

Ghar ki tension: domesticity and distress in India's aspiring middle class

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Tension is a polysemic term used across South Asia to describe the strains and scrapes of life, like 'worry' or 'stress' in Euro-American discourse. Yet in the formerly agro-pastoralist and upwardly mobile Gaddi community of Himalayan India, it is used by women with the qualifying *ghar ki* – 'household' – to indicate a deeper disruption to bodily humours, intimate relations, and household materiality. This article takes *ghar ki tension*, with a particular focus on the layered qualifier *ghar*, as a window into the precarity of middle-class domestic life as it is experienced in the bodies of the women who pursue it. Rather than focusing on the communicative functions of women's distress within the household, this article looks to the relational, affective, and material ways in which women see their bodies and houses as mutually constituted and disrupted. This approach reveals how women's domestic labour is both a source of dignity and a burden. This burden is experienced in *ghar ki tension*, in bodily symptoms of overheating, and visits from supernatural beings. This article suggests that *ghar ki tension* might offer a novel way of looking at distress as the psychic and embodied cost of upward social mobility beyond the Gaddi context.

I first spoke with Seema¹ on a blistering May afternoon, one year after her husband had given up his job in Delhi and returned to their village in the Himalayan foothills. Seema gingerly invited me and my research assistant inside her home and led us into a small room off to the left side of the house. She offered me a plastic chair and curled up on the corner of the bed. Seema was an upper-caste Gaddi woman in her early forties. Before her husband gave up work due to a leg injury, she was happy as a 'housewife' – in her own words – tending to their house and small set of fields, caring for her two sons and her in-laws. But when her husband returned, he started to drink more alcohol at the tea stall by the school. What began as a habit became an addiction. Their wealth waned, and she was forced to find ways of making money. Seema kept her eyes fixed on a pair of shoes lying in the corner and picked at a loose thread in her chemise. The air between us was thickened by her worries: a lack of income, children's school fees, a failed crop. She looked up at me directly and paused. A familiar refrain – *mujhe bahut*

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ghar ki tension hai – ‘I have so much household worry’, she sighed. ‘When my husband was OK, then it was OK’.

When he did a job and we made the house, then we used to joke around. The problem is that my husband can’t work and the burden [of earning and making household decisions] has come to me. Now the pressure has come to me. I have *ghar ki tension*. There is always *tension*² when I try to go to sleep, I think of the wheat – if it is outside will it get wet? Because all the decisions are mine.

The space was laden with this *tension*. It was at once a feeling that Seema expressed, but also an embodied state and an atmospheric mood. Seema felt this *tension* in her body, especially in its overheating. She had recently felt her ‘heart going *tuk tuk*’. This is the feeling one gets when one has been cursed by black magic, she explained. ‘When I have so much *tension*’, she said, ‘I feel like just eating something and dying’. She laughed nervously before continuing, ‘but then I picture my children there and, I think, who will look after them?’

Tension is a polysemic term used across South Asia to describe the strains and scrapes of life. In its broadest form, it is a ubiquitous idiom, like ‘worry’ or ‘stress’ in Euro-American discourse (T. Roberts *et al.* 2020; Shidhaye & Patel 2010). Yet in the Gaddi community of Himalayan India, it is used by women with the qualifying *ghar ki* – ‘household’ – to indicate a deeper disruption to bodily humours, intimate relations, and household materiality. For Seema, and many of the Gaddi women I encountered, it was associated with a frustrated striving towards middle-class respectability. In the last century, the Gaddi people of Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, have transitioned away from agro-pastoralism and begun to accumulate wealth through the land and waged market economy, ushering them onto the lower rungs of India’s middle class. For Gaddi women, obtaining middle-class status involved withdrawing from waged work, being able to depend on the secure income of a loving husband, and occupying oneself with the material, spiritual, and relational well-being of the house and those within it. This project was also crucial to a collective Gaddi aspiration towards middle-class respectability involving the re-signification of tribal and caste subjectivities, as this previously Shaivite animistic community sought inclusion in a Hindu nation. However, not all families have been able to benefit equally from economic opportunities. Those in secure formal employ such as the military and government jobs (*naukri*) have had much smoother trajectories of social mobility than those in informal employ in the tourism, hydropower, and slate mining sectors. Women like Seema, whose husbands cannot earn, are faced with a contradiction between the material circumstances of their household and the pressure to cultivate its respectability.

In this article, I contribute to a rich literature on class as a constantly evolving cultural project (Liechty 2003) that is generated, historically, through inequalities of gender, race, sexuality, caste, ethnicity, and kinship (Bear, Ho, Tsing & Yanagisako 2015; Heiman, Liechty & Freman 2012). In India, the middle class is inherently lacking in clearly defined markers (Baviskar & Ray 2011) and has taken on different historical forms, many of which involve a particular orientation towards the home as a private and secluded sphere (Donner 2011; Ray & Qayum 2011) where women are responsible for the cultivation of particular ideals of domesticity and sexual propriety (Bear 2007; Donner 2017; Maqsood 2017). Scholars have charted the origins of middle-class domesticity in colonial legal regimes that sought to collect taxation from discrete household units, arbitrate marriage and inheritance processes through patriarchal descent lines, and discipline female sexuality (Chowdhry 1994; Kapila

2004). This project of domesticity dovetailed with nationalist aims at Independence in 1947, inviting women into a Hindu national imaginary through their role as mothers and housewives (Donner 2008; Sarkar 2001). These ideals have been reworked and reified through India's post-Nehruvian liberalization, as the state has encouraged the expansion of India's middle class to drive growth (Baviskar & Ray 2011). Neoliberal governance has further reified the domestic space as a site of consumption and economic self-sufficiency (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1995; Fernandes 2006), underpinned by a permanent conjugal bond where the work of care is absorbed primarily by women.

However, global realities of wage stagnation, unstable livelihoods, climate change, systemic racism, and the erosion of welfare mean that obtaining middle-class respectability is deeply precarious for many in India and beyond. Anthropologists of affect draw attention to the ways in which the experience of upward social mobility, while most often framed through the lens of aspiration (Appadurai 2004), is shot through with rage, frustration, ennui, exhaustion, anxiety, or dread (Moodie 2015: 18; see also Berlant 2011; Murphy 2017; Ngai 2005; Povinelli 2011). The location of these negative feelings in the domestic sphere 'often keeps people silent, weary or too numb to really notice the sources of their unhappiness' (Cvetcovich 2012: 12). In India, bar a number of important exceptions (see Chua 2014; Jeffrey 2010; Parry 2012), less attention has been given to affective and embodied pressures of the middle-class project. For women on the margins of the middle class – and especially for those from lower castes or tribal groups who must shed reputations of savageness and promiscuity – domesticity is especially fraught (see Heyer 2014; Kapadia 1995; Moodie 2015; N. Roberts 2016; Still 2014). The Gaddi, as they negotiate a complex nexus of class, caste, and tribal aspirations, are one such case where women struggle to obtain and maintain middle-class domesticity and keep precarity at bay.

This article examines how Gaddi women experienced the pressure of the middle-class domestic project in their minds, houses, and bodies as *ghar ki tension*. This condition was signalled by overheating of the body, unidentifiable aches, 'high BP' (blood pressure), insomnia, and rumination. *Ghar ki tension* could also be concentrated in the heart and chest, and was associated with panic (*ghavrat, dil ghavrat*) or feelings of suffocation. Sufferers would get menstrual problems and abdominal pain. Unlike scholars who posit *tension* as a psychologizing idiom that replaces supernatural belief (Halliburton 2005), I also found *ghar ki tension* to be associated with malign forces – witchcraft (*jadu*), black magic (*opara*), and the evil eye (*nazar*) – entering into the home and body. This occurred when the boundaries of the house and the woman's body became vulnerable to the envious gaze of kin and neighbours, causing serious illness. Women experienced these symptoms in times when the atmosphere of the home was tense because of economic scarcity or relational conflict. They attributed their symptoms to constant housework and carework for ungrateful children, violent husbands, and demanding in-laws (see Atal & Forster 2020; Das 2015, Snell-Rood 2015). Where accounts of *tension* amongst women have focused on the communicative function of such symptoms (see Nichter 1981, Qureshi 2019; Weaver 2017), I draw attention to the material, affective, and relational ways in which women's bodily disruption is experienced co-substantially with disruption of the house.

Investigating *ghar ki tension* required a methodological approach that paid attention both to the politico-economic processes that shaped domesticity and to the intimate experiences of the body. I began by conducting archival research on the changing

shape of Gaddi domesticity in the British Library and the SOAS Library, studying primarily colonial gazetteers and settlement reports. When I arrived in Kangra, I rented a room from a low-caste Gaddi family, and from it I mapped the flows of goods, people, and substances within and between households in the hamlet, and beyond to surrounding villages. Women and girls of the village also began to drop into the house, such that it became a space where they could unburden themselves of *tension* (see Simpson 2019). My residency there, and long-term participant observation in a number of other households, allowed me to become intimate with the material culture of the Gaddi house, and the patterns of domestic labour within it. I scaled across the Gaddi community by conducting a household and health survey of domestic networks, kinship maps, and oral history interviews with Gaddi people across caste groups in order to understand the local cosmology of illness and its implications for Gaddi femininities. I conducted, recorded, and transcribed illness narrative interviews (Groleau, Young & Kirmayer 2006) and participatory workshops with Gaddi women who experienced *ghar ki tension* to elicit the symptomatology of the condition and the way in which body parts and qualities held different symbolic meanings. This combination of methods allowed me to understand the ways in which *tension* was distributed across this community, and ran along the lines of class, caste, and tribal inequality.

This article consists of two parts. The first part charts a genealogy of the Gaddi project of domesticity in the context of a growing national middle class. It examines what is at stake for Gaddi women in domesticity against a complex nexus of class, caste, and tribal politics. The second investigates the pressures of this project and shows how it is experienced in the minds and bodies of those who seek it. It concludes by suggesting that distress in general, and *ghar ki tension* in particular, might be used as analytics for understanding the fraught experiences of upward social mobility.

Domesticity

A vexed identity

The Gaddi are a formerly agro-pastoralist, Hindu Shaivite community who live primarily in the mountainous districts of Chamba and Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. 'Gaddi' is a vexed identity category defined variably on caste, tribal, livelihood, and linguistic lines (Christopher 2020; Kapila 2008). In its broadest form, to be a Gaddi is to speak *gaddi bolle*. This group included Rajputs and Thakurs as a reference group, Bhatt Brahmins, and five lower castes: Sipi, Badi, Rihare, Dhogri, and Hali (Christopher 2020: 5). In the caste-stratified pastoral economy, Brahmins held land and officiated rituals; Rajputs and Thakurs held the status of transhumant flock owners, butchers, and traders; while lower castes worked in adjacent professions (working as wool clippers and ritual healers or dealing with animal carcasses). The Gaddi people of Kangra, with whom I conducted fieldwork, have experienced a rapid shift in livelihood over the past century towards formal employment in the military or government service, or 'entrepreneurial' waged labour in the slate mining, tourism, hydropower, and construction sectors (Axelby 2007; Wagner 2013). This shift is driven by the infeasibility of shepherding as a livelihood, as pastures and properties are enclosed, and the smelly, sweaty hardship of a nomadic life becomes less appealing to young men. Kangra Gaddis have watched as the urban sprawl of the plains creeps into the hills, and the upper class of Delhi and Chandigarh buy up their land to escape the city for the cleaner air. They have profited as

Hindu and Buddhist tourists seek lodging, food, and tour guides as they visit the sacred temples that dot the valley.

New forms of inequality in income, education, and status have deepened within and between households, where one brother is in the military and another runs a small corner shop, and where one neighbour sells his land to a hotelier and another remains a petty labourer on the hotel's construction site. These inequalities sometimes run along the existing social divides of caste, but often depart from them, allowing lower-caste Gaddis to appeal to higher-class status and leaving higher-caste Gaddis struggling to maintain their social status. In 2002, Kangra Gaddis – Rajputs, Thakurs, and Ranas – were granted Scheduled Tribe status based on their 'unique lifestyle' and supposed separation from the caste system (a status enjoyed by Gaddis in Chamba since Independence), giving them access to educational and employment benefits (Kapila 2008). Lower-caste Gaddis are excluded from this category as they were already classified as Scheduled Caste and had access to such reservations. In sum, social hierarchies are deeply unstable in Kangra, where people make claims to social prestige based plastically on shared language, middle-class wealth, caste purity, tribal aesthetics, land ownership, and access. However, one of the most salient ways of cultivating social status is the appeal to a particular ideal of middle-class, Hindu domesticity.

The ghar transforms

The household has historically been a privileged site for the articulation of Gaddiness, especially for women. In the pastoral economy, men established their connection to the landscape through pastoral labour, but women did so through the transmission of sacred connection to emplaced *kul devis* – female clan-based goddesses who reside in houses – and the shared substance of the female line (Kapila 2022). The Gaddi house is understood not as a building but as a whole place, where women are said not to have married a particular man, but to have married in 'such and such a place', and to take on the qualities of that place (Wagner 2013). Gaddi houses were traditionally made of mud, displaying a unique form of craftsmanship (Newell 1952): bricks of earth, dug up and shaped into two squat storeys, with low hanging doorways and wooden shutters carved with intricate designs (see Fig. 1). The interior of the mud house was musty and damp – not with the flowering mould that plagues new concrete houses, but with the earthy smell of the dung paint used to plaster the floor and walls, and routinely reapplied by the women of the house. Elderly Gaddis described the role of women as 'keepers' of the house within the shepherding lifestyle: while men were on the move, women tended to multiple houses along the grazing route (see Simpson 2022). Women were considered equal contributors to household income: engaging in subsistence agriculture on the land that their families owned in summer; supporting their husbands with the flock along the pastoral route; labouring in the fields of landowners in the plains in exchange for lodging and board in winter. Men were often away for long periods, leaving women to manage domestic decisions and care for household gods. Respectability within this role did not depend on women maintaining chastity, such that extra-marital affairs and divorce were less stigmatized.

As the agro-pastoral economy has broken down over the last century, the Gaddi *ghar* has come to be defined by the fixity and boundedness of middle-class domesticity, rather than the fluidity of transhumance. Where pastoralism required the pooling of household resources, waged labour requires a division of productive and reproductive



Figure 1. A Gaddi mud house. (Photograph by the author.)

labour. Where men are responsible for generating monetary income, women are responsible for small-scale subsistence agriculture and reproductive labour that is framed increasingly as housework (*ghar ka kaam*). This gendered division of labour has been codified in new patriarchal ideals of sexual propriety and respectability (*izzat*) (Phillimore 1982; 1991). It is buttressed by colonial and postcolonial legal regimes of marriage, inheritance, and land registry that shored up the boundaries of the household, specified its make-up, and prevented ‘improper’ practices of polygamy, divorce, and remarriage (Kapila 2004). Men have seen their dominance over property cemented through the codification of the single male descent line as the primary line of inheritance. Women have seen their right to access or seek maintenance from acquired property diminish, unless it is linked to this ancestral descent line.

Increased inequalities of material wealth and social prestige between Gaddi families have animated a more hierarchical, caste-bound marital structure, further consolidating the ancestral line and caste divisions *within* the Gaddi tribe. Over the past century, Phillimore (1982) and Kapila (2004) have charted the decline of exchange (*atta satta*) marriage, and the rise of hypergamous prestige marriage (*dan pan*). In Kapila’s research during the late 1990s, she recorded evidence of only dowry *dan pan* marriages, ‘thought to be more modern and more in keeping with legal requirements and Hindu precepts’ (2004: 391). Kapila concludes that these legal, marital, and economic processes meant that families have become nuclear, defined by blood rather than care. The home is sustained by a permanent conjugal bond and a rigid ideal division between man as breadwinner and woman as housewife.

A collective aspiration

By the time I began my fieldwork in 2017, the Gaddi *ghar* was being reshaped by global and national ideals of middle-class domesticity. Gaddi households don't have the globalized patterns of consumption of the Indian urban middle-class home that others have detailed (see Donner 2011; Fernandes 2006), and people are very seldom employed in white-collar jobs. But neither do Gaddis see themselves as part of an impoverished class because they own land, unlike the migrant workers from Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh who work on their lands, and whom they see as *gareeb* (poor). Herein the appeal for middle-class inclusion is based on gendered respectability (*izzat*) rather than employment. While some families still live in joint arrangements with separate hearths, new couples aspire to their own independent nuclear house.

Although men are much more present in the space of the house – unless they are away in military cantonments or employed as migrant labourers – the aesthetic work of the household is the responsibility of women. The primary sign of wealth is the establishment of a concrete house, as I gathered from moving into the house of a well-off landlord who prided himself on his palatial concrete home. He distinguished himself from kin across the road, where his three brothers lived in one mud house with their families. Gaddi women expressed shame about having a mud house, a sign of poverty and ill fortune. Concrete both provided a sign of wealth and displayed the enduring strength of the lineage, where home improvements offered an opportunity to assert wealth and visibility in the community (see Elinoff 2016). Women made up for houses that were made wholly or partly of mud with effusive cleaning and populated their interiors with appliances and decorative objects that signalled middle-class status. Wealthier concrete houses were populated by new appliances, ornate velvet furnishing, and plush blankets, often given as part of a new bride's dowry. In poorer houses, hand-embroidered cushions were laid out on plastic chairs. I was always struck by the immense dignity women drew from these objects. They are largely the same in each place: cream doilies, plastic flowers, studio family photos (see Wagner 2013). Women were keen for me to see these objects, arranging them or showing them to me while we drank tea (see Simpson 2023).

For married women, the ability to stay at home and invest in the aesthetics and poetics of homemaking was part of a 'collective aspiration'. As historians have analysed, post-Independence middle-class discourse in India sexually objectified tribal women and ascribed them with a 'sexual freedom' that was considered improper for non-tribal women (see Skaria 1997). This association between tribal women and sexuality persists today, such that the embrace of lifelong marriage and conjugality is an inherent part of the female role in a collective aspirational pursuit of indigenous dignity and upward mobility (Moodie 2015: 79). This became clear during an encounter I had with an elderly low-caste Gaddi man, Parminder Uncle. I playfully called him 'Mucho Uncle' because of the mutton chop moustache that sagged on his jowls. Parminder had spent an illustrious career in the Indian army, posted to Sikkim and the Pakistan border, while his wife raised their four children in a concrete house high in the hills to the west of Dharamsala. One day, Parminder dropped by specifically to see me and pulled two photographs from his breast pocket (Fig. 2). The background of the first was of a stark hillside, above the treeline, typical of the upper pastures of Chamba. The foreground, which had been pasted on top, showed lush green grass and a herd of grazing goats. The upper layer of the photograph was a cut-out of him and his wife. He was dressed in suit pants and a clean pale blue shirt, his head wrapped with a red turban. His wife was



Figure 2. Parminder and his wife. (Photograph by the author.)

in full Gaddi dress and wore silver wedding jewellery. ‘The most important part of our Gaddi culture, for we are Gaddi too’, he said, ‘is how the women behave’.

In our culture, we have *purdah*, and women have to veil in front of their husband’s brothers. This is how we know who is a daughter and who is a daughter-in-law. I want you to write about this. About how we take care of our women.

Parminder also presented a second photo, this one of his sister and wife on his wedding day, both of them wearing traditional Gaddi dress and jewellery (Fig. 3).

Parminder’s military salary allowed his family to accumulate wealth over the course of his lifetime without his wife having to work beyond the house. When he retired, he was able to set up a business that sustained the family’s wealth. Like other Gaddi families with stable incomes, Parminder’s family built a concrete house that was gradually partitioned as his sons married. Part of this aspirational project, however, involved making claims to Gaddi identity – which was contested due to his low-caste status. For Parminder, this meant himself embodying the aesthetic traits of Gaddiness: singing Gaddi songs; wearing a Gaddi hat; framing himself with goats even though his family had never owned a herd. More importantly than this, it meant control over the behaviour, dress, and sexuality of his wife, daughters, and daughters-in-law. For Parminder, domesticity not only was important to his personal aspiration for inclusion in local tribal imaginaries through the re-signification of caste subjectivity, but also spoke to a collective aspiration on the part of both lower- and upper-caste Gaddis towards inclusion in a middle-class, national Hindu imaginary.

Such a story resonates with existing South Asian literature on the relationship between patriarchal norms and upward social mobility (see Still 2014: 5-7). The Hindu model of caste-based social mobility follows a thesis of ‘Sanskritization’, wherein the

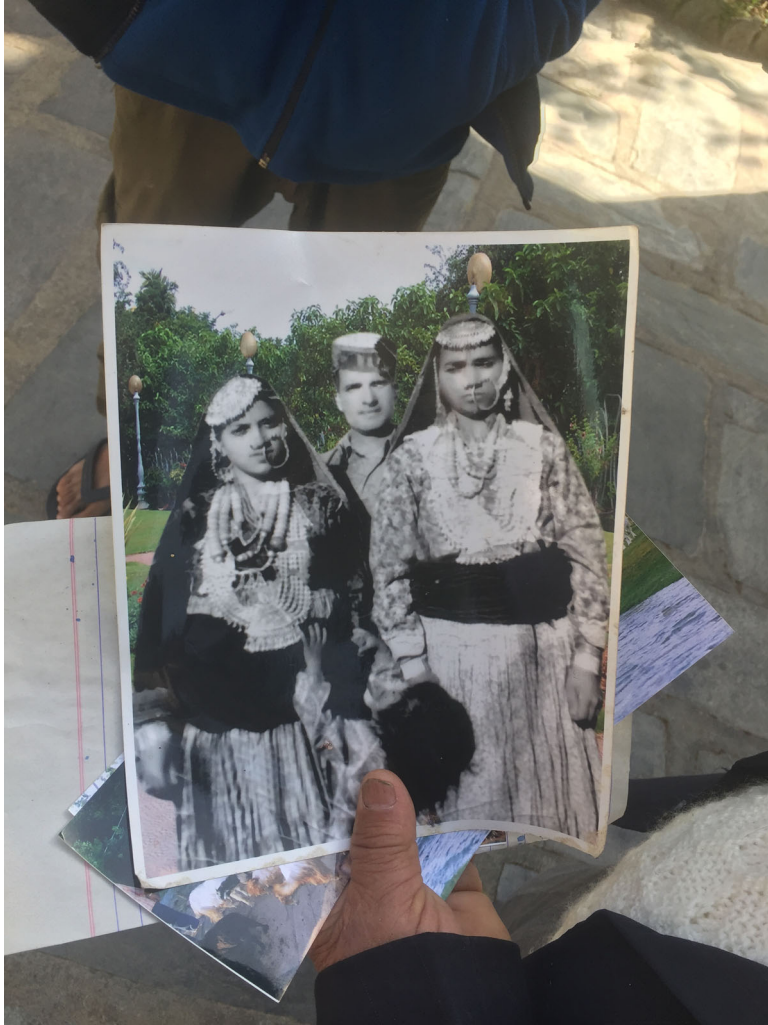


Figure 3. Parminder's sister and wife on his wedding day. (Photograph by the author.)

respectability of lower-caste women depends on their husbands' ability to protect their wives from the advances of upper-caste men. Therein, upwardly mobile, lower-caste or tribal women mimic the values of upper-caste women: adopting *purdah*, restricting mobility beyond the household, and retreating from waged or agricultural work. Such literature highlights the inverse relationship between upward social mobility and female sexual liberation, where feminist scholars have argued that the intensification of capitalism in India has only made patriarchal structures of marriage, domesticity, and honour stronger and more flexible (Chowdhry 1994; Mies 1982). Yet the value and dignity that Gaddi women experience in housewifery seems to refuse the capitalist devaluation of domestic work or the framing of such work as drudgery. This was exemplified in encounters I had with Gaddi women who had successfully managed to

build respectable households. Let us turn to one such example in the case of Sapna, sister-in-law to Seema, whom we met at the beginning of this article.

Keeping life clean

Where Seema's husband was a waged hotel cook, Sapna's husband was a salaried military man. His income allowed him to build a beautiful concrete cottage that sat amidst the fields just in from the road. Unlike Seema's house, which had begun to crumble and chip after every monsoon, Sapna's house was painted a pale peach. Its floors were not cold moulding concrete, but tiled and shiny. Their toilet was connected to the house, and their ceilings were fitted with elaborate cornices. Sapna called herself a housewife. She was stocky, with a broad, well-made-up face and long hair that she anointed with vermilion. Her natal home was in a popular tourist spot. She told me this proudly, shooting me a knowing glance that said, 'This place is so different, so "backward"'. When I asked her what she did on a normal day, she told me that it revolved mainly around cleaning and caring for her kids. She sends them to school, makes their tiffin. She sweeps the floors, makes meals, does the beds, and cleans cooking utensils. 'This takes my whole day', she smiled. 'And you watch TV', her young son chimed in. 'And TV', she laughed. Her favourite shows were popular Hindi serials. Sapna preferred to keep to herself and didn't involve herself too much in the goings-on of her husband's family.

Sapna, like most Gaddi married women, was acutely concerned with the cleanliness of her home. Cleaning allows women to perform certain classed and religious femininities through manipulation of household objects, sensory experiences, and intimate relations (Pink 2004). For Gaddi women, the work of cleanliness involved managing both the vital materiality of the home and those within it, but also a potent immateriality or a domestic mood (Allerton 2013; Gammeltoft 2018). The ideology of Hindu middle-class cleanliness involves the performance of daily rituals to establish boundaries around home and body that exclude the dangerous gazes, bodily fluids, and malign supernatural influences of people considered to be 'polluting' (Dickey 2000). These might be people from lower castes, classes or those who are considered sexually unchaste. Cleanliness also involves management of bodily humours and tempers, for bathing, nutrition and hygiene promote both physical and metaphysical health (Alter 1999). As Henrike Donner (2011) recounts of Bengali housewives, daily practices of household management, especially in cooking and feeding, are critical aspects of upward social mobility. Like Donner's interlocutors, Gaddi women check food, anoint their children with *kajal* (black eyeliner), and conduct daily protective rituals and prayers to ward off the evil eye. They disallow particular people from entering, sharing food in, or gazing into the home, such as people from lower castes; travelling salesmen; children; women or adolescent girls who are considered sexually promiscuous; and even kin whom they believed to be jealous of their wealth. They also manage the boundaries of their own bodies: veiling, wearing appropriate clothing, and, in the case of married women, marking the hairline with vermilion.

This ritual labour has taken on new meaning in the present turn to Hindu nationalist politics. Like many Gaddi women, Sapna performs daily ritual prayers to Lord Shiva, rather than to the family's ancestral god. She participates in contemporary Hindu rituals like Karwa Chauth (a day of fasting for husbands) that were never observed by older generations. Such ritual practice is part of a wider Gaddi turn away from Shaivite animism and towards mainstream Hindu religion, buttressed by the politics

of Hindutva. As Alice Tilche (2022) shows, new generations of tribal groups resist nationalist discourses that frame them as ‘fallen Hindus’ by distancing themselves from stigmatized practices such as meat eating, alcohol consumption, and ritual sacrifice. Women have a particular part to play in this project of socioreligious reform. They enter into the masculinist environment of Hindutva through the roles of the heroic mother, the chaste wife, or the celibate warrior (Banerjee 2006). In Gaddi domesticity, these first two ideals combine as the woman’s body becomes a site of national and familial honour, her chastity and virtuosity becoming the condition of both familial *and* national thriving. One male interlocutor explained:

People used to come to India and see poverty in the streets. Now they see wealth and opportunity. They all want to come here. Soon we will overtake those people in the West. They don’t even have wives who will have children, so they won’t be able to reproduce themselves.

As Megan Moodie puts it, ‘For women who have been excluded from national images of femininity, [d]omesticity is a marker of freedom ... not a cage from which one must seek release, but a space of security and freedom from worry’ (2015: 90-1). A clean home and a sexually chaste, hygienic body are means by which women make claims to upward social mobility and inclusion in a Hindu nationalist imaginary (see Longkumer 2018).

Distress

The labour of maya

The middle-class project as framed by Hindu nationalism offers a particular vision of femininity for Gaddi women. However, realizing this project requires a certain level of consistent material wealth that is only obtainable for a few Gaddi families who are securely employed or successful in business. Alcoholism and domestic violence are common, driven by the stress of financial insecurity. Women are left with a double burden of working for money and caring for the household, exacerbated by the shame of living in poverty relative to their kin or neighbours. In instances where income is precarious, women cannot readily fall back on their husbands’ kin. This section turns to the cracks and fissures in the middle-class domestic project as experienced in the bodies, minds, and houses of the women who pursue it.

When the household was a loose domestic network, women were able to rely on affines to share household work and worries. Today, in an increasingly nuclear household, this work falls to one woman alone. Women sighed as they told me ‘*apne ghar, apne tension*’ – ‘to each her own house, to each her own tension’. This phrase was used to highlight the ubiquity of *tension* in all households. It points to the necessity of keeping one’s *tension* away from the prying eyes of others. Gossip and rumour worked as a powerful force, threatening to permeate the privacy of the household, and were considered a source of witchcraft and black magic. Many women expressed an overwhelming sense of isolation and loneliness as new inequalities of wealth between households worked to atomize them and increase suspicion. Those who didn’t have financially supportive husbands, and especially widows, experienced this most extremely.

This situation was put eloquently by an upper-caste Gaddi widow, Manju, while sitting on the roof of her house. I was helping her to pack large sacks of grain that she had harvested from her family’s fields. It was a year after the death of her husband in a motorcycle accident, and she complained to me that she experienced both grief from

the loss of her husband and *ghar ki tension* in bringing up her young son without him. I asked her if she had enough support from her sisters-in-law, or from her own siblings. ‘*Zindagi ka saaf koi nahin karte*’ – ‘There is nobody else who will keep life clean’, she retorted as she continued the menial work of packing, using cleanliness to refer both to the materiality of her home and to the relationships within it. She continued:

Everybody has their own things ... they have to keep their own families ... The biggest thing is that you have to think about your own life, you have to think about your own children’s lives, beyond that it is difficult. You have to have the money for your own children’s education.

Manju’s focus has been sending her son to a private school. She has to ask her brother-in-law for the fees and is considering getting a job, but this would cause her to lose respectability in the eyes of her neighbours. These worries, she said, affected her body, leaving her depleted and wracked by *tension*. She spoke of this burden as *maya*:

[Before my husband died], we were always together. We rested together, we did our work together, we ate together, we didn’t spend time with anyone else. But now, after he has passed, I am not interested in worldly things. *Sab moh-maya hai* [Everything is illusory].

In Hindu and Sikh cosmology, the term *maya* is used to refer to the relations, substances, and space of the home, and to the illusory quality of worldly things and relations. Anthropologists have focused on the former meaning, framing *maya* as indicative of a particular form of gendered, relational personhood. Analysing *maya* amongst Bengali housewives, Sarah Lamb suggest that it is like a web formed by sharing and exchanging bio-moral substances – such as semen, sweat, and blood – through acts such as sex, touching, living together, sharing food, owning things, and eating the fruits of village soil; and it is sustained materially and affectively through sentiments of love, compassion, and care (1997: 283). These bonds are made and unmade, in turn causing the humours of the body – heat, coolness, and dryness – to shift. The house is the material space where *maya* is held, such that people are ‘concerned with controlling what substances cross the vulnerable thresholds of their houses and combine not only with their bodily substance but with the substance of their houses’ (E.V. Daniel 1984: 109). It is through the control of substances in the house and the substances of the woman’s body that the purity of a caste group and a lineage is preserved and reproduced (Bear 2007).

Gaddi women used *maya* to refer to the webs of relations that they were responsible for, and the co-substantiality of their homes and bodies. However, they emphasized not the positive, life-affirming aspects of *maya*, but its negative, illusory qualities: the suffering that comes with relational work. For a widow like Manju, well-being would involve the withdrawal from the web of *maya*. However, her housework responsibilities left her burdened or stuck in ‘illusion’. The association of *maya* with illusion has been said to entrench patriarchal ideas of female deficiency, where women’s responsibility for *maya* leaves them unable to understand the true shape of reality (Gold 1991). However, Gaddi women spoke of the illusory quality of *maya* as a burden that resulted from their labour. They used the notion to mark the mundane sacrifice that they make to their families, and to push back against their responsibilities. Most importantly, this sacrifice was marked on their minds and bodies in *ghar ki tension*. Overexertion causes depletion of vital energy (*shakti*), resulting in exhaustion, distress, or health problems, but through these forms of disruption people are also able to articulate their sacrifices (Bear 2018; Rashid 2007; Snell-Rood 2015). In the following two sections, we will see how women

registered this burden, first, in the interiority of their bodies, as in the case of Bimla, and, second, via the intrusion of supernatural figures, through her neighbour, Rani.

Overheated bodies

Bimla is an upper-caste Gaddi woman who is married to a local tourist guide and has three young children. She lives with her nuclear family in a small concrete house on a block of land low in the Kangra valley. I visited Bimla often, spending many long afternoons chatting and playing with her children. The house has two rooms, a small kitchen and an attached bathroom, and Bimla keeps it fastidiously clean. When I asked her where she manages to find solace, she replied that it is when her house is calm and peaceful: 'neat and clean' – she used the English words. 'When it is not clean, I feel very stressed', she told me, during one of our chats on the veranda.

Bimla's husband's income was inconsistent, and he was tight with money. She was often forced to beg him for money or seek small loans from kin to pay for basic expenses like her children's schoolbooks. 'Women's work is very hard', Bimla told me one day as we were on the way to pick up her daughter from the school bus. 'There is no time for yourself. While the work of cleanliness was a source of joy and dignity for her, it was also exhausting, particularly when she did not have the financial or emotional support of her husband. She explained:

The main worries are about food, and about money. How will we get it? All this *ghar ki tension*, ladies have. Gents don't have *tension* like this. If, in the house, the [supplies] are finished, the gents will say, don't worry, I'll earn some money, but they don't say where they will earn that money from. They will say that I will give you this money, and you bring the [supplies]. But ladies think, where will they do that from? If ladies need 20 rupees, their husband will only give them 10 rupees, and say just make do with that. Men say, get the rest of the things later. Ladies say, how will I manage with only 10 rupees, those things are important and are needed right now. Ladies have to adjust.

For Bimla, keeping these threats at bay involved resourcefully making small sources of income stretch. Her comments echoed the words of Sapna, the housewife whom we met earlier. 'Gents drink a lot here', Sapna said:

Women have to cope with all of these problems. Where men don't drink, like in my house, they don't lay a hand on ladies. In this place, women aren't strong and assertive ... People here talk a lot, particularly about women, people in this place aren't open-minded.

Sapna, as a result of her husband's secure income, highlighted that she didn't face these threats and hence didn't experience *ghar ki tension* like her sister-in-law Seema, the widow Manju, and Bimla did.

When things were particularly precarious, Bimla's *ghar ki tension* developed into bodily symptoms: especially high BP, hot flushes, and acute pains in her body, often in her back or abdomen. She would get a headache and struggle to sleep. These episodes often came after she had had a big fight with her husband. Her symptoms sometimes elicited his sympathy, but he was unwilling to take her to the hospital because of the cost.

2,500 rupees, he will start to shout and tell me that I don't have any pain. Women have no time for pain, not body pain or pain in the mind. But when it comes to his costs, like he wants to buy a car, he will just spend the money.

When she felt seriously ill, she would pack up her things and go to her natal home to be cared for. Once there, her brothers would take care of her children, and her husband would be left alone to fend for himself.

In these moments of conflict, housework ceases to be life-affirming or a source of dignity for women, but instead becomes a struggle. They experience this relational disruption in their bodies, most often in humoral overheating: when the body and the atmosphere of a house becomes too hot as a result of relational strain. Heat has been shown by anthropologists of material culture to be an important sensory quality, generated through domestic activities, and associated with security and solidarity (I. Daniel 2015). In Hindu cosmology, heat is a particularly important quality of the woman's body, as it is associated with the creative, sexual energy (*shakti*) that is the life force of the household and perpetuates the lineage (Menon 2002). At liminal points in a woman's life course, like puberty, marriage, childbirth, and during breastfeeding, her body is considered overheated and thus the 'weak point' in the lineage, where she might invite curses into the household that can go on to afflict her husband and in-laws (Harlan & Courtright 1995). In expressions of *ghar ki tension*, women's bodies would become overheated outside of these liminal junctures as a result of exhaustion or neglect.

Women experienced this overheating through biomedical symptoms like hot flushes, chronic headaches, and 'high BP'. High BP, though not necessarily medically diagnosed as hypertension, was experienced as an excess of heat that could lead to panic attacks (*ghavrat*) or heart palpitations (*dil ka ghavrat*) (see Cohen 1998; Das 2015; Weaver 2017). As Catherine Fennell (2011) observed in her study of heat in Chicago projects, the sensory qualities of body and domestic spaces allow people to reflect on and resist the expectations of respectability placed on them. Gaddi men lamented that women whose bodies were too hot were impulsive and prone to sexual deviance. In contrast, Gaddi women used idioms of overheating to push back against domestic duties. For women like Bimla and Seema who experienced these symptoms, the heat of the body marked the overexertion of their energy (*shakti*) and exploitation of their labour, rather than its deviant exertion beyond patriarchal structures. When the materiality and relations of the household are unbalanced, the very source of life in the house that emits from the female body becomes excessive and tends towards its opposite. The heat of the woman's body that is meant to nourish becomes strange and painful. In these instances, the interiority of the body is overheated and unsettling just as the interiority of the house is fraught and tense. In other instances, the unsettling force comes from outside, in the form of supernatural beings that enter the home and body. Let us turn to these instances in the final section.

Jungle Raja dreaming

Rani was a lower-caste Gaddi woman, married to a slate miner who was a good friend of Bimla's husband. I met her one afternoon when she dropped by Bimla's house. Bimla had told me before that Rani had been experiencing *ghar ki tension* because her husband's job was unstable, and sometimes he didn't bring home enough money to feed their children. Rani and her husband had been fighting about this, causing the atmosphere (*mahaul*) of the house to become fraught. Rani felt this as high and low BP and had been coming over to talk to Bimla when things got too much. That afternoon, she told us of her visits from the 'Jungle Raja'. The Jungle Raja, or Jungle Prince, was an incubus that came into the dreams of women who were experiencing *tension* to tempt them into sexual forays. He was described as a handsome man who flattered them before luring them into a forest. Rani explained that the Jungle Raja must be the figure who was also causing other troubles in her life, like her high BP and her children

not doing well at school. When Rani went home that afternoon, Bimla explained that she thought the Jungle Raja was visiting Rani because her sexual relationship with her husband wasn't going well, and her husband wasn't earning enough. Bimla explained that Rani's husband had become more attentive to Rani since the visit of the Jungle Raja, taking time off to spend at home with her and taking her to a local ritual healer (*chella*).

The appearance of the Jungle Raja gives us a clue as to the significance of sexuality and desire to the condition of *ghar ki tension*. As has been examined, the Gaddi middle-class household has become increasingly nuclear, oriented around a conjugal bond within which female sexuality is located (Kapila 2004). Meeta, a neighbour of mine, explained the importance of this bond one evening as we sat on her porch. 'Girls, they get married, and then husband and wife, they have sex, and there is a new kind of feeling that happens. They get together, and then they get used to it'. I asked her what this 'different feeling' was.

After marriage, [sex is] like a routine. It becomes an essential part of your life. If you don't do it, you feel weird ... For husband and wife, it keeps them together. If nothing else, it's the sex that keeps them together. In the day you're working hard, but in the evening the husband and wife get together.

Gaddi women commonly discussed their desires and needs and how to cultivate a romantic sexual relationship. However, many women did not have such success: their husbands were violent, alcohol dependent, or unable to meet their material needs. For these women, *ghar ki tension* was a means by which they expressed unmet desire and expressed their sexuality beyond the conjugal bond.

The appearance of the Jungle Raja often occurred simultaneously with other symptoms of the overheated body in moments of conjugal strain. In the same way that biomedical complaints allowed women to articulate disrupted care relations, the dreams of the incubus allowed women to articulate unmet desires, and often to elicit care from their husbands. As Rosario Montoya (2002) observes amongst Nicaraguan women, these sexual and material desires are linked, and women's expression of transgressive sexuality is a means by which they agentively navigate domestic situations (see also Raheja & Gold 1994; Wardlow 2006). The visits from the incubus recall accounts that highlight the fraught agency that women conjure through forms of spirit possession (see Kakar 1982; Nabokov 1997; Ram 2013). Also in a Himalayan setting, Radhika Govindrajan (2018) recounts a genre of *baat* (happenings) where women are lured into the forest by lustful bears that pleasure them sexually in ways that their husbands do not. *Bhalu ki baat* (talk of the bear), she argues, 'allowed women to mount a radical critique of rigid notions of sexual purity and control that portray sexually curious and voracious women as a stigma to their family and community' (2018: 170). Similarly, the genre of Jungle Raja dreams allowed Gaddi women to portray themselves as desirous subjects in a way that served their project of middle-class domestic aspiration, pushing back against a hegemonic narrative of tribal sexuality that saw women's desire as corrosive of domestic well-being. Importantly, however, in both *ghar ki tension* and Jungle Raja dreaming, this expression of agency was not direct: women did not directly blame their husbands or kin for bodily or psychic disruption, nor did they directly blame their husbands for their unmet desires. Instead, their symptoms and afflictions worked to obliquely signify their demands and sacrifices as they struggled to maintain domestic well-being and respectability in the context of precarity.

Conclusion: Distress and domesticity

‘[D]omestic worlds and inner worlds tend to collapse’, Tine Gammeltoft and Pauline Oosterhoff write, ‘household tensions and inner tensions blending into one dense feeling of worry and distress’ (2018: 534). For Gaddi women, these tensions bleed together at the level of the body, and in the context of a high-stakes project of middle-class domesticity. This article has attempted to disentangle these tensions by charting a deep history of Gaddi domesticity, showing how the collective aspiration for inclusion in India’s (Hindu) middle class is contingent on the labour of women, especially for marginal groups. It has shown, however, that women do not take on this labour unthinkingly, unfeelingly. Instead, many, and especially those who do not enjoy strong marriages or secure incomes, experience this project as a burden that leaves them exhausted and depleted. In moments of precarity, they experience this burden in their bodies, as forms of overheating. In other moments, and especially where their sexual needs are not being met, their bodies become afflicted by supernatural intruders like the Jungle Raja. These forms of psychic and bodily affliction are painful and distressing for the women who suffer them, but they also allow them to push back against neglectful husbands and abusive kin.

Fundamentally, this article has posed a central theoretical question: what do we get if we look at middle-class domesticity through the lens of distress? A careful analysis of women’s distress reveals a number of observations that might travel to contexts across the global middle class. First, ideals of middle-class domesticity are not always experienced positively by those who seek them. Instead, they are experienced ambivalently, as both highly compelling and deeply fraught (see Berlant 2011). Second, it is hard to talk directly about this ambivalence while also maintaining dignity, especially for groups who have been historically excluded from the middle class, like tribal and low-caste groups in India, or minority or racialized groups elsewhere. As such, and third, the ambivalent attachment that people have to ideals of domesticity is registered in more visceral, oblique ways. In the Gaddi case, this was in the bodily symptoms of *ghar ki tension*: the heart going *tuk tuk*, as in Seema’s case; an eruption of heat, as in Bimla’s case; a visit from the Jungle Raja, as in Rani’s case. But, fourth and finally, the articulation of these concerns, however obliquely, is an act of mediation: both reproducing the ideal of middle-class domesticity and subverting or even resisting it. Women lamented the immense pressure of sustaining *maya*, and also signalled inadequate conditions of intimacy, care, and provision. As such, they revealed the project of domesticity to be not only fundamental to their happiness, but also illusory. The expression of distress, indeed, reveals both the salience of the ideal of domesticity and its failure to provide the qualities – well-being, security – that it espouses.

In sum, we see that a focus on distress reveals the ambivalence that is at the heart of projects of middle-class domesticity, the difficulty in speaking this ambivalence directly, and the way that the body is made to mediate such ambivalence. *Ghar ki tension* is an emic term that expresses these four social processes, a term that might travel, and be used as an analytic to capture the ambivalence of middle-class domesticity elsewhere. The picture that this analytic paints is much more nuanced, more affectively charged, than those given by scholars who choose to focus only on processes of aspiration or consumption as they investigate class mobility. Through a focus on distress in general, and *ghar ki tension* in particular, we see not only success or failure to achieve the fantasy of domesticity, but also the failure of the fantasy itself.

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NOTES

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² The English word was used, but it took on a particular meaning as it was used by Hindi- and Gaddi-speakers.

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Ghar ki tension : vie domestique et détresse dans la classe moyenne ambitieuse indienne

Résumé

Tension est un terme polysémique, utilisé dans toute l'Asie du Sud pour décrire les contraintes et les cahots de la vie, comme « soucis » ou « stress » dans le discours euro-américain. Chez les Gaddis de l'Himalaya indien, anciens agriculteurs et éleveurs en pleine ascension sociale, les femmes lui adjoignent le qualificatif *ghar ki*, « du foyer », pour indiquer une perturbation profonde des humeurs physiques, des relations intimes et de la matérialité domestique. Cet article déploie cette tension du foyer, cette « *ghar ki tension* », en insistant sur le qualificatif *ghar*, comme une fenêtre sur la précarité de la vie domestique de la classe moyenne, telle qu'elle est vécue dans les corps de ces femmes. Plutôt que de considérer cette notion comme un moyen pour elles de communiquer la détresse éprouvée au sein de la maisonnée, l'article l'analyse comme reflétant les conceptions qu'ont ces femmes de leurs corps et de leurs maisons comme se constituant mais aussi se perturbant mutuellement, du point de vue relationnel, affectif et matériel. Cette approche révèle la façon dont le travail domestique des femmes est à la fois une source de dignité et un fardeau, fardeau qui est ressenti dans la *ghar ki tension* et dans des symptômes physiques de bouffées de chaleur et des visites d'êtres surnaturels. L'article suggère que la *ghar ki tension* pourrait être un nouveau moyen d'envisager la détresse comme le coût psychique et corporel de l'ascension sociale, au-delà du contexte spécifique des Gaddis.

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