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How Gaddi Vote their Identity: Political Representation, Participation, Connection and Withdrawal in Lower Chamba

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Abstract

This article uses decisions about voting, including the decision not to vote, as a prism to consider what it means to be Gaddi in 21st-century Himachal Pradesh (H.P.). While the results of polls can tell us how people voted, they say little about the background to electoral decision-making—the reasoning by which interests, identities, and ideologies are compressed into the simple choice between candidates. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in rural Chamba district, the article tracks participation in elections for the H.P. State Legislative Assembly and a local Panchayat from 2000 to 2022. The paper concludes by presenting electoral contests as arenas in which the performance of citizenship is entangled with shifting forms of identity combining the social, administrative, and political.

Keywords

Gaddi; Scheduled Tribe; elections; citizenship; politics

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Introduction

When I first met Dev Singh, he was two years into a five-year term representing the voters of Ghar ward in the Naharn Village Gram Panchayat. It was 2002, and I had just arrived at my field site in the lower part of the Chamba Valley, close to Chamba Town. Dev Singh's election as ward member had been a cause for celebration among the Gaddi community of Ghar. Election to the Panchayat carried with it a degree of status: ward members were marked as important individuals able to leverage political connections for collective advantage. Then, as now, the state was an active and obvious presence in rural Chamba District, and elected representatives were seen as key mediators able to distribute (or deny) resources at the village level.

Indian citizens are enthusiastic voters who turn out in impressive numbers to elect political representatives. Explaining the cultural logic of electoral participation, Banerjee writes of how, for many Indian voters, especially those who are poor, "voting is not just a means to elect government. Rather, the very act of voting is seen by them as meaningful, as an end-in-itself, which expresses the virtues of citizenship" (2014: 3). So, it came as a surprise when, in 2003, I learned that Dev Singh and other young men in Ghar ward were actively discouraging their fellow villagers from participating in the forthcoming Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) election. My incomprehension about Ghar ward's boycott of the State Assembly election increased when, after serving one term, Dev Singh decided not to recontest his seat in the 2005 Panchayat elections. His explanation for this—darkly muttering about "dirty politics"—seemed odd considering the tangible and intangible benefits that his election as a ward member should have brought. Dev Singh was viewed as hardworking and trustworthy; had he agreed to stand a second time, he would have been re-elected. Given the level of interest—both in terms of what was materially at stake and as demonstrated by high turnout in elections—I was left wondering

why Dev Singh and the people of Ghar chose to withdraw from these central rites of citizenship in the world's largest democracy.

This paper uses decisions about voting, including the decision not to vote, as a prism to consider what it means to be Gaddi in rural Himachal Pradesh. The events described here—Ghar ward's refusal to participate in the Legislative Assembly election and Dev Singh's decision not to stand for re-election—occurred, respectively, in 2003 and 2005, when I was still new to fieldwork in Chamba. I here adopt an approach pioneered by A.M. Shah (2007)¹ to ask what subsequent elections to the Himachal Pradesh State Legislative Assembly and to the Naharn Gram Panchayat reveal about the interplay of Gaddi identity and political representation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork stretching over twenty years², in this paper I foreground the lived reality of electoral choices as they are experienced and understood at the village level (Yadav 2007: 367). Focusing on the relationships created between representatives and those represented offers a fresh perspective on how Gaddi people might conform to, but also depart from, notions of the Scheduled Tribe as a single, undifferentiated administrative classification or a unified "vote bank." The paper proceeds as follows: first, I provide a historical review of the development of the Scheduled Tribe classification in India and relate this to guarantees of political representation for Chamba district's tribal populations. I then focus on democratic participation in Ghar ward to try to unpick the factors behind and fallout from the villagers' collective boycott of the State Legislative Assembly election in 2003 and Dev Singh's subsequent decision to stand down from the Panchayat in 2005. Updating the story over subsequent rounds of elections to the village Panchayat and the State Legislative Assembly from 2005 to 2022, I go on to analyze how voting decisions are influenced by material interests, political reasoning, and social connections. The paper concludes by presenting electoral contests as arenas in which the performance of citizenship is entangled with

shifting forms of identity combining the social, administrative, and political.

Differentiated Citizenship in Chamba District

Fifteen kilometers north of the district headquarters at Chamba Town, Naharn Panchayat covers more than thirty small villages scattered over a slope that rises steeply from a tributary of the Ravi River. The Panchayat is divided into seven wards; demographically, the population of the three wards closest to the river is made up of upper-caste Hindus, Scheduled Castes (SC), and Muslim Gujjars who have Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Midway up the hillside, Ghar ward is equally divided between Scheduled Tribe Gaddi, ST Gujjars, and a Rajput caste; higher still, the wards of Sulhi, Chunda, and Baal are solely Gaddi. This is where we start our story: in 2000, Dev Singh was elected unopposed to represent Ghar in the Naharn Gram Panchayat.

The origins and boundaries of Gaddi identity are examined elsewhere in this special issue. Here it is enough to say that a general sense of Gaddi-ness customarily centers around distinct language and culture, historical dependence on combinations of nomadic shepherding and subsistence agriculture, and residence (or claim to ancestral origin) in the eastern end of the Chamba valley³. From the Gaddi heartland of Gaddern—a mountainous area surrounding the town of Bharmour in the Budhil Nalla and the upper Ravi River—beginning in the mid-19th century, many families chose to move to new homes in Kangra District on the southern side of the Dhaula Dhar Range or to the hills that surrounded Chamba Town at the lower, western end of the valley. At this time, Chamba was a Princely State, and the Gaddi households that established themselves in what is now the Panchayat of Naharn did so with the permission of the Chamba Raja.

After Independence, the Districts and Princely States of the western Himalayas were organized into the embryonic Himachal Pradesh. With the end of Chamba as a Princely State, the Raja's subjects were

transformed into rights-bearing citizens of the sovereign, democratic republic of India. India's new Constitution confirmed the principle of universal adult franchise, and the first elections to the national parliament and to state assemblies were held in 1951. While "democratic" denotes the relationship between the state and its citizens, the idea of the "republic" promises a commitment to ensuring equality among citizens (Banerjee 2022: 4). Though the rights of citizens were premised on universality, the Indian Constitution differentiates citizenship for two administratively recognized categories: the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The criteria for determining a community as a Scheduled Tribe were loosely defined around marginality and a lack of social, educational, and economic development (Middleton 2013). Owing to their "unique culture," their "geographical isolation," and the "backwardness" of their traditional nomadic occupation, in 1950 Gaddis in Chamba district were given ST status (Government of India 1965).

While affirmative action programs for Scheduled Castes follow a compensatory logic aimed at redressing historical oppression, the disadvantaged position of Scheduled Tribes stems from a particular understanding of civilizational progress (Kapila 2013). Incorporating India's tribal populations into the state-building process, for the purpose of this paper, two forms of ST provision are of interest: the first concerning efforts to promote their economic development and the second guaranteeing political representation. Relating these to the Gaddi people in Chamba District, let's consider each in turn.

The Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognizes areas with a predominantly tribal population as deserving of additional assistance, which promotes economic development. "Backwardness" is here understood both as a characteristic of an ethnic group (the Scheduled Tribe) and of the place where that group resides (the Scheduled Area). In the modernizing vision of the decades following Independence, it was considered

necessary that India's tribal people "be reformed in order to become proper citizens" (Jaoul 2016: 6). Infrastructure provision—usually in the form of roads—would connect hill and jungle areas to urban centers; education and the reservation of government jobs were the means to "uplift" marginalized populations and bring them into the national mainstream. In 1975, the Bharmour block of Chamba District was notified as a tribal sub-district, which qualified the area for additional resources under a tribal development plan.

Alongside this enhanced state provision for "backward" areas, a second set of provisions ensures the political representation of tribal populations in decision-making bodies (Jayal 2007: 8). Article 243D of the constitution provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat, while Article 332 of the Constitution of India provides for the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Legislative Assemblies of the States. Of the 68 seats that make up the Himachal Pradesh State Assembly, three—Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, and Bharmour—are reserved for ST representatives. Elections in these three constituencies are franchised on the same basis as elsewhere; where they differ is in requiring candidates to belong to a Scheduled Tribe. Bharmour, in common with other political constituencies in India, is geographically defined. Under the first-past-the-post electoral system, a single representative is elected to speak for all the people living in the constituency. Importantly, the borders of the tribal sub-district of Bharmour are similar to, but not an exact match for, the area marked as the reserved constituency of Bharmour. Therefore, differences exist between, on the one hand, those Gaddi who live within the defined geographical boundaries of the reserved constituency and tribal sub-district, and, on the other hand, those Gaddi who live outside either the reserved constituency or the tribal sub-district or both.

Reviewing efforts to recognize India's Dalit and tribal populations as equal citizens, Béteille (1991) distinguished between a

"meritarian principle" establishing equality of opportunity and a "compensatory principle," which prioritizes equalizing the disparities existing between groups. While quotas and affirmative action programs place value on individuals, the second type of claim aims for a fairer distribution of benefits and therefore targets development efforts at collectives. Meritarian and compensatory principles are brought together in the logic of reserved political representation. Though the intention of ST classification was to draw historically excluded groups into a notional national mainstream, Béteille warned that making caste and ethnicity the basis for affirmative action would be a reality in which these forms of identity would be strengthened. Thus conceived, development efforts ushering Scheduled Tribes into a difference-free modernity ran alongside political imperatives insisting on their continuing difference and cultural boundedness (Jayal 2013: 240). The contradictions arising from this unstable combination and the attendant difficulties of imposing legal-administrative categories onto shifting and complex identities are the subject of this paper. In a previous paper, I outlined emergent possibilities for "emancipatory citizenship" evident among ST Gujjars in Himachal Pradesh (Axelby 2020); I now examine how guarantees of equal citizenship established in India's Constitution have translated into varied vernacular forms for Gaddis in Chamba District.

How Ghar Ward Votes (2000 to 2022)

How do the formal relationships that Gaddis in Chamba have with their political representatives translate into voting behavior? While the results of polls can tell us how people voted, they say little about the background to electoral decision-making—the reasoning by which interests, identities, and ideologies are compressed into the simple choice of candidates. This paper considers the way Gaddis in Chamba approach the elections as differentiated citizens. Adopting A.M. Shah's "worm's eye view" (2007), I attempt to unpick the choices made by voters in Ghar ward as they participated in

Legislative Assembly and village Panchayat elections from 2000 up to 2022. Doing so demonstrates how reservation policies have shaped the ways people vote, participate in politics, and perceive their political leaders (Michelutti and Heath 2013: 57). Post-election, it falls to elected representatives to engage with the state at different levels and to deliver the range of citizenship entitlements allocated to Scheduled Tribe Gaddis. The representatives' ability to define and interpret the identity of the electorate determines their success or failure.

The Election Boycott of 2003

For forty years, the Congress Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Thakur Singh Bharmouri has been a tangible presence in the lives of Gaddi people in Chamba. Bharmouri was first elected to the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly in 1982 and has stood as a candidate in every subsequent election⁴. Though he'd lost the 1998 election to his BJP opponent Tulsi Ram, when I first rented a room in Ghar village, it felt as if Thakur Singh—smiling paternally and with a glint in his eye—remained ever present.

In 2002, the Panchayat of Naharn, along with the neighboring Panchayats of Saloni and Gwar, sat just inside the ST reserved constituency of Bharmour at its westernmost edge. As a reserved constituency, candidates for election to the Himachal Pradesh (H.P.) State Assembly must belong to a ST community. Technically, these could be individuals from the minority ST Gujjar and ST Pangiwal communities; in practice, candidates from the two big parties have belonged to the numerically dominant ST Gaddi community. Tulsi Ram (BJP), the successful candidate in 1998, was running again in 2003 with Thakur Singh Bharmouri, his Congress opponent. Both candidates were Gaddi and both lived in the small town of Bharmour at the eastern end of the Chamba valley—the heart of Gaddern.

On the election trail, Bharmouri would point to significant achievements that benefitted his constituents; he'd supported

legislation guaranteeing rights of access to grazing resources and claimed to have led the campaign to confer ST status on Gaddi people in Kangra District (his BJP opponent made similar claims)⁵. But I realized that voters are more often motivated by interventions that are immediate, tangible, and personal. Gaddi people throughout rural Chamba would tell me how Thakur Singh Bharmouri was responsible for the building of a hydro-project or had given the go-ahead for the provision of drinking water and electricity to their villages. Tulsi Ram's supporters would point to a particular road and say that he had ordered its construction. Without Bharmouri's personal intervention, a relative wouldn't have secured the prized government job, and their children would not have had the benefit of a 10+2 education. Village fairs, festivals, and pilgrimages were said to benefit from Tulsi Ram's presence and Bharmouri's patronage. On the campaign trail, the competing candidates sought to exemplify Marc Abélès' description of a successful politician as "above all the representative of a territory with all its traditions, even a living symbol of a locality" (1988: 174). Bharmouri and Tulsi Ram worked hard to insert themselves into the everyday lives of the electorate, to be at once the embodiment of cultural traditions from the past while constantly articulating possibilities for future development.

Why, then, given their previous support for both candidates, did the villagers of Ghar ward decide to boycott the H.P. State Assembly election held in 2003? In Ghar, participation in elections is a collective activity, and so was the decision not to vote; on the day of the election, everyone stayed at home. The voting boycott extended beyond the households in Ghar ward to the neighboring villages further up the hill in Chunda and Baal that were predominantly inhabited by Gaddis. I could understand why upper-caste Hindus, Muslims, Dalits, or ST Gujjars might be reluctant to vote for candidates drawn from a community other than their own. But in this case, Gaddi villagers had consciously opted to withdraw from supporting a Scheduled Tribe

candidate who, according to the logic of reservation, would represent their interests in the State Legislative Assembly. The election of 2003 saw Thakur Singh Bharmouri returned as Bharmour's MLA, although the voters of Ghar played no part in this.

Election boycotts (*vahishkar*) are a recognized feature of the Indian political landscape. Three points can be made about the forms that these protests take: first, here we are talking about election boycotts that are active and collective decisions not to participate and therefore distinct from passive individual antipathy. Second, we can distinguish between instructions to boycott elections that are issued by political actors (parties or insurgencies) and those that originate at the grassroots level. Third, locally driven boycotts are usually understood as protests against the political class or attempts to make demands for resources, services, or special status for a particular area or community. Inevitably, the reasons—tied up in overlapping claims—require proper contextualization.

I asked Dev Singh what drove the decision not to vote. The explanation he gave was simple: Thakur Singh Bharmouri had not visited Ghar ward in the preceding five years. This chimed with an often-repeated criticism about the invisibility of politicians, “We never see our representatives until they come to beg for votes.” But the insult was compounded during the election campaign: Bharmouri's convoy had arrived in Naharn, where they were received at the home of the Pradhan. In 2003, Naharn's Pradhan was a high-caste Hindu who, as we will see, did little to represent the Gaddi people in the upper parts of the Panchayat. According to Dev Singh, the Pradhan assured Thakur Singh Bharmouri that “everything is ok here” and there was no need for him to visit other wards in the Panchayat. Normally, if a candidate or party is seen to be ignoring the electorate, then voters have the choice of switching allegiance to a rival candidate or party. Why didn't the voters of Ghar switch their support to BJP candidate Tulsi Ram? “Because Tulsi Ram didn't visit us either.”

This might have been the final straw for Dev Singh, but it's also worth digging a little deeper. What explanations did other Gaddi voters in Ghar, Chunda, and Baal give for their non-participation in the electoral process? One widely shared explanation was a feeling that Gaddi households in the constituency were not receiving the same level of assistance—reserved jobs, promotion of education, and infrastructure provision—as those living closer to the center of Bharmour. Expressions of dissatisfaction were not simply about an absence of tangible goods, services, or benefits in Ghar (“We never see any benefit from our representatives”) but also about the comparable availability of these resources in the central part of the constituency (“The MLA only helps his relatives in Bharmour”). It had been noticed that, following its designation as a tribal sub-district, Bharmour had gained new schools and a college, hydro-projects that provided jobs, and the roll-out of a road-building program. The overlap between the tribal sub-district of Bharmour and the Reserved constituency of Bharmour was not exact. At the time of the 2003 Assembly elections, three Panchayats in lower Chamba—including Naharn Panchayat, in which Ghar ward sits—were part of the Reserved constituency but were excluded from the Tribal Sub-District. This placed the Gaddis of Ghar ward in an anomalous position—able to claim ST status as individuals and constitutionally guaranteed to be represented in the State Assembly by a Scheduled Tribe MLA, but living in Chamba Development Block, where Gaddis were a minority. This should not have mattered; ST individuals are entitled to receive assistance in education and getting jobs. However, in practice, doing so required the support of a political patron.

Before the events of 2003, I had understood a “vote bank” as a consolidated group of voters from a single caste or ethnic community who regularly vote for a political party or a candidate. In exchange for their electoral support, material goods and other benefits might be directed back to the communities that share (or cultivate) connections with victorious candidates.

But, reading Srinivas' (1955) description of the underlying mechanics of the vote bank, I came to realize that these arrangements depended on a class of political intermediaries able to broker relationships of obligation and reciprocity. In 2003, the MLA candidates failed to reach out to the voters of Ghar, in part because the community there did not have a local intermediary who could advocate on their behalf. In the absence of a direct connection, voters in Ghar, struggling to attract political attention, opted to withdraw from participating in the election.

It's possible to see the rejection of both MLA candidates in the 2003 election as stemming from the constitutionally guaranteed provisions of Scheduled Tribe status failing to materialize in Ghar. But, as we shall see, the contours of the vote bank are defined by an appreciation of social identity as much as by the promise of tangible rewards. As such, I would agree with Piliavsky's (2014: 156) argument that the choices voters make are moral as much as instrumental, grounded in how they imagine good politicians and their relations with them, what obligations they imagine these relations entail, and what they see as the sound basis of political authority. Returning to Abélès' (1988) definition of a successful politician, Bharmouri and Tulsi Ram campaigned to present themselves as representatives of Gaddi-ness and of Bharmour/Gaddern. But, in doing so, the competing candidates failed to properly acknowledge those who were further from the center of the constituency culturally, geographically, and socially.

The fallout from Ghar's election boycott varied according to who I spoke to. Some said it made no difference. Dev Singh was adamant that it did, "Afterwards, Thakur Singh Bharmour came here to meet us and asked why we did this boycott. He said in future he would visit and see us." As it turned out, Bharmouri would not need to visit Naharn, Saloni, or Gwar in future election campaigns for the simple reason that the three Panchayats were reallocated to the Chamba constituency when electoral boundaries were redrawn prior to the

2007 Legislative Assembly election. In a later section, I will explore what impacts these changes had on voting behaviors; but before doing so, it is necessary to offer a fuller description of the ward that Dev Singh was elected to represent in the Naharn Panchayat.

"Dirty politics" in Naharn Panchayat (2000-2005)

Let's now return to the other question that opened this paper—the reasons why Dev Singh was elected as the ward representative in Naharn Panchayat and why he couldn't bring himself to stand again at the end of his five-year term. As we'll see, this also relates to why Gaddi people in Naharn Panchayat failed to attract the attention of the MLA candidates during the State Assembly election of 2003.

The Gaddi villages of Naharn Panchayat have a distinct social history. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a wave of out-migration from the Gaddi heartland around Bharmour. Some people—including Dev Singh's great-grandfather—moved to the hills above the Raja's capital. The land below the forest was first farmed in the early decades of the twentieth century by Gaddi families who established themselves in Ghar, Sulhi, Chunda, and Baal. In comparison with the remote home villages in upper Chamba, it represented an upgrade. These Gaddi pioneers continued to combine nomadic shepherding with agriculture. But, over time, the ability to produce two crops from the land permitted a move away from agro-pastoralism to concentrate on cultivation.

When I first visited Chamba in the early 2000s, households in Ghar produced a summer crop of maize and a winter crop of wheat. Most families supplemented agricultural production with earnings from "daily wage" manual labor—alongside farm labor, this typically meant irregular manual work helping to build roads. Two or three families still migrated with their flocks, but the numbers of sheep and goats were small, and they stopped altogether over the following decade. Few Gaddi women

went to school; men were literate, but most hadn't studied beyond Class Five. Only a handful achieved low-level government jobs as Forest Guards or building roads with the Public Works Department. All households were able to access discounted rice and oil through the Public Distribution System (PDS); the state also provided electricity and drinking water; and efforts were underway to upgrade village paths around the ward (Axelby 2018).

The above description not only applied to Gaddi households in Ghar but also to non-Gaddi families. It struck me at the time how closely the lives of Ghar's Gaddi households were intertwined with those of their Rajput neighbors. This community felt intensely egalitarian, based on tight bonds of mutual obligation and support. Gaddi identity remained salient—they continued to marry within the caste and maintain cultural ties with the Bharmour area. But to a large extent, Gaddi and Rajput households in Ghar ward would work together, socialize together, share resources, and support one another. And it was as a collective (*bhaichara*) that the people of Ghar ward approached democratic elections.

In 2000, Dev Singh was elected unopposed as the ward member for Ghar. Karmo (Dev Singh's father's brother's son from Ghar village) and Chaman Singh (a Rajput from Londa village) encouraged Dev Singh to stand, and the rest of the village community fell behind their recommendation (Dev Singh told me he was elected with 100% of the vote). That his Rajput neighbors in Ghar were instrumental in persuading him to stand showed how the political identities suggested by the ST reservation diverge from the sociological realities that existed in the ward. It's worth noting, however, that this sense of shared political interests did not extend much beyond the villages in Ghar.

Naharn Panchayat has seven wards (Ghared, Pandah, Naharn, Ghar, Sulhi, Chunda, and Baal); three are dominated by high-caste Hindus, three are made up of Gaddi households, and Ghar has an even mix of ST Gaddi, ST Gujjar, and

Rajput families. A powerful faction in the Panchayat viewed elections as opportunities to gain and demonstrate control over local power structures. Those who controlled the Panchayat were able to direct resources in their favor. When Dev Singh was elected in 2000, it was to a Panchayat dominated by upper-caste Hindus from the wards of Naharn, Ghared, and Pandah. As a ward member from the "anti-party," Dev Singh struggled to claim the resources his ward was supposedly entitled to: "I asked the Pradhan for some budget, but each time they would say 'no budget, no budget'." Feeling disillusioned, Dev Singh described politics as a "dirty game."

Cynicism about politics is a phenomenon found throughout the world but takes particular forms in India. Reporting from a Bengali village, Arild Ruud finds politics as something that morally upright people would prefer not to touch for, "Merely by choosing to be engaged in politics, anyone was almost bound to be tarnished by unsavoury decisions, shady actions and odorous alliances" (2001: 116-7). What strikes me here is that, over the course of his five-year term as ward member, Dev Singh never really got to play the "dirty game" of politics. He could see it existed—as demonstrated by the Pradhan's refusal to release funds to a rival—but he couldn't, or perhaps wouldn't, engage with the tactics necessary to achieve success. Why might this be?

To ordinary villagers, the state occupies an unfamiliar space that operates with its own distinct language, culture, and moralities. Ordinary voters therefore require connections through intermediaries who understand the everyday functioning of state bureaucracies and are able to utilize their contacts and knowledge of official procedures. In this way, political fixers operate as "lubricants" in clientelist exchanges between voters and the state (Berenschot 2014: 197). But entering this unfamiliar space comes at a cost. In the eyes of the Bengali villagers that Ruud describes, to engage in politics is to compromise the values, norms, and morality of village

social life, which are characterized by ordered respect and dignified standards of behavior and living. This chimes with the accusations of corruption that Dev Singh and other Gaddis aimed at the politically dominant high-caste families of Naharn. At that time, the Pradhan and vice-Pradhan were well integrated into webs of patron-client relationships that were not available to others in the Panchayat. Entering these hierarchically ordered political relationships would negate the egalitarian values and the networks of shared obligation that characterized social relations for the closely interlinked families of Ghar. It was the close bonds of the village community that were behind Dev Singh's success in standing for election. And his need to maintain these bonds explained his decision not to contest the position for a second time. At the 2005 Panchayat election, Dev Singh's cousin Karmo was forwarded to Naharn Panchayat as the member for Ghar. Again, with the support of the whole ward, he was elected unopposed.

Panchayat and State Assembly elections 2007–2022

The case studies outlined above highlight a disconnect between voters in Ghar ward and the elected politicians claiming to represent them. In this section, we fast forward through the years to the present day. Analyzing the results of village Panchayat and State Legislative Assembly elections between 2007 and 2022 allows us to trace the process by which the voters of Ghar have been integrated into the politics of the Chamba constituency. Along the way, we consider how, as a minority ST community outside of the tribal sub-district of Bharmour, their collective social identity has altered.

The year 2007 marked a fresh start. After the boycotted election of 2003, though presumably not connected to that event, the election commission removed the Panchayats of Gwar, Saloni, and Naharn from Bharmour and re-notified them as part of the Chamba constituency. Dev Singh was optimistic that the change would benefit the Gaddi of Ghar ward and Naharn

Panchayat in general, “Thakur Singh Bharmouri always treated us well when we visited Bharmour; he used to greet us and speak Gaddi-boli, saying ‘tu khara ha?’ [how are you?]. But what was the benefit for us? Nothing. And did our leaders ever come to see us here? No. Bharmour is far from Ghar, but Chamba is near.”

I wasn't present for the H.P. State Assembly election held in 2007, and when I inquired into what happened, recollections varied. What was remembered—a common refrain—is that both candidates were “city men” from Chamba Town. On one side, standing for the BJP was B.K. Chauhan, a retired Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer; and on the other side, the Congress candidate Pawan Nayyar was a businessman and “A-grade” *thikedar* (contractor) from a wealthy family. Neither candidate visited Ghar ward during the election campaign. B.K. Chauhan won by 26,705 votes to 18,048.

Unlike the elections of ward members for Ghar in 2000 and 2005, the Panchayat election held in December 2010 involved an actual contest. Rival factions backed Hans Raj from Budda village and Karmo from Ghar. These two Gaddi candidates represented a split in the local community. The support of close kin was expected as a matter of course. But wider kinship relations also played a role—people in Budda voted for Hans Raj, those in Ghar for Karmo. For the first time in a Panchayat election, party affiliations were declared—Hans Raj flew the BJP flag and Karmo ran under the Congress banner. In previous local elections, allegiance to a party had barely seemed to matter, and, talking to Hans Raj and Karmo, here again it was hard to detect a genuine commitment to a policy platform or ideology. Ultimately, Hans Raj won. The gossip in Ghar was that he owed his victory to the relative affluence of his family (his uncle served in the Indo-Tibetan Border Police), which he used to buy the votes of Gujjars living in the ward. Remembering that Dev Singh had told me that serving as a ward member left him out of pocket, I asked why a candidate would be prepared to shell

out money to win an election. It seemed that progressive welfare measures, and in particular the allocation of budgets for the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme (NREGA), had changed the calculus of political involvement at the Panchayat level. Under NREGA, any household could receive a fixed payment for up to 120 days for work on infrastructure projects. For a shrewd Pradhan or Panchayat member, this created opportunities to direct the works carried out and to take control of budgets by allocating payments. As ambitious as Hans Raj was, like his predecessors, he struggled to get his plans past the Pradhan and vice-Pradhan of Naharn Panchayat. As we shall see, the gaps opening in the village community would accelerate in the following years. For reasons that are not unconnected, voters in Ghar ward had begun to consider how they might challenge the high-caste dominance of the Panchayat.

In 2012, B.K. Chauhan for the BJP again defeated Congress's Pawan Nayyar in the Legislative Assembly election. Many people in Ghar told me they had voted for the Congress candidate, though some went for the BJP. Comparing the election results of 2007 and 2012, it might appear that little had changed. But underneath the surface, connections—economic and political—were being established that would link villagers in places like Ghar with businessmen and party members in Chamba Town. A literal manifestation of these connections can be seen in the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) program, which extended road access to remote villages. Where before road building was the sole responsibility of the Public Works Department (PWD), now much is undertaken by private contractors. Initial tenders were handed to wealthy “A-grade” contractors able to deal directly with the state government. However, for work to commence on village roads, it was necessary to secure agreements from local Panchayats. A consequence of this was the emergence of new classes of rural contractors: the local “B graders,” who subcontracted from “A graders,” and finally, the “C graders,” who provided labor to complete the work. What

did these patron-client arrangements look like in Ghar? Control over the Panchayat remained with upper-caste villagers in Ghared, Pandah, and Naharn wards; contractors from those villages were able to monopolize the income-generating opportunities associated with road building. An extension of the road from Naharn village connected it to the Gaddi villages of Ghar, Sulhi, Chunda, and Baal. During the 2012 election campaign, both B.K. Chauhan and Pawan Nayyar used this new road to visit Ghar and the upper wards in Naharn Panchayat.

For as long as I had been visiting the villages making up Naharn Panchayat, I took it for granted that the Pradhan would be drawn from one of the high-caste families from Ghared, Pandah, or Naharn ward. Compared to the Gaddis living higher up the hill, these families were wealthier and more educated. They were also better connected both figuratively and literally, for prior to 2012, the road stopped at Naharn. Long-standing relationships with politicians and party operatives in Chamba Town cemented their central place in Panchayat politics. But by 2015, it was apparent that the upper-caste monopoly of power was being weakened. Dissatisfied with Naharn's dominance of the Panchayat (and control of the budget), Gaddis from across several wards agreed to cooperate to defeat the dominant faction. All that they required was a candidate with the contacts and financial resources to take on these vested interests. Collectively, they coalesced around Amar Singh, a Gaddi from Sulhi ward, who was identified as having the necessary credentials for the role. Amir Singh's father had a low-level government job with the Forest Department, which provided the family with a level of financial security. After completing his schooling, Amar Singh found work selling vegetables in a market in Chamba Town. With good contacts and a head for business, he expanded into taxi hire with the purchase of a vehicle. Around this time, he established ties with “A-grade” contractor Pawan Nayyar, who had been the 2007 and 2012 Congress MLA candidate. Pawan Nayyar had successfully tendered

to build new roads connecting the villages of Naharn Panchayat to Chamba Town. To secure local consent, Pawan Nayyar subcontracted responsibility for building the road to Amar Singh. Road building requires manual labor; Amar Singh secured employment for men from his own ward and from villages in Ghar. The support of Gaddi people across several wards, his ties to party operatives in Chamba Town, and the profits made from his role as contractor enabled Amar Singh to be selected as Pradhan of Naharn following the Panchayat election at the end of 2015.

In 2017, Himachal Pradesh again went to the polls. Shortly beforehand, Pawan Nayyar, who had twice stood for Congress and twice lost, defected to the BJP and replaced the twice victorious V.K. Chauhan on the party ticket. The 2017 Legislative Assembly election pitted a contractor, Pawan Nayyar (BJP), against a successful Chamba-based businessman, Neeraj Nayar (Congress). In this Nayyar vs. Nayar contest, Pawan (BJP) won by just over 1800 votes. Most of Ghar ward voted for Pawan; some told me they did so because they supported the BJP (this was the year of the Modi wave), others because they had come to know Pawan when he visited Ghar as the Congress candidate in 2012. But a contributing factor was the close tie that Pawan Nayyar had developed with Amar Singh, the Gaddi Pradhan of Naharn.

I returned to Chamba in October 2022 to witness the State Assembly election. At the previous year's Panchayat election, the people of Ghar ward had selected Karmo's son Nitu Ram as their representative. This proved further evidence of the blurring of boundaries between politics and business; Nitu, like Amar Singh, had established relationships in town and was considered an aspiring *thikedar*. The expectation was that resources would be channeled to the ward through the established relationships of Nitu as a ward member, Amar Singh as Pradhan, and a friendly MLA. At the time we spoke, the identity of this MLA was being decided; the date of the State Assembly election was November 12.

It had been expected that Pawan Nayyar would stand for re-election as MLA. So, when the BJP high command announced that they wanted their candidate to be a woman, it came as a shock. More surprisingly, they selected as their candidate Indira Kapoor, a Jila Parishad member and staunch BJP supporter for more than 25 years. In contrast to the usual wealthy, high-caste, town-based candidates, Indira came from a Gaddi family and had spent most of her life living in a village. Pawan Nayyar was aghast and called on his supporters to join him for a rally. Rumors abound about what happened next; what we do know is that two days later, the BJP reversed their initial decision and withdrew the ticket they had given to Indira Kapoor. Instead, it was decided that the BJP candidate for the 2022 Vidhan Sabha election would be Neelam Nayyar, the wife of the sitting MLA Pawan Nayyar. I visited Ghar to ask if people would be voting for Neelam. Most said they would not. After Pawan Nayyar's election in 2017, the promised benefits hadn't materialized in Ghar ward, and, more damningly, Pawan was said to have behaved arrogantly to those who had complained, saying, "He's a friend only to the *thikedar*." I also asked about whether Indira Kapoor would attract support in Ghar with or without the BJP ticket. Again, "No." Although it was appreciated that Indira was Gaddan (a Gaddi woman) and understood from experience the problems of rural life, she wasn't going to gain many votes in Ghar for reasons ranging from "She's not from this area" to "I don't know her." In contrast, there was widespread support for Congress candidate Neeraj Nayar. Since being elected ward member for Ghar in 2021, I learned that Nitu Ram, Dev Singh's nephew, had become a close supporter of Neeraj, who, like Pawan Nayyar, was a businessman from Chamba Town. During the campaign, Nitu invited Neeraj to visit Ghar. The candidate arrived in a convoy of cars and walked the final stretch to Nitu's newly built home along with a procession of supporters. Here, under a colorful canopy, local leaders expressed their appreciation before Nitu introduced Neeraj. Neeraj then repeated a

stump speech outlining the policy promises offered by Congress and highlighting how he would always be available for the people of Ghar. Before leaving, he sat down to eat a community *dham* (feast) organized and paid for by Nitu. Symbolically, this event rooted Neeraj in this part of the Chamba constituency through his connection with Nitu.

When it comes to voting, it seems to me that the attractions of particular policies or claims to affiliation with a party's ideological stance are far less important than a sense of personal connection and the pathways to upward mobility made possible through affiliation with a candidate, regardless of their party. As such, it is quite possible for someone to express enthusiastic support for Modi and the BJP at the national level but for them to vote for Congress' Neeraj Nayar as the MLA for Chamba. For most people, policy commitments are one thing, but what really matters is selecting a representative who will be effective at mediating to claim benefits on your behalf.

Throughout this review, we have seen how Gaddi voters in Ghar prioritized direct social connections with non-Gaddis over a notion of ethnic affiliation. The State Assembly election was boycotted in 2003 because neither Gaddi candidate had the trust of Gaddi voters in Naharn Panchayat. Similarly, in 2022, the Gaddi candidate Indira Kapoor was rejected as "Not known to us," while the wealthy "city man" Neeraj Nayar was accepted because he had visited Ghar and established close links with individuals there. These "vote bank" links might have been hierarchical patron-client ties of the kind that would be familiar to Srinivas's villagers in Mysore, but recognition, however unequal, is considered preferable to the estrangement from elected representatives that had characterized Ghar ward twenty years previously.

Citizenship and Political Community

Indian citizens approach the ballot box as individuals, free to cast their vote in any way they choose. But, as A.M. Shah points out, "The vote is an instrument, a cultural product, and the Indian voter uses it like

any other cultural product in the light of his life experience" (2007: 25). To put it another way, decisions to vote in a particular way or not to vote at all are subject to the subtle and not-so-subtle pressures exerted by the various social groups, classes, and categories to which an individual is assigned.

Sian Lazar says that to study citizenship is to study how we live in a political community (2013: 1). An anthropological approach to citizenship allows us to contrast what citizenship and citizens are supposed to be (a legal status constitutionally guaranteed) against a critical analysis of what they actually are (the reality of how citizens participate in political communities). This review of electoral decision-making in Naharn Panchayat illustrates the contingencies of political membership for Scheduled Tribe Gaddis in Chamba District. It shows how a sense of self and relationships with others actively shape the day-to-day practices of politics and how citizenship works as a way to make claims on different political communities (ibid: 2). Moving away from ideas of citizenship as purely a legal status, citizenship is here analyzed as a complex bundle of practices constituting political membership, to which tensions and contradictions attach.

Among others,⁶ Jaoul (2016) has argued that India's Dalits and Adivasis have been institutionalized through state categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of affirmative action politics. He goes on to write that elected politicians are distinguished from the marginal populations from which they hail through their attachment to state values and norms (Jaoul 2016, 10). Moving beyond the dominant, statist conception of citizenship, Jaoul argues for ethnographic attention to be redirected toward the ways in which political subjectivities are being produced on the ground. In this paper, we've seen how, between administrative definitions of Scheduled Tribes and attempts at subject-making from below, elected representatives play a key role in creatively interpreting membership of political communities utilizing a range of alternative identities.

“Citizenship is more than simply a status denoting membership of a polity but is constituted through a set of practices associated with participation in politics” (Lazar 2013: 6). In the reserved constituency of Bharmour, elected politicians such as Thakur Singh Bharmouri and Tulsi Ram have engaged in processes of subject-making by accepting, exploiting, exploring, extending, and leveraging ideas of Gaddiness. A key aspect of this political enterprise has been the promotion of Gaddi identity as a unified and bounded ethnic group that is distinct from (though not necessarily opposed to) other communities. The power of these elected representatives depends on their ability to manage the space between “democratic” and “republican” values (Banerjee 2022), between universal and differentiated ideas of citizenship (Jayal 2013), and between meritarian and compensatory principles (Béteille 1991). However, a consequence of their success in strengthening political and administrative classifications is that Gaddis living in the lower parts of Chamba District have been less able to benefit from the resources and opportunities directed towards Bharmour sub-district, where Gaddis form a majority.

In Naharn, we see different processes at play: while Dev Singh felt bound by the moral economy of the village *bhaichara*, in recent years, individuals such as Nitu Ram and Amar Singh have sought to mediate between the village and the town. Despite the efforts of these individuals, this review reveals that for Gaddis in Ghar, incorporation into political communities beyond the level of the ward is limited in quality and extent. They are left to express their identity as citizens primarily by engaging in the simple act of voting or, when wishing to show dissent, by turning their backs and withdrawing from this most basic ritual of democratic participation.

Representing Gaddi Identity in the 21st Century

Behind administrative categories like “Scheduled Tribe,” there exist heterogeneous realities affected by intra- and inter-tribe power relations and conflicts. Unpicking the logics behind individual and collective voting decisions points to shifting understandings of development, democracy, and politics and how these shape, and in turn are shaped by, different facets of identity. This paper has revealed some of the tensions between the Constitutional provisions guaranteeing ST representation in institutions of governance and the multiplicity of overlapping identities, interests, ideologies, attitudes, and attachments that people take with them when they go to vote.

When writing this article, I had the chance to ask Bharmour’s ex-MLA, Thakur Singh Bharmouri, whether his constituency could still be labeled as a “backward tribal area.” He answered with a laugh, “Bharmour is no longer backward, but it is still tribal.” For the people of Ghar ward, the story of the last two decades is one of political detachment from the Reserved Constituency and from the ethnic identities assigned to Gaddis in Bharmour. Unable to access the special provisions available to Gaddis in the tribal sub-district, many feel themselves relegated to the margins of India’s post-liberalization economy. The differentiated citizenship rights ascribed to Scheduled Tribes under the constitution are not distributed equally: Gaddis in Naharn might be said to be “backward,” but they no longer see the benefits of being “tribal.”

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Endnotes

1. Banerjee (2022) has also undertaken long-term research on voting in two villages in West Bengal.
2. I first visited Chamba District in 1999 and returned to undertake a year of fieldwork in 2002–3. Shorter visits—in 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2019—were supplemented by a second full year of fieldwork in 2014–15. My most recent visit coincided with the Legislative Assembly election held in November 2022.
3. The 1904 Gazetteer of Chamba State describes the Gaddis as being “indigenous to the Bharmour wizārat of the Chamba State” (1904: 137).
4. Thakur Singh Bharmouri was first elected as the representative for the Bharmour constituency in 1982 and was successfully re-elected on another five occasions—1985,

1993, 2003, and 2012. In the intervening years—1990, 1998, 2007, and 2017—he was defeated by rival candidates from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 2022, he stood again—and lost.

5. For more on these political campaigns, see Saberwal (2003) and Kapila (2008).
6. See the collections by Shah and Schneiderman (2013); Gorringer, Jeffery, and Waghmore (eds.) (2016); and Jaoul and Shah (2016) in *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*.

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