

**Challenging traditional authority:  
The role of the state, the divine and the RSS**  
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*This paper is an examination of the relationship between traditional authority and the state, using a leadership dispute in a rural adivasi village as the ethnographic backdrop. The primary objective of the paper is to examine how traditional authority continues to be reproduced in the context of local notions of political and cosmological legitimacy. It shows how the 'state' can simultaneously buttress and transform traditional authority. By looking at the processes by which 'the state' is experienced by local people, the article also illuminates the relationship that people have with lower-level state officials. Finally, the article sheds light on one way in which Hindu Nationalism is making inroads into this particular adivasi community, and addresses the implications of how the RSS, acting as an extra-state power, is used to enforce accountability at a lower level.*

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It was early spring in 1999, and every household in the predominantly *adivasi* ('tribal') village I call Mohanpur, in central Chhattisgarh, was beginning to prepare for the annual *tendu* leaf collection. In three weeks time, the leaves would be declared ready for picking and the village would become deserted, as all but a few elderly people and small children would rush off to the jungle at dawn to collect as many leaves as possible. After six or seven hours, they would straggle home around noon to begin the painstaking process of counting the leaves into bundles of fifty. Evening would see them hauling hundreds of bundles off to a designated field, where they would be sorted and recorded by the village *munshi*, the man in charge of the local collection process. These bundles would then be dried and carried off by lorries to government storehouses, from where they would be sold to the highest bidder and used to make the indigenous Indian cigarette, the *bidi*.

The *tendu* leaf collection is a state-controlled enterprise managed by the forest department.<sup>1</sup> Each village in the area has its own *munshi* who is appointed by the local *tendu* committee officials, a group of four men who oversee the collection process in seven local villages. It is to this committee that the *munshi* has to deliver the previous day's collection totals throughout the five-week season. These officials, in turn, are appointed by and accountable to their district and state-level superiors. Twice during the season, and once after its conclusion, cash payment for the leaves is distributed by the state government to the local committee officials, who then deliver the money to each village *munshi*. As the government-appointed officer-in-charge, the latter is responsible for organising the local collection, keeping detailed accounts and distributing the twice-monthly cash payments to local villagers.

The collection process is tedious and taxing, but with the possibility of earning five to ten times their 'average' daily wage, this is the one time of year when people look forward to a relatively sizeable cash income.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, spirits are typically high in the weeks leading up to the collection, as people contemplate how they might spend their windfall.

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While ordinary villagers prepare for this process by making ropes out of jungle grass, which they then use to bind the leaves, the *munshi* keeps busy dusting his record books and going over the previous year's receipts. His is a most enviable position, for he is guaranteed a lucrative commission for his services while being spared the hard physical labour that goes into collecting the leaves.<sup>3</sup>

As I watched the preparations getting underway this particular spring, I noticed that the process appeared to be identical to that I had witnessed the previous year. I must confess that I wasn't relishing the thought of enduring another five weeks of *tendu* collection during which all activities that I considered to be of any anthropological interest came to a halt. The only thing that drew my attention away from the preparations were the regular visits to the village by members of the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*), including my friend Raj, a young man who had left the village two years previously to join an RSS-affiliated ashram in the city some 40 kilometres away. Over the previous year, visits from the RSS to the village had increased from once every two months to once weekly. These visits often coincided with major Hindu festivals such as Mahashivratri. On such occasions, three or four RSS representatives would arrive, sometimes with a Pandit, for the purpose of teaching local *adivasi* people about these festivals and their associated 'big Gods' (Shiva, Krishna, Ram) and showing them how to go about conducting the festival rites in 'proper' mainstream Hindu fashion. In addition to transmitting mainstream Hindu culture to *adivasi* people, RSS activities included conducting 'training meetings' with local young men which, like those being held in other parts of India, aimed to 'infuse qualities of nation building' and spread Hindutva ideology (Basu *et al.* 1993; Nandy *et al.* 1995).<sup>4</sup>

It was on one of these visits, a week or so before the *tendu* season was to officially begin, that something extraordinary happened. Without warning, the *munshi* was approached by the local *tendu* committee officials who demanded his record books and informed him that his services were no longer required: there had been a complaint, they said, and he was being replaced. As word of his dismissal spread, people across the village quietly celebrated. For they were seeing the end of what effectively amounted to ten years of theft, a period during which they had regularly witnessed their yearly cash bonuses pocketed (for services rendered) by this man. Individually, these bonuses were relatively small amounts, ranging between Rs 50-250 per family; but in total, they amounted to thousands of rupees per year. Although his practice of pilfering was common knowledge throughout the village, in the ten years that this man had been *munshi*, nobody had dared make an official complaint.

This was indeed a remarkable event, and I was as surprised as anyone that he had been deposed: for the *munshi* also happened to be the headman (the Patel), the most powerful and feared individual in the village who was, in a sense, above the law. For years, villagers had been discontented with the Patel's behaviour, which was allowed to continue, partly because it was thought to have been legitimised by the divine, and partly because of his connections to powerful individuals outside the village. While the *tendu* committee officials in whose region the village lay had been aware of the Patel's conduct, their hands had also been tied. For unless someone from the village registered an official complaint, members of this committee could do nothing about the situation. And the villagers hadn't dared complain because of the possible repercussions they would face. Moreover, it was said, there would have been

no point: the receipt books were in the Patel's control, and the alterations that he allegedly made to cover his deeds would serve to erase any written proof of the stolen bonuses.

So why had control over the lucrative local venture been stripped from the most powerful and feared man in the village? To many villagers, the Patel's dismissal as *munshi* appeared to be a straightforward sign that the *tendu* committee officials had finally found some sort of legal basis on which to act. But to the respected local elders and young men 'in the know', it was a sign that the Patel had lost his traditional authority, which was legitimised by and dependent upon his connection with the most powerful deity in the area.

This article is about the transformation of traditional authority, and the role that the state, with the assistance of external sources of power, plays in this process. Its chief objective is to provide an ethnographic examination of how traditional authority is locally constructed and reproduced, and how modern state institutions and personnel are used to both legitimise and transform its existence.

Unlike neighbouring villages where traditional authority has been diluted by local systems of governance (cf. Cohn 1987: 575-631), political authority in Mohanpur continues to be legitimised in 'pre-modern' terms (Chatterjee 1997: 295; see also Fuller and Harriss 2001: 24), remaining rooted in a single individual and bound to notions of divine legitimacy. The ethnography described in this paper depicts the transformation of this authority that takes place through a sort of 'customary rebellion' (Gluckman 1955, 1963). In the African context examined by Gluckman (1955: 28, 1963: 112), this is a rebellion which, while upholding the existing traditional order, draws its legitimacy from and seeks change through an appeal to custom. In such a context, disputes are about distributions of power, not about the structure of the system itself, and the sanctity of kingship withstands the defects of the individual king (Sundar 1997: 85). According to Guha (1989: 90), who examined traditionally sanctioned forms of resistance against unjust kings in the northern Indian kingdom of Tehri Garhwal, the origins of such customary rebellions stem from a perceived breach of covenant between ruler and ruled.<sup>5</sup> In Mohanpur, the particular breach revolved around the Patel's violation of the cosmological and political limits of power, and the rebellion brought about a change to the distribution of power. By analysing the situation that led to this rebellion, this article contributes to the wider ethnographic literature on the transformation of traditional authority.<sup>6</sup>

It is significant that the existence of traditional authority in Mohanpur required the state for both its legitimacy and its transformation, and a second objective of this article is to illuminate the processes by which the state is experienced by local people (cf. Gupta 1995: 390). Recent anthropological literature has commented on the relative lack of attention to the state in ethnographic work (Brass 1997; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Gupta 1995). While this article does not claim to be an ethnographic study of the state, it does offer a sense of the relationship that local people have to lower-level state officials. Commonly, villagers have little regular interaction with state personnel – such as the *tendu* committee officials, the *patwari* (land records official), and the police – which has not been mediated by or filtered through the authority of the Patel. As the ethnography will illustrate, far from being a 'neutral arbiter of public interest' (Fuller and Harriss 2001: 3), the state has thus served as an effective tool to buttress the traditional authority of the Patel.

Notwithstanding this scenario, the article sets out to examine the way in which an existing state structure (represented here by the *tendu* committee), with the assistance of a powerful external authority (in the guise of the RSS), was actually utilised to *challenge* the Patel's traditional base of authority. As such, this paper contributes to the growing body of ethnographic literature on how the state-system is used to the advantage of local people (see Lerche 1995). It further suggests that the state is not a discrete entity acting outside the society, but is available to local people as a representative tool which can be used to enforce basic citizen's rights (see Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Gupta 1995; Spencer 1997).

The final observation brought out in this article addresses the significant fact that the powerful 'external authority' happens to be the RSS, the most visible 'face' of Hindu nationalism in this part of Chhattisgarh. Mitigating the 'backwardness' of tribal people is one of the objectives that has recently figured in the agenda of the RSS. While scholarly analysis of the origins and current manifestations of the Hindu Nationalist movement is vast (see, for example, Basu *et al.* 1993; Jaffrelot 1993; Khilnani 1997; Nandy *et al.* 1995; van der Veer 1994), the available material fails to outline the precise manner by which Hindu nationalism is being introduced into non-urban, 'backward' areas. With few exceptions (notably Hocking 1996; see also Froerer 2002), existing documentation typically restricts itself to the 'social upliftment' strategies being employed by the Sangh Parivar amongst *adivasis* (see Hansen 1999: 103-06; van der Veer 1994: 135-36). This article thus aims to shed light on at least one way in which Hindu nationalism is making inroads into this particular *adivasi* community, and to address the larger implications of this.

## I

### *Geographical and social setting*

This article draws on research that was carried out between 1997-1999 in Mohanpur, a village of roughly 900 located in one of the more densely forested districts of Chhattisgarh. At the time of my fieldwork, Chhattisgarh made up the eastern and south-eastern region of Madhya Pradesh. It became a state in November 2000, and currently boasts a population of nearly 21 million, three-quarters of whom dwell in rural areas (Chaudhuri 2001: 86).

Today, 44 percent of the state's total land area is covered in forest, and timber accounts for around 40 percent of the state's total forest revenue. More than 70 percent of India's total production of *tendu* leaves, which are used to make the *bidi* cigarettes, come from the Chhattisgarh forests (ibid.: 86-88). Both the timber and the *tendu* industries, along with the collection and sale of minor forest produce such as *mahua* (used in the production of liquor), *sal* (extracted as a cooking oil) and *lac* (used to make bangles), serve to supplement the incomes of the majority of the state's five million *adivasi* people who are concentrated throughout the forested areas.<sup>7</sup>

Like many *adivasi* communities in this part of India, Mohanpur is geographically cut off from the urban 'mainstream' due to thick jungle and inaccessible roads. The 40 km distance to the nearest city and district headquarters is thought by local people to be quite far. Most villagers, who earn their livelihoods through a combination of rice-cultivation and the collection and sale of non-timber forest products, have never made the five-hour journey into the city. Due to the lack of electricity, there is little regular access to 'popular' Indian or Hindu culture *via*

television and other media. This relative geographical and cultural distance from the Hindu 'mainstream' contributes to the general 'backwardness' of the village and surrounding area.

The village, with a population of 893 spread across 165 households, is three-quarters Hindu and one-quarter Christian.<sup>8</sup> The Hindus are divided into three *adivasi* groups, including the Ratiya Kanwar, the Majhwar, and the Dudh Kanwar, and four non-*adivasi* groups, namely the Yadav, Panika, Chohan and Chowk/Lohar;<sup>9</sup> the Christians are all Oraon *adivasis*. All local people speak Chetri, a dialect of Chhattisgarhi, although the Oraons speak Kurukh amongst themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The local caste hierarchy, which follows the same order listed above, is visible in terms of rules of commensality.<sup>11</sup> The four high castes (Ratiya Kanwar, Majhwar, and Dudh Kanwar, along with the Yadav) indulge in the 'symmetrical exchange' of food and drink (see Parry 1979: 97). None of these castes takes food from any village 'low castes' (Panika, Chohan, Chowk/Lohar), however, although all low castes can take food from high castes. Moreover, no Hindu castes will take food from the Christian Oraons. With respect to the public expression of relations between specific caste communities (*samaj*), such prescriptions are 'founded on an ideology of pollution' (ibid.: 101), and strictly enforced and respected by the caste communities as a whole. Amongst individuals, however, such rules are liberally but quietly broken, with high castes frequently sharing meals and drink with their low caste friends.

There is a great deal of ritual and economic interdependence between the Hindu castes. For example, members of the Ratiya Kanwar high-caste are responsible for officiating at all ritual events, whereas lower castes are responsible for the polluting jobs of playing the leather drums (Chohan) or cleaning up after the ritual (Panika). In traditional occupational fashion, members of the Yadav caste take care of cattle-herding; the Chohan families are responsible for goat herding; and the Chowk/Lohar caste see to the blacksmith needs of the village (see Singh 1993).

In contrast to the situation within the Hindu community, there is a relative absence of ritual and economic interdependence between the Hindus and the Christian Oraons. The latter as a whole serve no specific ritual or economic role for the former, although individual exceptions include the sole Oraon woman who is occasionally called by Ratiya Kanwar households to assist in the birth of a child, and those members of the Oraon community who sell alcohol and act as moneylenders to the Hindus. Both communities occasionally participate in communal labour activities sponsored by the other, however, and all castes attend each others' marriage and funeral celebrations.

It is important to note that, while implicating the lives of all local people, the issues brought out in this article largely reflect the dominance and perspective of the Ratiya Kanwars. As will become clear, reasons for this revolve around the fact that it is the Ratiya Kanwar who have historically controlled and continue to dictate most ritual and political affairs of local concern.<sup>12</sup>

The local dominance of this caste is largely due to a combination of high-caste rank, 'first settler' status and landownership.<sup>13</sup> They have resided in this area 'for nine or ten generations' and comprise nearly half of the village population. The rest of the Hindu castes migrated to the area between two and four generations ago, 'in search of

land and work'. The Oraons, all Catholics, arrived in the area from a neighbouring district one generation ago and are presently the second largest caste in the village. They, like their predecessors, came in search of land, and were given permission by the Ratiya Kanwars to settle in the area.

As the founding group, the Ratiya Kanwars have superior rights to the land in comparison to later immigrants. Moreover, leading members of the village council (*panchayat*) are all Ratiya Kanwar and most villages in the surrounding area have Ratiya Kanwar men as both their political and spiritual heads. Locally, the village headman (the Patel) and priest (the Baiga), along with leading elders and other members of the village council, traditionally and currently come from this caste.

The political and economic status enjoyed by the Ratiya Kanwars is augmented by the divine legitimacy that they derive from local deities, all of whom have their own distinctive identities, indicated by names and roles, or the space and territory in which they reside. These include the house and village deities, along with the jungle deities that belong to the land and subsist off whichever human community happens to live in their vicinity. The latter both control the area surrounding their sacred space or *debras*, and own the agricultural yields and forest produce that are harvested from these areas. If humans trespass into or take any produce from their territory without permission, or if they disturb the resident deity outside of designated 'safe' times, then they risk the deity's revenge, which can result in crop failure, serious illness, or even death.

The majority of these beings are the ritual responsibility of the Ratiya Kanwars who, as the owners of most of the land on which the deities have their *debras*, have special mediation powers and obligations, and refer to themselves as the *dev ki adhikari*, the deities' patrons or servants.<sup>14</sup> Carrying out the ritual and physical obligations that accompany the title of *adhikari* is a mixed blessing. While ritual and social status are high, possible harmful consequences are also great. If the *adhikari* fails to perform a mandatory village ritual, the costs for which he alone must bear, then his family is held responsible and will be inflicted with the wrath of the resident deity.

While the dominance of the Ratiya Kanwars is connected to the tradition and status that comes from being the 'sons of the soil' (Weiner 1978), it has more recently been reinforced by the growing influence of members of its younger, more educated generation. Amongst this younger generation is a group of seven young men who are all married and in their twenties or thirties. Landed and literate, these young men enjoy immense respect from both village elders and the lay public alike. Raj, the RSS activist who lives in the city, along with his two brothers – a local shopkeeper and the village 'doctor' – act as the unofficial leaders of this younger generation of Ratiya Kanwars, and consequently the Hindu community as a whole. The occupational interests of these men regularly take them outside of the village where, accompanied by other members of the group, they interact with people from other villages and the city. Tales of their excursions are looked upon as exciting, if not exotic, by the majority of local people, whose own forays outside of the village do not normally extend beyond the 15 or 20 km range within which their affines reside. The group's access to the outside world has conferred upon them a type of social status which, when combined with their position as members of the most dominant local caste, makes them very influential.

Another factor that contributes to the influence of this younger generation of Ratiya Kanwars is the access and affiliation that this group has to the RSS. It is this group that regularly attends the training meetings conducted locally on a weekly or fortnightly basis by the RSS, led by Raj or one of the other visiting RSS cadres.<sup>15</sup> Members of the group also assist the RSS in other activities (such as organising a local celebration to mark International Women's Day), and some are occasionally taken to spend time with Raj in the RSS-sponsored ashram in the city. This group is, in part, the vehicle responsible for facilitating the local 'inclusion strategies' being implemented by the RSS (cf. Froerer 2002). The manner by which they act as the instrumental 'bridge' (Bailey 1963: 251) between the lay village public and the RSS will be taken up later.

## II

### *The Ratiya Kanwars and divine authority*

The origins of Ratiya Kanwar and, by extension, the Patel's authority revolve around a particular narrative which dates back to the arrival of the first Ratiya Kanwar ancestor and continues to constitute relations of political and ritual dominance (see Gilsenan 1996: xii). The story goes that shortly after the first two Ratiya Kanwar families arrived in this area and began working the land at the base of a small mountain, a senior male family member suddenly died. The nervous survivors decided to request special protection from their ancestor deities in the form of a blood sacrifice. As the sacred drum (*nissan*) announced the start of the *puja*, a powerful local deity suddenly descended upon and possessed Moharsai, the senior-most family member and the primary ancestor through whom all local Ratiya Kanwars trace their lineage. This deity immediately announced that he was the 'Big God' (*bara dev*), Kaleshar: the god of all deities (*dev ka mukhia*), whose power exceeded that of even the most powerful village deity, Thakurdev.<sup>16</sup> He revealed that he was angry because the Ratiya Kanwars had trespassed onto his grounds and cultivated within his territory without requesting permission. In return for this transgression, he had taken the life of their male relative. Now that he had got his revenge, he had come to inform the surviving Ratiya Kanwars that he and his entourage of junior deities and demons who assisted him in ruling over the area were in need of them for their survival. It had been some time since any humans had inhabited the area, and it was from humans that their sustenance in the form of ritual offerings came.<sup>17</sup> Kaleshar offered protection to the community if the Ratiya Kanwars agreed to remain in the area. In return, he requested that they shift away from this particular place near the mountain, and that they sacrifice a buffalo to him every twenty years.

The mountain range that surrounds Kaleshar's *devras*, which is reportedly rich with a variety of forest produce and game, is off-limits to people except during ritual occasions. Although this applies specifically to the area around Kaleshar's *devras*, the general rule of respect for the forest extends to the land surrounding the entire village, for the whole area is said to be Kaleshar's territory, carefully looked after by him and his demon sentinels. Stories of past illnesses and deaths attributed to knowingly or unknowingly invoking the Big God's wrath by ignoring these rules were frequently narrated to me by local people.

Villagers fear this deity more than any other supernatural being, although he can be a very generous god if his rules are observed and regular propitiation takes place. Indeed, his powers seem to be infinite: 'anything is possible', I was often told by

my informants, if you have Kaleshar on your side. This extends to non-Mohanpur residents as well, as exemplified when a candidate for the 1999 state legislature came to the village canvassing for votes. He happened to be a member of the Ratiya Kanwar caste from another village, and one of the local elders informed him that he would receive more votes if he pledged a goat offering to Kaleshar.

In addition to being the primary divine source of dominance for the Ratiya Kanwars as a whole, it is this particular deity from whom the person who approximates the figure of the king, the Patel, a hereditary life post passed down to the eldest son, receives divine authority to rule over his subjects.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between the headman and Kaleshar was cemented when Kaleshar first introduced himself to the Ratiya Kanwars and possessed the clan leader, Moharsai. Every village headman since then has, by virtue of occupying the post, been delegated the task of being Kaleshar's 'representative on earth' (Fuller 1992: 106).

It has long been argued that public rituals are the most prevalent way in which authority is legitimated in traditional societies (see Bloch 1989; Kertzer 1988: 37; Leach 1954: 15), and the authority of the person who holds the post of Patel is most elaborately manifested during two such rituals: the annual Gaura festival, which is a public celebration of the marriage between Mahadev (Shiva) and Gauri Rani (Parvati); and the twenty-year buffalo sacrifice called *Mahaseva*, which enacts and re-validates the historical agreement between Kaleshar and the village founding father, Moharsai. As long as the ruling headman looks after Kaleshar's upkeep in ordinary and twenty-year pujas and ensures that his *devras* is respected, then the ruling deity will continue to give legitimacy to the Patel and protection to his village.<sup>19</sup> It is at these two rituals that the acting Patel is transformed, through possession, into his supernatural counterpart, Kaleshar;<sup>20</sup> and it is here, when Kaleshar begins to speak through him, issuing warnings, making demands, or simply reaffirming past promises, that the Patel's authority and position in the eyes of the public as ruler of the village appears to be completely validated.

### III

#### *The Patel and traditional authority*

While all headmen have been accorded an important association with this deity, the current Patel has enjoyed a more privileged relationship with Kaleshar than any headman before him. He was directly chosen by Kaleshar for the post when he was first possessed by the Big God as a young boy of twelve during a major public ritual, a mark of honour and indication that he was somehow special. This tribute was even more significant because he was not actually in line to inherit the position of village headman; his paternal uncle was the acting Patel at the time, and the position should rightfully have gone to this man's son, Babulal. But because Babulal was a toddler at the time of his father's premature death, the reins passed to his older cousin, the current Patel. Two Gandhel elders who had witnessed the Patel's childhood possession told me that the moment Kaleshar descended on him they knew that one day he would become Patel – in spite of the fact that it wasn't meant to happen in the hereditary

scheme of things. His elevation to the office some two decades later was seen as a sort of product of divine desire.

Because the current Patel's access to and legitimacy from Kaleshar dates back to this childhood possession, his authority is superior to that of previous village headmen. Indeed, he seems to have used his connection to Kaleshar to advance his agenda and facilitate acceptance of his decisions. One such occasion occurred halfway through my fieldwork when the then Baiga, the village priest, died after a short illness and a new one had to be installed in his place. Like the position of Patel, this is a hereditary office and should have rightfully gone to the eldest son of the deceased Baiga. But the Patel had a dream in which Kaleshar appeared and told him that the deceased Baiga's brother (a man considered by his own family to be weak in character and therefore easily controlled by the Patel), and not his son, should take over the ritual reins.

This dream should have been sufficient to legitimise the Patel's choice of Baiga, for dreams, along with possession, are considered to be one of the primary media for acquiring divine knowledge and receiving divine affirmation.<sup>21</sup> But there was still a great deal of dissent over the decision, particularly from the deceased Baiga's own family. The eldest son and rightful heir to the priestly throne was no ally of the Patel, having come into conflict with him in the past over a land dispute. The family's outrage spilled over into the rest of the village, and there was talk of boycotting the Patel's choice. Dissent finally subsided when the public puja to formally install the new Baiga was held. This was when Kaleshar made a surprise visit and immediately possessed the Patel, reaffirming his choice of Baiga and sending a message to the public that the Patel was, through his legitimising supernatural authority, in charge, and that his choice was divinely validated.

As is evident, this particular Patel's power is 'locked into beliefs about the derivation and maintenance of that power' (Obeyesekere 1992: 161). His power is as much related to divine authority, indicated by Kaleshar's choice, as it is to people's beliefs about and acknowledgement of that authority. All elders, including those who are much the Patel's senior, agreed that the knowledge the Patel receives through dreams and possession, from Kaleshar as well as from other local deities and ancestor spirits, far exceeded that of others in the village.

The Patel sometimes flaunts his superiority, as when he claims that the reason he is in control of major rituals such as the annual Gaura festival is because he is the 'only one who understands everything' and who is capable of physically and ritually guiding the proceedings. He extends this superiority over both the deceased and present village Baiga, for whom rituals and the worship of village deities are supposed to be a 'special province' (Babb 1975: 199). The Patel's regular interference (by, for example, dictating the time and sequence of the ritual) in what was rightfully the (now deceased) Baiga's domain caused a great deal of animosity between them. And the current Baiga confessed to me more than once his reservations about his ability to carry out his priestly duties. Indeed, during my time in the village, he consulted the Patel for virtually every ritual occasion that required his leadership – not only for the requisite permission to hold the ritual at a particular time, but also for vital instruction on its performance.

In short, under the auspices of divine legitimation, the Patel regularly interfered with the duties of the now-deceased Baiga. And against tradition, the Patel personally chose and installed the current Baiga, for the purpose, according to public opinion, of appropriating the Baiga's spiritual authority and controlling him. In spite of the fact that the Patel's choice was publicly legitimised by Kaleshar, there was a sense of outrage that the rights of the traditional heir to the spiritual throne had been usurped by the Patel's intervention.

#### IV

##### *The Patel and secular authority*

The Patel's power is further buttressed by his political power and juridical authority, which are both nearly absolute. It is he, and not the elected leader of the village council who officiated at local council meetings; it is to him, privately or publicly, that villagers turned for the airing and settlement of local disputes; and it is his word and decisions which were final on these disputes. The Patel, in other words, is in possession of the local 'capital of authority' (Bourdieu 1977: 40) which enables him to dictate, determine and define the parameters of his power.

It is unusual for a single caste to be in effective control of a village, much less to have a scenario whereby this kind of authority exists in such an all-encompassing form and is possessed by a single individual (cf. Mendelsohn 1993: 810-11). Typically, the power of a village headman is diffused and authority is shared between a group of 'big men' who normally come from the dominant caste or a group of high castes, and sit on the village council, the *panchayat* (cf. Mayer 1960). In recent decades, the old village council has been replaced with a state-administered system of self-government (*gram sabha*).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in other neighbouring villages it is the head of this body (*sarpanch*) who has greater power. In an action 'combining the modern as well as the old order' (Mendelsohn 1993: 827), some traditional village headmen might become elected sarpanch and retain a dominant and official voice in juridical matters. In Mohanpur, although the current Patel himself has never been elected, his authority nonetheless surpasses that of the local *sarpanch*.

The Patel's relative economic prosperity and visible material wealth also serves to reaffirm his political and ritual legitimacy. He owns the largest and most fertile tracts of agricultural land and claims the choicest sections of forestland. With the exception of one other Gandhel landowner, no other villager yields a surplus of agricultural or forest produce on the same scale as the Patel. Most locals, to the contrary, fall short of their basic subsistence needs and have to supplement their yields with other income-generating activities, or go into occasional debt by mortgaging their land or livestock. The Patel's landed and harvested wealth contributes to the accumulation of other assets, including a large amount of livestock and a recently acquired diesel-powered threshing machine. Likewise, his income from legitimate agricultural and forest resources has been augmented by more nefarious activities, such as the pilfering of *tendu* bonuses. Finally, he allegedly pockets the fines intended for the village coffers and imposed by the village council upon individuals who indulge in various forms of social misconduct.

The Patel's connection to persons who hold external power, namely local-level state officials, not only impairs the access but also sometimes controls the relationship that other members of the local community have with these authorities (Mendelsohn 1993: 832). A good illustration of this is the relationship that the Patel has with the Patwari, a government-appointed official in charge of the land records of eight or nine local-area villages. Although he has an 'office' in a village some 15 km away, due to time and distance-related constraints, local people generally meet the Patwari when he makes one of his twice-yearly visits to the village and sets up a temporary office in the home of the Patel for two or three days. This arrangement, an example of the 'blurred boundaries' between the state and society discussed by Gupta (1995), allows the Patel to have privileged access to the Patwari and to control the access that local people have to him. Ordinary people, in other words, have little opportunity to meet the Patwari in a context outside the purview of the Patel.

Moreover, the official fees for the Patwari's services are very nominal, but he commonly demands extra 'fees', or bribes, for performing any of the routine duties for which he is given a salary by the government. Such bribes are enforced by and shared with the Patel, the only other person who is aware of the exact nature of local village landholdings. This knowledge allows the Patel to impose his own threats against local people, many of whom are ignorant about the extent of their own landholdings. The authority that the Patel gains from access to such officials is both real and symbolic. In one instance he successfully demanded that the Patwari *not* change a particular name on a land record. This helped to reinforce villagers' assumptions that he could (and would) use such power in the future.

The Patel's local authority has been further legitimised by power emanating from outside the village, namely local-level state officials. It is the Patel with whom other outside authorities like the District Collector and the police make their primary contact when they have official business in the village. For example, pension payments and school scholarships are issued by District officials to the Patel, who is known to charge the rightful recipient an 'issuing fee' for their distribution. Subsidised rice allotted through the free school-lunch programme is also distributed to and controlled by the Patel, who keeps the inevitable surplus for himself. And the Patel has final decision-making powers over the appointment of local government-salaried positions, such as the forest guard assistant, the *anganwadi* (nursery teacher), and the school teacher. Currently, the former two posts are held by his son and daughter-in-law, respectively, and the school teacher had to pay a 'fee' of Rs 10,000 to the Patel for her appointment.

The Patel is also informed of people who are under suspicion for a particular crime, and if the incident is not taken care of (through payment of a bribe) through the auspices of the Patel, then the individual is summoned to the local police station (*thana*) twenty kilometres away. One incident during my fieldwork concerned three local men who were accused of provoking the suicide of another local man. The Patel talked to the police on their behalf and the three were let off after paying Rs 500 each to the police and Rs 100 to the Patel.

Finally, as a Congress Party supporter, the Patel hosts visiting MLA candidates and is normally the main recipient of bribes from such people. He is also responsible for delivering local votes to the Congress Party candidates, and he is known to use his

knowledge and connections to the Patwari to manipulate the outcome of local elections by threatening villagers that he would take away their land if the proper candidate didn't win. Again, the fact that he didn't have the legal power to do so didn't matter to local people; merely believing that he could was enough to sway their vote.

The bribes and relationships in which the Patel engages are nothing unique to this area; they are part of a wider 'system of corruption' described by Gupta (1995) in which local superiors are also implicated. Lower-level officials like the Patwari are indeed only one link in a chain of corrupt practices that extends beyond the apex of state organizations and revolves, as we saw with the example of the MLA candidate, Nankiram, around electoral politics (ibid.: 384).

In short, while such dominance at the village level may, as Mendelsohn (1993: 833) argues, have waned in other parts of India, the Patel's traditional authority has been buttressed not only by his economic wealth, but by his control over the local panchayat, by his juridical power, and by authority figures and power emanating from the state. Ordinary people's experience of and access to the latter has been dictated by the Patel to such an extent that, in some ways, the state is subordinated to the Patel (see Mendelsohn 1993).<sup>23</sup>

It is not without good reason, then, that both supporters and detractors refer to the Patel in private as *Raja*, the king. On the one hand, they respect him because he is the village headman, whose continuing legitimacy, displayed by his ritual, political and economic dominance, is supported by the ruling deity. Whenever anyone is summoned to come before him (myself included), they drop whatever work they are doing and rush off immediately, out of fear and deference for their leader. But they also despise him. He is known to be a corrupt, selfish man who has a 'bad character' and misbehaves with people. Villagers' fear of the Patel's short temper and strong fist is illustrated in the many stories about how he beats people who try to cross him. Their fear also translates into a relationship of dependence for, as one of the wealthiest men in the village, the Patel is in a position to threaten, help or withhold vital material resources from villagers in need.

Given such an unusual situation whereby authority was concentrated in one individual, it puzzled me for a long while why people continued to publicly support the Patel. I knew that the majority of them, including members of his own family, feared and loathed him, and although his access to powerful external people could help to explain some of his invulnerability, certainly there were enough villagers to get a faction together and challenge some of his decisions.

As Pardo argues (2000: 6-7), conceptions of legitimacy do not have a separate existence isolated from other social processes: they are culturally constructed, and contextually significant. The local context in which the Patel continued to enjoy support and legitimacy – even when he was indulging in bad or corrupt behaviour – was through his access to and continuing approval from the most powerful cosmological authority. Very simply, people did not dare cross the Patel because of the legitimacy he received from Kaleshar. And Kaleshar's continued approval of the Patel's behaviour was evidenced by the latter's unremitting local power, his external connections and increasing wealth. In short, and notwithstanding his far-reaching sources of external authority, it is the authority that the Patel receives from Kaleshar's

divine legitimacy that remains primary here. As Kaleshar is leader of the deities, I was told, so the Patel is leader of the people; they are 'as one'.

The Patel's connection with Kaleshar is a manifestation of something that has always existed, and has a continuity that will extend beyond the current Patel and is vested in the position itself (cf. Bloch 1989: 66-80). He occupies a post which links him with the historical reign of previous local kings and therefore directly to the founding father himself. In this respect, the hereditary position of the Patel is a classic example of Weber's traditional authority, where leaders are designated by traditional rules and status (1978 [1922]: 226). The rules in this particular case are in the form of a three-tiered hierarchy of authority in which the Patel is the pivotal factor: Kaleshar rules over the people, by giving authority to the Patel; and the people show respect for Kaleshar, by giving obedience to the Patel.

The current Patel's authority goes beyond the continuity vested in the position itself, however, for having been chosen to ascend to the local throne by Kaleshar, he enjoys a degree of power which sets him apart from individuals who occupied the post before him. The Patel's traditional authority, augmented by the divinely-ordained charismatic authority bestowed upon him when he was a boy, thus appears to be doubly omnipotent: villagers are obligated to him not only because he is the person who happens to hold the office of traditional leader, but because the primary legitimating authority personally appointed him, as a child, to that very office. It is the combination of these two forms of authority, inextricably linked to the Patel's proximity to Kaleshar, that has allowed him the unusual dominance he has enjoyed since he ascended to the throne over two decades ago. And the power that derives from his position as Patel has been augmented by the secular power that emanates from outside of the village.

So what happened to the Patel's hold on the 'capital of authority'? How could one so powerful, whose actions were regularly vindicated by the support of his supernatural benefactor – the only other being that people feared more than the Patel himself – have suddenly been dismissed from managing the most lucrative post in the village?

What is important here is that the Patel's primary source of local legitimacy is not, to quote Leach (1983: 76), a remote god, whose authority is off-limits to all but himself, who happens to be the traditional chief-priest of the village. At one level, there is nothing remote at all about Kaleshar or any other local deity who regularly interferes in the lives of their human subjects through illness, dreams, and possession. The fact that members of the local ruling caste are descendants of the same founding father and original link to Kaleshar means that they all have some hereditary connection with, and therefore access to, the latter's divine power. The dominant tradition, in other words, possessed a certain openness that allowed for resistance (see Guha 1989: 98). The Patel's assertion that he was the only one who had the authority to act on behalf of the divine – that he was the primary vessel in whom Kaleshar had vested all ritual knowledge – indicated that he did not believe that others in his caste also had access to this same authority. And while the Patel's proximity to divine authority gave him a monopoly over status and power, it was precisely this same proximity that made him vulnerable to those who also claimed access to the divine.

In our three-tiered hierarchy of authority, the Patel in the middle could not maintain his traditional authority over the people below without the assumption of sole legitimacy from above. And while the Patel has enjoyed privileged access to this divine legitimacy, he is worthy of obedience from the people only if, as Weber (1978 1922]: 226) says, he observes the traditional limits of power, or obeys the ‘customary rules’ preserved by the historical tradition (Bourdieu 1977: 16). Moreover, since the Patel ascended to the throne from two avenues of authority, he is obligated to remain within the boundaries of both. This means that if he either steps beyond the limits of his traditional authority, or if he fails to aid his subjects and appears to be deserted by the source of his divine authority, then his divinity will be fractured (Sundar 1997: 85), legitimacy will be withdrawn and, in the classic formulation of Gluckman (1955, 1963), customary rebellion will be allowed to take place.

## V

### *The challenge to traditional authority*

This is precisely what happened, as signified by the Patel being dismissed from his duties as *munshi* in the manner described at the beginning of this paper. The trouble began with the illness of Durga, the Patel’s daughter-in-law and mother of his only grandsons. Early on in my fieldwork, Durga suffered from an infected lesion, the latest in a six-week spell of bad health, which had begun with the onset of minor aches and culminated in a ten-day period of high fever and delirium. My naive suggestion to the Patel that perhaps his daughter-in-law should see a doctor was met with the response that the infection was not a case of simple illness, treatable by doctors and injections, but was supernatural, caused by her husband’s (the Patel’s eldest son) neglect in propitiating Kaleshar during a minor house puja. In revenge, Kaleshar had become angry and threatened to take Durga’s life. Only the combined divination efforts of local healers and the promise of an offering of nine goats had saved her from certain death.

The Patel’s explanation was common enough, as far as local beliefs about disease go. Indeed, the majority of supernaturally-caused illnesses are due to minor infractions such as trespassing onto sacred grounds, or neglecting deities during puja, as in Durga’s case. For such transgressions, the promise of a coconut and one or two fowls or, at most, a single goat, will usually suffice to make amends with the affronted deity. But in Durga’s case, Kaleshar would not relent until he had extracted a promise of an extraordinary number of blood offerings, the likes of which are reserved for an annual festival like Gaura wherein all families share the cost. Strange, I thought, that such a demand was made for a relatively minor infraction.

Months later, long after Durga had recovered, I was told the ‘real’ version of her illness by a man named Prakash, the Patel’s first-cousin and close ally. This is a man whom some consider to be second in power and authority in the village, but whose affinity for alcohol sometimes diminishes this respect. Durga’s illness was indeed caused by the vengeful Kaleshar, I was told, but not for a minor propitiatory neglect. Kaleshar was angry with the Patel himself, for his bad ways and disrespect for the villagers and the surrounding forestland – Kaleshar’s land. As punishment and

warning to the Patel to mend his ways, Kaleshar had made Durga, a valued daughter-in-law, gravely ill.

Prakash's 'real reason' was revealed to the healers who attended to Durga during the divination ritual that saved her life. The healers, all respected elders in the village, didn't tell the Patel about Kaleshar's true revelations because they feared punishment for what would certainly be interpreted as insubordination. The Patel couldn't possibly be told that his benefactor was angry with him; for he and Kaleshar were as one. In any case, one healer told me, the Patel would hardly believe them, for Kaleshar doesn't ordinarily appear to healers.

According to Prakash, whom the healers did tell, Kaleshar was referring specifically to the Patel's practice of pocketing the *tendu* bonuses. Recall that *tendu* leaf collection, along with legal ownership of agricultural and forestland, is locally understood to be (and is in fact) an 'intermediate' zone of authority that falls rightfully within the operating sphere of government-appointed officials, such as the Patwari or the *tendu* committee (cf. Guha 1989: 91). This zone is, in other words, technically off-limits to the specific form of ritual authority held and claimed by the Patel, I was told by several different individuals, including my friend Pradeep (Prakash's nephew), Sanjay (another relation of the Patel) and Naka Sahab (the local forest guard), unless there is a genuine case of overlap, such as if someone wishes to cultivate in Kaleshar's grounds. But stealing peoples' bonuses, or threatening them with land seizure if they don't vote for the proper candidate, is clearly not within his zone of authority and is, moreover, considered to be morally wrong.

And this is precisely where the Patel overstepped his boundaries and exploited his position and the legitimising force behind it. He shouldn't have used his connections to Kaleshar for his own corrupt purposes, I was told; he shouldn't even be interfering in what is rightfully the Baiga's realm, Prakash further complained, referring to the appointment of the new Baiga several months earlier. And he definitely shouldn't use Kaleshar to extend his authority over people with respect to land and forest-related issues. When I asked if the Patel actually used Kaleshar's name in making these threats, I was told that he didn't. But he didn't have to use Kaleshar's name, because they are 'as one' (*anuser*). He doesn't have to use the name, in other words, because the authority behind his position, and the tradition behind that authority, are enough to instill fear and compliance into people. Traditional authority, symbolically manifested in the relationship between the Patel and Kaleshar, and visibly displayed in the Patel's continuing local power and economic wealth, thus appeared to be unchallengeable.

Nothing was immediately done after the healers got the first sign that all was not right between Kaleshar and the 'king' until over a year after Durga had recovered and people were preparing for the new *tendu* season, as described in the beginning of this article. It was only then that Prakash, the Patel's ostensible supporter, suddenly had a dream. Recall that dreams are second only to possession as a powerful medium of communication between humans and the divine. In this dream, according to Prakash, Kaleshar appeared and told him that the Patel must be removed from his job as *munshi* and replaced by someone else. Otherwise, something terrible would happen. This dream, combined with Durga's near-death a year earlier, convinced Prakash that this nocturnal warning should be taken seriously.

After having the dream, Prakash went privately to other Ratiya Kanwar elders and informed them of this latest warning. Together, they decided that to ensure against the threat of misfortune, Kaleshar's demands must be actualised: the Patel must be removed from his *munshi* responsibilities. Normally, issues such as these that ultimately affect the whole community would be discussed in the context of a village *panchayat* meeting. But, because the Patel controlled the *panchayat*, instead of calling a meeting, Prakash and his supporters – all members of the ruling Ratiya Kanwar caste – went to Raj, his RSS cohorts and the group of seven young men mentioned earlier in the article. Recall that this group was becoming increasingly influential, due to its social status and its connections to a powerful external authority, the RSS. This group was told about Kaleshar's demands and consulted about who should become the new *munshi*. It was decided that one of them, a thirty-year-old classificatory nephew of the Patel and Prakash, should fill the post. Once this decision was made, the group of young men, led by Raj, went without the elders and filed an official complaint with the local *tendu* committee, who returned to the village and stripped the Patel of his *munshi* duties.

Which brings us back to the beginning of the article, to the story of the Patel's dismissal. Everyone seemed pleased with the Patel's removal, although they would only talk of the matter in confidence. Fear of the Patel stretched wide, for he had only been dismissed from the position of *munshi*, not from the office of Patel itself. Even the new *munshi* admitted to me that he was extremely hesitant in agreeing to take on the responsibilities; the Patel was his uncle, after all, and there was still a possibility of retribution. He only took on the job after the relentless assurances he received from Prakash that this was what Kaleshar wanted. In spite of this, he took special precautions and purchased a new amulet for protection; and he was convinced that the Patel had something to do with the fever that struck him shortly after the *tendu* season got underway.

Many of the older boys and young men who usually acted as the *munshi*'s assistants (*chaprasi*) throughout the season also refused to help this year, or were prohibited from helping by their parents because of the potential retribution from the Patel. And the two village criers, respected elders and healers, refused to go around the village and announce the arrival of the season, due to threats from the Patel. The latter even ordered the Baiga not to perform the traditional pre-season *puja*, which ensures that everything goes without mishap. Instead, an impromptu *puja* was performed by Raj and other members of the group of seven young men. Finally, on the day the season began, when everyone traditionally picks the most leaves and earns the most money, the Patel's entire family boycotted the collection. When I went around to some of his extended family members and enquired why they hadn't gone out to pick leaves, they said glumly that they couldn't go against the orders of their family head, for fear that he would get angry. Others in the village pointed out that the family was foolish, for they had lost a good day's earnings.

The Patel apparently never knew that the 'real' reason behind his dismissal was Kaleshar's disapproval of his behaviour, nor did he know that Prakash had orchestrated the affair. At least the Patel didn't let on that he knew; for it was handled under the cloak of officialdom by the *tendu* committee members, who told him only that a complaint had been filed by Raj and the seven young men. When I asked him why he

thought he was dismissed, he said that people in the village had become jealous, and vowed to return as *munshi* the following year.

But the Patel's knowledge of Kaleshar's alleged disapproval is not what is important here. The importance lies in what Kaleshar's appearance at Durga's healing ritual and his nocturnal order for dismissal a year later signified to Prakash and others. And what it signified was that divine legitimacy had been withdrawn from the Patel and bestowed upon Prakash, who used it to remove the Patel from his lucrative position as *munshi*.<sup>24</sup>

In the same way that new political systems borrow legitimacy from the old by claiming old ritual symbols and redirecting them to their own purpose (Kertzer 1988: 43-47; see also Sundar 1997: 97), once Prakash received Kaleshar's authority, he and others used it as a legitimising tool to replace the very person whom it had traditionally supported: the Patel. Loss of authority, manifested in his right to act as *munshi*, was thus the consequence that the Patel paid for overstepping his legitimate boundaries of power.

## VI

### *Some unanswered questions: Traditional authority, the state and the RSS*

It will be helpful at this stage to draw this whole story together by addressing some of the more critical issues that remain unresolved. First, the Patel had been considered to be corrupt for years. Why had he only now been held accountable? The most obvious answer to this question comes from the villagers themselves, and that is that people were simply afraid to challenge the Patel beforehand because of his connection to the most powerful legitimising authority, Kaleshar. The Patel's legitimacy, which derived from a dual source of traditional office and divine choice, more or less made him invulnerable to local opposition.

Additionally, recall that the Patel had connections to sources of power that emanated from outside of the village, such as the police, the Patwari, and the Congress Party. While these latter sources certainly contributed to the Patel's political invulnerability, it has been suggested that the Patel would not have had access to such power had he not had the divine support from Kaleshar in the first place. Divine legitimacy was thus pre-eminent: the Patel's secular and economic power was dependent on his ritual authority. And while people were unhappy for years with the Patel's conduct, no strategies against the Patel could be effectively actualised until people were assured that they would not be punished by Kaleshar.

It is interesting that, in line with Prakash's narrative, no action was taken – nor indeed could be taken – before permission was granted (or the order given) by Kaleshar. However, this is not unusual. Bourdieu (1977: 22) observes that in social settings in which political authority is relatively uninstitutionalised, political strategies for mobilisation can be effective only if they are presented in the guise of the values and customary rules which the group recognises (cf. Brow 1998). Locally, such rules revolved around the diktats of Kaleshar, which were traditionally carried out through

the customary authority of the Patel. Only when this authority was transferred to Prakash at the time of his dream, was he in a position to act. He did so by convincing the elders that his dream (and before it, Durga's illness) was in line with the 'customary rules' that demanded respect to Kaleshar. He won the group over to his side and instigated a successful challenge against the Patel by upholding the existing order and honouring the values that the group honours: the most important being obedience to the 'big god'.

This raises the question of Prakash's motives in initiating the process that led to the Patel's removal in the first place. Because he himself was not a contender for power against an established authority who sought the position for himself, his personal motives must remain a matter of conjecture (cf. Gluckman 1963: 127). At a more public, objective level, Prakash became the instigating force behind the Patel's removal because it was he who had the dream wherein Kaleshar gave the order for the Patel's dismissal. And having received the first 'sign' or warning from Kaleshar one year previously in the guise of Durga's illness, Prakash and others had no choice but to act, for fear of divine wrath. At a political level, Prakash was afforded public legitimacy because he was the elder closest to the Patel. Moreover, while he remained a public supporter of the Patel, he was a known sympathiser of those who hated and feared him. He, like everyone else, privately disapproved of the Patel's behaviour; and he, like others, had been robbed for ten years of his hard-earned *tendu* bonuses.

As an ostensible supporter of the Patel, Prakash could not afford, politically or materially, to mount the challenge on his own and go to the *tendu* committee himself, even though, by virtue of the dream, he clearly possessed the necessary 'capital of authority'. For contesting the Patel was politically subversive and potentially dangerous, and while Prakash was a powerful and respected elder, he was still the Patel's social and political junior. He was what Gluckman (1955: 34) called a 'subordinate officer': an individual who, while remaining loyal to the Patel in order to protect his own status, went about orchestrating his removal from behind the scenes.

What would happen next in a normal course of events would be for Prakash to announce the contents and instructions of his dream in the course of a local *panchayat* meeting. But the methods that would ordinarily be used to carry out Kaleshar's instructions could not go through this proper channel because the local *panchayat* was under the Patel's control. Recall that the latter not only dominated the village council, through which he could impose and enforce punishment, but he also controlled the ritual reins of power. He was still capable, in other words, of hijacking Prakash's dream and overturning Kaleshar's orders with a dream of his own, as had happened with the replacement of the Baiga. As such, Prakash's dream (and consequent authority) would never have stood up to a public challenge from the Patel. And so, while Kaleshar's authorisation was in the first instance necessary, it was not sufficient. An alternative source of power emanating from outside the dominant local system was needed from which this divine authorisation could be effected. It was necessary, in other words, to transmute his own authority into a collective, legitimate interest (Bourdieu 1977: 40).

To do this, he turned to Raj and the RSS-affiliated group of seven young men. If they had an alternative source of legitimacy outside the Patel's control, why couldn't this group of young men, with the accompanying legitimacy afforded by their

association with the RSS, have acted on their own initiative? Why did they need Prakash's intervention? I suggest that before they could act, these young men, along with the elders, had first to be assured that they wouldn't face divine retribution by challenging the Patel. Because they, like other villagers, were frightened by the big god, Kaleshar's permission had to be guaranteed before any action could take place. This permission had a dual importance in initiating this process. Not only did it ensure legitimacy of action and sanction against divine repercussion, it also resolved any questions of Prakash's personal motivation and self-interest that may have arisen from other villagers. At a more practical level, I would suggest that this group of young men couldn't act before because the RSS connection had only developed into a locally recognisable alternative source of legitimacy in the previous year when the frequency of their local visits increased from every other month to once weekly. Both the elders and the young men wanted to change the situation, and neither felt they could do it alone. The former needed the connections and courage of the latter; the latter needed the permission and traditional support of the former.

And this is where the story comes full circle. The reason that Prakash turned to these young men after receiving the supernatural signal was not only because of their public position against the Patel, but because of their connection to an external organisation and alternative source of legitimacy, the RSS, which extended beyond the reaches of local tradition and provided a means through which Kaleshar's order could be implemented. As discussed earlier, all were respected members of the Ratiya Kanwar caste; none feared the Patel's normal threats of land appropriation, for they had the knowledge, money and means with which to stand up against such threats; and although they deeply respected local traditions and the power of the supernatural, they were also not particularly worried about the Patel's ability to exact revenge in the form of calling on supernatural powers, for they had the village doctor on their side. All could afford, in other words, to publicly and materially challenge the Patel. Most importantly, perhaps, all were openly opposed to the Patel's behaviour and corruption.

Outside alignments and sources of power in the guise of the RSS were thus used as what Bailey (1963: 251) calls a 'bridge action', which enabled local-level state officials to mount an effective challenge to the Patel's traditional authority. The seven men did not publicise their alignment with the RSS, or admit that the latter was the reason for their successful overthrow of the Patel. Indeed, the RSS's involvement in this affair was relatively indirect. But these connections were well known.

## VII

### *Conclusion*

This article has been an ethnographic examination of the transformation of traditional authority and the role that the state, represented by the *tendu* committee, plays in this process. Against the backdrop of an incident whereby the Patel's power was transformed when he was dismissed from his role as village *munshi*, I illustrated how traditional authority is locally constructed and reproduced. As was made clear, the Patel's traditional authority was bound to notions of divine legitimacy and buttressed by external sources of power, including those emanating from local-level state personnel. The transformation of his authority revolved around his violation of the

cosmological and political limits of power, and took place through a sort of ‘customary rebellion’ which drew its legitimacy from custom while maintaining the traditional order.

The article has also shown how the state was experienced by local people. It illuminated the way in which the Patel controlled the access that local people had to lower-level state officials. In the process, it was shown how the state was not only used to legitimise his traditional authority, but was also utilised by local people to transform it.

Finally, the article highlighted the way in which Hindu nationalism is making inroads into this particular *adivasi* community. By doing so, the article addressed the implications of how the RSS, by acting as the extra-state power and getting involved in the incident, was used to enforce accountability at a lower level.

The implications of the incident described in this article go beyond both the dismissal of the Patel as *munshi* and the subject of the transformation of traditional authority. At one level, the RSS’s involvement, though indirect, is an example of how the organisation can appropriate a contentious issue and tailor its ‘inclusion strategies’ to the concerns of a local situation. Involving itself in this incident has provided the organisation with a vehicle through which it can gain legitimacy and thereby more effectively communicate its *Hindutva* ideology to local people.<sup>25</sup> Indeed all villagers – including the Christian Oraons – have benefited from the dismissal of the Patel. All, ultimately, came to know that it was at the behest of the seven young men, with the indirect backing of the RSS, that the dismissal was actualised; and all were grateful to these young men, and by extension to the RSS, for their role in returning the long-overdue bonuses. As mentioned in the introduction, the larger ‘community’ of *adivasi* people has yet to be encompassed within the *Hindutva* fold. By lending its legitimacy to those who wished to contest the dominance of local power holders and performing a valuable social service on behalf of the village as a whole, the RSS has, through what van der Veer (1994: 135) calls the ‘politics of inclusion’, come closer to this goal.

Another interesting consequence of the RSS’s involvement in this incident concerns citizens’ rights and the demonstration to local people that the ‘everyday state’ (Fuller and Bénéi 2000) has mechanisms in place through which to deal with corruption and the violation of norms. In the situation described in this article, such mechanisms included the ‘official complaints process’ that local people availed of through the auspices of the *tendu* committee, and the resultant dismissal of the Patel by this committee. Traditional local power holders, it was learned, could be challenged by less powerful individuals by accessing and using existing state mechanisms and personnel to their advantage. While people have perhaps recognised the existence of such mechanisms before this incident, they have long been resigned to the fact that corruption of the sort practised by the Patel was a reality about which they could do nothing. For the Patel’s power, it will be recalled, rested on two bases of authority: that which stemmed from the occupation of an official, government-recognised office, which involved liaising with local-level state officials; and that which stemmed from divine legitimacy. This incident did not mean the dismissal of the Patel from his official post of village headman; however, his removal from the position of *munshi* was an indication that he could no longer rely solely on divine authority. This meant, by extension, that the possible political allegiances and external avenues of power were no longer contingent on the Patel’s authority. The state, in other words, was no longer in place merely to buttress the authority of those power holders: it could actually be used to transform their authority.

A final, more disturbing consequence relates to the fact that the specific external authority that participated in the removal of the Patel was the RSS. Part of the RSS's strength lies in the fact that it performs 'social services' even as it holds out the (unspoken) threat of violence.<sup>26</sup> Before this incident, the *tendu* committee, like everyone in the village, seemed to be held hostage to the Patel's authority, claiming that they had no power to act without local participation. Given the Patel's penchant for sharing bribes with local officials, a more plausible scenario is that they were reluctant to intervene because they too were willing beneficiaries of the Patel's corrupt practices. It is not inconceivable, then, that the *tendu* committee officials could have agreed to remove the Patel *because* the complaint was issued by RSS-backed individuals. Irrespective of whether this was the case or not, the disturbing implication is that a precedent has been set whereby the transformation of traditional authority, along with the enforcement of accountability of local-level state officials, required the indirect involvement of an extra-state power that is widely associated with violence.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> While *tendu* committee officials are elected in some areas, locally they are appointed by forest officials.

<sup>2</sup> The wage received by those who participated in government-sponsored work projects, or those who were employed as temporary agricultural labourers for wealthier farmers, was Rs 25-30. During the initial days of the month-long process, when leaves are plentiful, families are capable of picking between 400-800 bundles in a day (around 20,000 - 40,000 leaves). At Rs 40 per 100 bundles, this amounts to Rs 160-320. At the time of my fieldwork, Rs 40 could purchase four to five kilograms of rice, which could feed a family of four for two days.

<sup>3</sup> In the previous year, the *munshi* received Rs 1400 for every 100,000 bundles that his village collected. His total commission was over Rs 11,200, an incredibly large sum by local standards.

<sup>4</sup> The objective behind such activities runs parallel to Hindu nationalism's 'unifying' agenda and is impelled by what van der Veer calls the 'politics of inclusion' (1994: 135). At this time, the larger 'community' of *adivasi* people has yet to be encompassed within the Hindu fold, and as such remains an important obstacle to the long-term political agenda and comprehensive success of the Hindu nationalist movement (Hansen 1996; see also Froerer 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Other scholars who have recently invoked the notion of 'customary rebellion' in the Indian context include Sundar (1997), who examines the 1876 Bastar rebellion and argues that it was intended to emphasise the divine function of kingship and demand that the raja fulfil his role (1997: 86).

<sup>6</sup> This has been one of the central issues animating the sociology of India for decades, and encompasses numerous features. These include the transformation brought to traditional forms of social and political organisation (including kingship) by electoral politics (Bailey 1963); the changes brought to traditional village structures through market forces and the creation of new power bases (Béteille 1965; Robinson 1988); and the decline of traditional rights and obligations of patronage by increasing government intervention (Breman 1974). While these scholars all focus on changes which brought about a transformation of traditional authority, others look at how 'true' traditions were used to promote social reforms. For example, in Uberoi's (1996) edited collection on social reform, sexuality and the state, many authors talk about how traditional symbols of 'motherhood' were adopted, valorised and likened to ideals of nationhood. For other examples where traditional 'motherhood' and women's symbols were used as reformist ideas, see Sangari and Vaid (1989), Kumar (1993), and Forbes (1981).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.chhattisgarh.nic.in](http://www.chhattisgarh.nic.in) for current demographic information.

<sup>8</sup> Religious affiliation does play an important role in the wider ethnic relationship between the local Hindus and the Christians, and is also a significant factor in the attention paid by the RSS to the village (see Froerer 2002). However, this is a separate issue which I will not address in this article.

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<sup>9</sup> Although I prefer the term ‘*adivasi*’, which means ‘original inhabitant’ and is used by local people themselves, my alternating usage of the terms ‘caste’ and ‘tribe’ throughout this paper reflects both the impossibility of a clear distinction between these two terms, as well as the ambiguities generated by early academics and administrators who attempted to understand and theorise the differences between these categories and communities (see Ghurye 1943; Bailey 1961; Dumont 1962; Mandelbaum 1970; Desai 1977; for more current discussion on the ‘tribal question’, see Sundar 1997: 156-90).

<sup>10</sup> In the area where I conducted my fieldwork, a mix of Hindi, Chetriboli, Chhattisgarhi and Kurukh is spoken. Standard Hindi is used in schools and by government and church officials, whereas Chetriboli, Chhattisgarhi and Kurukh are spoken in the village. Kurukh is a Dravidian-based language spoken by the Oraons, and has no relation to Hindi. Chhattisgarhi belongs to the eastern Hindi language branch, and Chetriboli is a dialect of Chhattisgarhi. For more detail on how language is factored into the ethnic relationship between the Kurukh-speaking Oraons and the non-Kurukh speaking Hindus, see Froerer 2002.

<sup>11</sup> The ranking of local groups does not follow the mainstream caste hierarchies found in other parts of India (cf. Singh 1993). Like Mayer’s study of caste hierarchy in the central Indian village of Rajkheri (1996: 34-35), this ranking represents the broad consensus of villagers and is based on local norms of pollution and untouchability, which revolve most visibly around rules of commensality.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Sundar (1997), who describes a similar scenario with respect to the continuing dominance exercised in matters social, political and economic by members of the ‘*perma*’ or founding lineage in her anthro-historical study of South Bastar, Chhattisgarh.

<sup>13</sup> These features of local dominance run parallel to those outlined by Srinivas (1959): missing numerical strength, economic and political power, and ritual status. For more discussion on ‘caste dominance’, see also Dube (1968).

<sup>14</sup> In his discussion of forests and pastoral deities in Maharashtra, Sontheimer (1989) observes that the arrival of a group in a village is often referred to as the coming of their deities to the village (cf. Sundar 1997: 25). As noted by Sundar in a separate publication, in some respects, whoever brought or ‘owned’ the gods, owned and managed the land (2002: 176).

<sup>15</sup> It is within the bimonthly training meetings that these young men are taught about RSS aims and *Hindutva* ideology. The ideological message of these meetings is summed up as follows: ‘...Hindus alone constitute the Indian nation, since they are the original inhabitants and sole creators of its society and culture. Hinduism is uniquely tolerant, and hence superior to any other faith, but its tolerance has often been mistaken for weakness. The Hindu nation has been repeatedly conquered by aliens, particularly Muslims and then the Christian British, and must acquire strength through RSS *sangathan* to counter all present and future threats’ (Basu *et al.* 1993: 37).

<sup>16</sup> According to Andre Béteille (personal correspondence, March 1999), Kaleshar is another name for Shiva, or a reincarnation/godling of Shiva. However, when I enquired as to whether this was the case locally, I was given a resounding ‘no’ from the Patel and Baiga, and reminded that Shiva resides in the village in another form, Mahadev. The alleged connection between Kaleshar and Shiva becomes even more interesting when we consider that the primary festival in the village that celebrates the marriage between Shiva and Parvati (Gaura) is also that in which Kaleshar’s power and involvement in village affairs is most publicly reaffirmed.

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<sup>17</sup> The issue of divine needs varies in both theory and practice. Eck (1981: 37), for example, asserts that ritual offerings are not a gods necessity, but shaped by human ideas of honouring guests. Fuller (1992: 69-72) concurs, but states that the issue is more complicated. At one level is the view that while deities do not actually need offerings and services, they must be worshipped *as if* they do. At another level is the position that deities not only need the offerings rendered to them in the form of puja, but that they actually suffer if such offerings are not provided. According to my informants, Kaleshar is clearly a case of the latter: he needs propitiation and blood offerings.

<sup>18</sup> For an extensive review of the literature on 'divine kingship', see Feely-Harnik (1985); cf. also Fuller (1992: Ch.5), and Guha (1989).

<sup>19</sup> As is often the case where ritual convention is concerned, there is a difference here between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The actual performance of these rituals is often more sporadic, spanning between 15 and 30 years for the Mahaseva celebrations, and occasionally skipping one to three years for the Gaura festival. Reasons for this are invariably practical, and relate to the villagers' inability to collectively sponsor the costly rituals. For more discussion on the (ir)regular propitiation of deities, see Fuller 1992.

<sup>20</sup> There is a vast anthropological literature on spirit possession. For specifically South Asian examples, see Srinivas (1965 [1952]), Gough (1959), and Stirrat (1992).

<sup>21</sup> The power of dreams is also illustrated in the context of local healers, who receive much of their knowledge and instruction from dreams. As we will see below, dreams are also viewed as warning signs (in cases of oncoming illness), or as signs of divine instruction or permission. See Sargent and Johnson (1996: 116), who talk about the recruitment of traditional healers through 'divine selection', or dreams.

<sup>22</sup> See Fuller (1992: 139-40), Majumdar (1958: 99), Sharma (1978: 118), and Srinivas (1969 [1955]).

<sup>23</sup> See Cohn (1987: 757-631) for a similar discussion of the power of the village headman.

<sup>24</sup> Parallels with this situation can be drawn from Norbert Peabody's (1991) account of the movement of statues between kingdoms in seventeenth-century western India. These statues, which were controlled by Brahmans and said to embody the divine, served as a validation of authority for the deserving king. Power was guaranteed to whichever king possessed the statues, and their removal signified a withdrawal of divine support and legitimacy. Prakash's access to divine authority, and his instrumental role in shifting this authority, undermining the singular power of the Patel, is analogous to the movement of statues between kingdoms, which weakened the authority of the king. This access served not merely as an index of the current distribution of power; it actually affected it.

<sup>25</sup> In this respect, the RSS's participation in the *munshi* affair can be compared to Hansen's (1996) discussion of how the *Shiv Sena* has used dominant regional idioms to 'translate' *Hindutva* into a viable local discourse and acquire a substantial electoral base in rural Maharashtra. See also Fuller's (2001) discussion on how the Sangh Parivar's has successfully appropriated local Hindu rituals in Tamil Nadu to create a wider 'Hindu unity'.

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this important issue to my attention. With specific respect to the threat of violence, Muslim communities, and

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the 'Muslim problem', have invariably been the main targets of violence (see Dalmia *et al.* 1995; Pandey 1990), though in more recent years, the RSS has been implicated in a number of well-published atrocities against Christians (see Cooper 1998; Filkins 1998; Singh and Mahurkar 1999).

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