person. The SDM had wanted them to grovel, in obvious revenge for his own humiliation the previous week. I recorded that it wasn't easy to tell where the doctor's loyalties lay. That said, he had called it a horrible job, and tellingly he also mentioned that nowhere else had he come across such hostility to sterilization.

5. While Himachal Pradesh was not in the frontline of the coercive policies implemented across the northern half of India, it suffered nonetheless. One statistical indicator of suffering was the crude rate for operating-table deaths. In highlighting Kerala's experience during the Emergency, for example, Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil draw a comparison with Himachal Pradesh. They state that with regard to deaths on the sterilization operating table, "with a population a sixth that of Kerala's, Himachal Pradesh's toll was half as large again" (2020: 212). I cite this study as a rare (and very recent) mention of the experience in Himachal Pradesh during the Emergency.

6. Karnathu flocks were generally not large. The vast majority, going to Bara Bangahal in summer, averaged 100 animals. Only the eleven flocks going via Kullu to Lahaul were typically larger, averaging over 230. One, an anomaly, was grazed entirely in what is now Uttarakhand. For a comparative figure on the proportion of households holding flocks, Richard Axelby estimates that in Bharmour "Around 25 per cent of households have one or more members involved in migratory pastoralism" (2007: 38). Presumably this percentage varies village by village, with some in Bharmour renowned, as Karnathu has been, for the importance attached to pastoralism.

7. Lattimore (1962 [1940]) mainly had in mind the ways in which herding and trading went hand in hand.

8. I am speculating here. But this strikes me as a reasonable inference based on what I know. There is, as I have indicated, a meagre academic literature to assist in this regard.

9. The literature on road-building and both development practices and discourses of development is now extensive. Ben Campbell provides an insight into local scepticism about grand developmental claims in one instance in Nepal (2010).

10. This is the subject of a vast literature. Moreover, the struggle by states to coax or coerce nomadic groups to settle was one of the inspirations for Scott's influential development of the idea of populations being 'legible' or 'illegible' (1999).

11. Young women marrying into the village—some as graduates in recent decades—have been instrumental in this process, for they have often moved up the mountainside at marriage determined to move back down with their husbands as soon as possible.

12. In Karnathu, one reason for retaining active links with an ancestral village in Bharmour was to draw on the right that gave to use the ST status of Gaddis in Chamba. Ironically, the only Karnathu families in a position to do so were Brahmans. For example, when the son of one family in our Brahman courtyard was applying to college and later to join a state bank as a trainee manager, he was able to apply with the family's ST certificate, derived from their ancestral links to Gadderan.

13. Kriti Kapila quotes Gaddis (Rajput Gaddis) in the village of Meghla saying to her "we did not want to become OBCs because we are not a backward *caste*—in fact we are not a caste at all" (2008: 124, emphasis in original). She continues: "from the 1990s onwards, the Kangra Gaddis based their campaign for Scheduled Tribe status not only on the existence of similarities with Chamba Gaddis, but also on their distinctiveness from the caste system" (ibid). A question I would ask is to what extent is this attitude of 'we are not a caste at all' a product of the post-Mandal climate.

14. Mahesh Sharma's characterization of the place of caste in Gaddi society historically is closer to Kriti Kapila's. He argues that, to facilitate interaction with the wider world on which their annual transhumant cycle depended, Gaddis "appropriated the caste superstructure, even though they remained external to its social dynamics" (Sharma 2015: 274). But where does 'appropriating caste superstructure' slip into being castes to all intents and purposes? and does this characterization encompass the scheduled castes? I am sceptical of this last point.

15. Stephen Christopher highlights one facet of this limitation in time and place: "To date, research paradigms privileging pasturelands and single village studies have led to methodological problems in generalizing about a heterogeneous and dispersed mountain community" (2020: 5). This particularly affects understanding of the experiences of the scheduled castes, which he and Nikita Simpson have done so much to bring to the fore.

16. Here is an occasion in which a 'community' is required to make itself 'legible', in Scott's terms (1999), to the state, through a parodic enactment of heritage. Needless to say, the parody is most grotesque for those whose necessary participation is a cynical prelude to their subsequent exclusion.

17. I say 'for a time' advisedly, as for some communities—especially *Dalits* in this context—dealings with the state at the present time may be fraught with obstacles and dangers.

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