7 Identity: Professionals or Warlords?

Despite the unusual density and continuity of documentation we have in relation to the family of Mohan Das and his descendants, it remains difficult to answer the question, 'How did the protagonists view themselves?' Because of the formality of the documents which record their activities, disputes and claims, it is tricky to access the self-perception of the protagonists of this story. As we come closer to the present in time, increased familiarity with the forms of address and representation ('*Thākur Sāḥeb*', for example) can create a misleading sense of access to reality.

Fortunately for us, we have disjunctures at every turn. We have *qānūngōs* who were also *chaudhrīs*, we have possible *diwāns* of a princely state addressed as *Thākurs*, and, as we shall see, we have a family that is described in twentieth-century documents as '*Kāyasth Nigam*', but which remembers a family history replete with Rajput-like exploits of blood, death and military valour.

In this final chapter of the book, we shall try to use that family history, in conjunction with other narratives of self-representation, in order to understand how a family of *Kāyasth zamindārs*, who negotiated with first the Mughal, then the Maratha and then the British empire, might have conceptualised themselves and the basis of their entitlements.

The *Munshī*

Even more than the *qāẓī*, who authenticated documents and their copies, attested to tax payments promised and paid, and adjudicated on important inheritance cases, there was another kind of professional whose hand we can literally see in all affairs of the Purshottam Das family. These were the scribes – *kātib* in Arabic-speaking regions and *munshī* in the Persianate world – who, despite their ubiquitous and indispensible role in the running of empires, received patchy attention until the 1990s.[1] Since that time, a flush of literature

[1] A very important early work was that of Karen Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste: The Kayasths of Hyderabad* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1994); since then Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'The Making of a Munshi', pp. 61–72; Chatterjee, 'Scribal Elites', pp. 445–72; Kinra, 'Master and *Munshī*', pp. 527–61; O'Hanlon, 'The Social Worth of Scribes',

about Mughal and post-Mughal *munshīs* has created for us an unusually elaborate picture of a social class – predominantly non-Muslim, most commonly of *Kāyasth* or *Khatrī* caste. From full autobiographical accounts, available from the seventeenth century, to multiple fragments, these protagonists have left detailed accounts of their education, curricular content, entry into the job market and social matrices. The picture this produces is that of a specialist service community, trained from childhood in Persian writing skills and steeped in the commonplaces of Perso-Islamic culture, which, at the top end of the spectrum, extended to full literary immersion, compositional ability and courtly deportment. Complementing this picture of participation is also a narrative of resentment and dislike of passive but powerful bureaucrats, armed with jargon and paperwork, a resentment that was sometimes expressed, at least from the eighteenth century, in sectarian terms, by some Muslim elites, especially jurists.

But were our protagonists *munshīs* themselves? They do not state their caste affiliation in any document scribed prior to the nineteenth century. Only one *parvāna* from the seventeenth-century part of this collection, unambiguously referred to caste, and did so using a classically Indo-Persian usage. This was the *parvāna*, dated 1073 AH/1662 CE, of which we have the original in DAI, Kuwait, and the copy in the NAI, New Delhi, in which an official called Muhammad Hussain granted land for creating a garden in the town of Sultanpur. The recipient of the grant is referred to as Kishan Das '*zunnārdār*'. While the Arabic word *zunnār*, adopted in Persian, originally implied a cord worn around the waist by Christians and Jews and also the Persian magi, in the Indian context, it came to also mean the Brahmanical thread, the *janeū*,[2] with which users may also have discovered a phonetic similarity. The protagonist Kishan Das is not identifiable from the otherwise very useful family trees preserved by the descendants; so we have to discard this eccentric piece of information as an outlier. Kishan Das, the Brahmin, may well have been unrelated to the family, who were informed because of their concern with lands and taxes in the area.

Caste references begin to appear in the collection only in documents that are clearly scribed in the nineteenth century (even if, in some cases, they claim to be older). In these documents, which are, typically, lists of landed properties owned, members of the family refer to themselves as *Kāyasth Nigam*, and this

pp. 563–95; Guha, 'Serving the Barbarian to Preserve the *Dharma*', pp. 497–525; Bellenoit, 'Between Qanungos and Clerks', pp. 1–39; Deshpande, 'The Writerly Self', pp. 449–71; also Spooner and Hanaway, *Literacy in the Persianate World*.

[2] Thus Amir Khusrau, the fourteenth-century poet's famous couplet: '*Kāfir-i 'ishq am Musalmānī marā darkār nīst/Har rag-i jān tār gasht hājat-i zunnār nīst* (I am a heretic in love, Of Islam I have no need/Every vein in my body has turned into a string, Of *zunnār* I have no need); S. B. P. Nigam et al., *Amir Khusrau Memorial Volume* (New Delhi: Amir Khusrau Memorial Volume, 1975), p. 72.

is also how descendants of the principal line identify themselves today. This, combined with the fact that the family monopolised the classic village-level profession of *Kāyasths* – that of the *qānūngō* – might suggest that here we have a family of not very eminent Mughal *munshīs*. The family's collective career, as we have seen so far, however, suggests a far more martial social role. It is as pioneering landed gentry that Jayanti Das had received his grant in the late sixteenth century; his son or grandson Mohan Das took the family to new heights, securing their status as *zamīndārs* of several villages, through military entrepreneurship sold to agents of the state in search of local talent. This may have been far less unusual than we might think, despite what may have been the 'stabilisation of service communities' in some parts of the subcontinent around the late medieval period.[3] *Kāyasth zamīndārs* abounded in Bengal in pre-Mughal and Mughal times, including 'Raja' Pratapaditya, one of the '*Bārō Bhūīṇyās*' or 'Twelve Gentry' of legend; a family of *qānūngōs* became the Raja of Darbhanga in the seventeenth century; and even in the eighteenth, *Kāyasth* entered the service of the newly formed state of Hyderabad first as military agents.[4] And indeed, there is no reason to find that surprising, given the demonstration by Peshwas in the eighteenth century that Brahmins could be warriors as well as rulers.

We have an opportunity to explore what some of our protagonists thought of their own condition through the medium of a rather special document. This is a long scroll that I discovered in the family's collection in Dhar. This document, which calls itself a '*haq-o-gal nāma*',[5] narrates the history of the family, which overlaps with the story told by the *maḥẓarnāmas*, but also extends much further back and offers justifications for entitlements that are somewhat different. It is also the story of a journey, the crucial journey of migration that brought the family from Udaipur to Dhar.

The scroll, the top section of which is damaged, bears no date, but the script is very similar to what we have in the margins of the Persian-language documents from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It appears likely that the language of this manuscript, which is very similar to Rajasthani, is Rangri or the written form of Malwi. If this identification is correct, then it would match with the fact that Rangri was reported by Grierson as being used in keeping administrative records in several princely states in Malwa.[6] The scroll, with its unseparated words, eccentric letter forms and hybrid vocabulary, was illegible to me and to family members (who were rather hoping that it would be

[3] O'Hanlon, 'The Social Worth of Scribes', p. 576.
[4] Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste*.
[5] I offer a longer discussion of this document in 'Kayasths in Rajput land: Family Lore in a Dynasty of *qānūngō*-zamindars in early modern Malwa', submitted as part of a special issue to the *IESHR*.
[6] Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, pp. 52–9.

a *farmān*), until I realised that it was the verbatim reproduction of the text in another document, about twenty pages long, scribed in a modern and legible Nagri script.

I can only speculate on the dates of scribing of these two documents, and the reason for re-scribing. It is possible that the context and imperatives were similar to those that produced the *kaifiyats* and *yādīs* of landed families in the Marathi-writing region or of temples and other propertied institutions in the Telugu-writing region, both at the behest of the newly formed East India Company government in the early nineteenth century.[7] I can clearly see that the manuscripts tell a story of migration; they say that the family was originally from Udaipur. Their ancestor *Thākur* Gunraj, who was the *diwān* of the *Rāṇā* of Udaipur, saved the *Rāṇā* from an attack of *Bādshāh* Humayun, who was probably a generic 'blessed' emperor, rather than the second Mughal emperor; the dates do not match at all. Whoever the invading *Bādshāh* was, Gunraj saved Udaipur by the clever but predictable ruse of tying torches to the horns of thousands of buffaloes, to present the impression of a huge army. Despite this service, gossips poisoned the *Rāṇā*'s mind, alleging that these *Kāyasths* intended to set up their own kingdom. Faced with such allegations, the *diwān* submitted his inkpot and seal to the king, and set out from Udaipur with around 125 bullock carts full of possessions and people. There is then a genealogical recital of the dispersal and the formation of the diaspora, ending with the branch that reached Dhar.

In Dhar, curiously enough, they again met a rampaging Humayun, although in the improbable year of 1487 Saṃvat (1430 CE). Finding the area depopulated, Humayun *Bādshāh* asked, 'Are there no good people here? (*Is bastī mein kōī bhalā ādmī nahī mālūm hōtā*)'. Somebody mentioned the Udaipuris, so the *Bādshāh* summoned them with due respect, and the family offered hospitality (*mezbānī*) to the emperor. The emperor was so pleased that he wanted to take them along, but on their request, left them behind, bestowing them with a host of rights, which are recited in this string of bowdlerised Persian administrative terms: '*jamīdārī chaudharāt kī parganā majkūr kasbā wagerā hak dastūr ināmī gāoṇ dāmī bhaint jīrāyat sāyer va kalālī wa farōī ki chauthāī dhīvar gāoṇ wa pāṭēlī wa paṭwārā kai gāoṇ kā betī kā shādī gamī hak dastūr rasūm wagerā lag saw sudā sanad kar dī*'.

Of these, the *jamīdārī* (*zamīndārī*) *chaudharāt* (*chaudhrāī*) are easily comprehensible as landlord rights, *dāmī* and *bhaint* refer to rights derived from that position; *hak* (*haq*) and *dastūr* are different registers of talking about rights. *Jīrāyat* could be agricultural land (*zirāʿat*) or it could have the Marathi usage,

[7] G. C. Vad et al. (eds.), *Selections from the Government Records in the Alienation Office: Kaifiyats, Yadis* (Bombay, 1908); P. Sitapati (ed.), *Srisailam Temple Kaifiyat* [this is a translation of a Telugu *kaifiyat* in the Mackenzie collection] (Hyderabad: Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1981).

meaning unirrigated land, as opposed to orchards. *Sayer* are non-land taxes in which the grant-holders clearly had a share. *Kalālī* and *farōī* are incomprehensible to me; *pāṭēlī* and *paṭwārā* offer an apt combination of landlord and record-keeping rights, in which the former predominate, given the claims on less entitled villagers, during life-cycle occasions, such as weddings (*shādī*).

In this case then, our protagonists claim, once again, that their rights in Dhar derive from the emperor (Mughal or otherwise), rather than a *mansabdār*, an obvious effort to elevate half-remembered claims. Their rights were the result of a service, but the service was simply one of hospitality and largesse, of being well-to-do people of consequence, sort of country squires able to make the necessary arrangements for receiving imperial visitations. A *Kāyasth* past was acknowledged, with the position of *diwān*, and full attributes of the clever *wazīr* and so on. However, that was told as a story of failure and betrayal; by kings who should have known better. The family remade itself, and remade itself as little kings who could host the same emperor whom they had helped repulse in Udaipur.

In the rest of the story, the protagonists refer to themselves as *Thākurs*, and they are seen to be defending a very Rajput notion of honour, against treacherous inferior Rajputs, referred to as '*rangḍa*'. So *rangḍa* Kanha Dewda, who had fled when the emperor was in Dhar, returned to create mischief, sending his retainers to treacherously kill the *Thākur* in his own house, while enjoying his hospitality. At this, the widow demanded revenge, which a twelve-year-old brother-in-law, Jayanti Das, resolved to provide. The frightened Dewda fled towards the hills of Jhabua, taking refuge with *banjāra* Nayaks, who proved to be more manly, refusing to give up their protégé on grounds of hospitality. However, the Nayak's resolve was shaken when Jayanti Das, perched on a tree, had his men shoot the earrings off the Nayak's wife's ear. Now captured, the *rangḍa* was brought back to Dhar fort, where the imperial officer, a Nawab with a garbled name in the manuscripts (Adbud Khan), requested everyone to refrain from violence, but Jayanti Das had to have his revenge. And his sister-in-law then proceeded to become *satī*, bearing the *pāgḍī* (turban) of her husband. This part of the story, then, mimics the Rajputs' intensely sanguinary and self-sacrificial ethos of honour,[8] actuated through the virtuous embrace of violent death – by men, as well as women, albeit on sharply divergent social occasions.[9]

The story then twists, and we find Mohan Das, a descendant of Jayanti Das, living in association with Bira *Rāṇā*, and looting a Mughal tax caravan. Emperor Alamgir, wrathful at the news, sends a *mansabdār* to arrest Mohan

[8] Kamphorst, *In Praise of Death*.

[9] Susan Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, *Essays on Rajputana: Essays on History, Culture and Administration* (New Delhi: Naurang Rai, 1984); Malavika Kasturi, *Embattled Identities: Rajput Lineages and the Colonial State in Nineteenth-Century North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Das and imprison him in the fort of Asirgarh. Years later, Mohan Das's brother Chandar Bhan manages to attract the emperor's attention during a hunting trip in the Deccan. In a story very reminiscent of the Anil Rai episode in *Padshāhnāma*, Chandar Bhan takes on a tiger or lion, once the imperial hunting party fails to shoot the animal. Wrapping cloth around one arm, and with a dagger or *katār* in the other, he kills the animal. The emperor naturally summons him for reward, and Chandar Bhan seeks not only the release of his brother, but the reinstatement of all the rights that had been lost in the arrest and sacking. And the emperor obliges, reinstating our protagonists in Dhar.

This story corresponds with many of the factual details in the legal documents. It offers some plausible explanations of incidents and allusions whose meaning or significance is otherwise elusive in our Persian documents. Mohan Das's temporary fall from favour and residence (imprisonment?) in Asirgarh may be explained by his changing sides and joining the highway robbers, albeit explained as a matter of honour in the family history. The *banjāras*, who made only fleeting appearance so far – in a noble's *dastak* offering tax-free transit and in records of credit transactions – reappear as significant protagonists, of ambivalent moral value in that tale of honour. But it would be facile to think of the family history as a source of additional 'facts'. The narrative it offers has the quality of a dream, in which dates swing across centuries, one emperor is mixed up with another and a protagonist could be a robber-catcher or a robber himself. Rather than regressing towards an early-twentieth-century effort to filter out facts from such stories, or indeed, lurching towards conflating all kinds of stories about the past with history, we can recognise the family history for what it is: an exercise in collective self-representation by a lineage. Only then can we see that this story of military conflicts, assassinations, revenge and women gloriously becoming *satīs*, is really the story of becoming Rajput.

Refusing Professionalism

Let us skip ahead to the early twentieth century and look at the very last document in our multi-lingual collection – this time, in English. We have already mentioned the petition to the Commissioner of the Central Indian Agency in the previous chapter; here, we shall discuss the arguments and evidence it offered, in order to access the modes of self-representation by this landed family. Once again, such self-representation was occasioned by a legal dispute, and one precipitated by the rationalising efforts of a half-heartedly modernising state, which (for the umpteenth time in South Asian history) attempted to assess revenues predictably, and convert the many nested rights in land to property ownership and salaried service. As the petition demonstrates, the values inherent in such a conversion were alien to landlords such as our family, whose self-perception centred around the royal model.

And so a clearly outraged Pratap Chand II, the patriarch of that generation, produced a printed petition in which he listed the many different rights of his family. The nomenclature of these rights are a bewildering array of arcane Indo-Persian revenue vocabulary, but highly familiar to us, who have encountered and understood these terms, and the rights they stood for, from two centuries worth of Persian documents. The family had clearly come a long way since the few *bīghas* of land in a handful of villages granted to Jayanti Das by an unidentified Mughal noble in the 1570s. Now, Pratap Chand, his descendant, claimed eighteen *istimrāri*[10] villages, 3,657 *bighas* of *zirāʿat* (agricultural) land in various villages, and the rights to collect money from the inhabitants for a range of reasons: the *kōtwālī chabūtra* of Dhar, which they managed, *dāmī*, *bhet*, miscellaneous *rusooms* (traditional dues), *lag, sakri* and *ori*.

To explain and justify these rights, Pratap Chand II told the story of three successive imperial regimes in Dhar – the Mughals, the Marathas and the British – and placed his own family within it. While compared to the family history, this historically accurate story, stripped of all dreaminess, was written in the familiar language of English-language petitions, it asserted the same thing – that rights could never be separated from the politics and wars of empires.

As the Mughal empire declined, said the petition, the *zamīndārs* of the area were compelled to make a deal with the Maratha *sardārs*, especially the Puars, the Holkars and the Sindhias. This deal was formalised in 1743 when the Mughal empire signed a treaty with the Peshwa, handing over Malwa, and the Peshwa, in turn, promised not to disturb the pre-existing rights in the region, especially those of the *zamīndārs* and the *qānūngōs*. The terms of this treaty were quoted in the petition, sourced from none other than Malcolm's *Central India*. In turn, the petition continued, the Maratha *sardārs*, among whom the rights of Malwa were divided, promised to uphold the rights of the *zamīndārs*, and, indeed, they had done so, despite efforts to reduce the military capacity of the *zamīndārs*, and to centralise the administration of the state. Indeed, when, after a troublesome period, the Dhar state was 'saved from extinction' by the British, specifically John Malcolm, by taking it over, the Dhar princes submitted a list of the rights of *zamīndārs* under their control, which was incorporated into the treaty between Dhar state and the British in 1818.

Pratap Chand II acknowledged that:

> The past Maharajas [of the Dhar state] have invariably treated the family of the Dhar Zemindars with marked consideration and esteem. Whenever the zeal of the State officers have raised any dispute affecting the peaceful enjoyment of the heritage, they

[10] Wilson, *Revenue and Judicial Terms*, 221. *Istimrari* was title to land whose revenues were permanently settled.

have always by unambiguous orders, restored the enjoyment to its proper groove, and set matters to right. The *question of specific service and its performance* [italics in original] was never raised in past times by the Durbar, as has been done in 1905 by Rai Bahadur Munshi Roshanlall Saheb, then Superintendent of the State.[11]

Who was this clueless Roshanlal who was so impertinent as to enquire what exactly the *zamīndārs* did for a living?

It appears that he was a British Indian official, appointed in connection with the Dhar state being taken under the authority of the Court of Wards for a second time. And this official, unlike the apparently more conciliatory officers appointed in the past (one Muslim and one British), was so insensitive as to interfere in the '*waṭan*' of the *zamīndārs*, and to deny the rights granted by previous sovereigns – Mughal emperors and Maratha Maharajas – on the petty basis that the *zamīndārs* did not perform the duties enjoined upon them by the grant documents – the *sanads*. This was all wrong-spirited, said Pratap Chand II, because these rights, enjoyed over sixteen generations (as reflected by a family tree submitted as exhibit) were largely rewards for loyal, mostly military services, already rendered. Thus, Pratap Chand II proclaimed himself unwillingly taking up the position of complainant against the Dhar *darbār*, and hoped for justice from the paramount power, that is, the British government of India.

And Mughal law made its final appearance in this story, this time in the form of a translated *parvāna*, purportedly issued by Asad Khan, *wazīr* of emperor Aurangzeb to Narsingh Das *chaudhrī* (son of Purshottam Das) in the year 1696. The original document has not been found among the surviving documents, but it is striking that the English translation follows the correct structure of a *parvāna*, and the conjunction of dates and names are fully plausible. Other exhibits enclosed with the petition were a printed English-language family tree and an excerpt from the Dhar state gazetteers. Royal order, family memory and colonial surveys thus together formed the basis of rights claimed by the long-enduring *zamīndār* family, who had gained their position and possessions through battle, tax-farming, state service and sharp dealing, but refused to be professional about it. This was a very clear declaration of the notion that 'land is to rule'.

The Shape of Memory: Lineal Descent Versus Outward Blossoming

The petition of the outraged *Thākur* Pratap Chand was accompanied by a family tree, which we have seen in the introduction. This document proposed a straightforward patrilineal line of descent, beginning with a key ancestor

[11] 'Petition' in Choudhary Family Collection, *Baḍā Rāolā* Dhar.

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(Gunrajdass), and ending with the petitioner himself. There were, however, other designs to plotting the chronological and genealogical progress of the lineage over time, and a strikingly different design is presented in a type of document that is commonly found in landed families across Malwa and in fact, all over South Asia – the *shajara*.

This depiction of the lineage is shaped literally like a meandering plant with twirling branches, *rising* rather than descending from a common ancestor, offering a literal visualisation of the Arabic word *shajara*, which simply means: a tree. The difference between this document and the English-script genealogical table is stark. This difference, especially the trimming of relations, cannot be explained simply by a change over time, for judging by the paper and the poor handwriting, the *shajara* was probably contemporary to or even written later than the English-language petition and its accompanying genealogical table.

The shapes of the two documents mirror, in many ways, the differences in structure and content of the Persian-language legal documents as compared to the Hindi-language family history. English having taken the place of Persian as the language of governance and record, the memory of the lineage that was presented in the English-script genealogy was one that was restricted to lines of inheritance rather than kinship, and presumably lines of inheritance that the petitioner was particularly keen to establish as exclusively valid. It stuck to one story, geared at producing specific legal entitlements, as the Persian-language documents had done in previous centuries.

The *shajara*, on the other hand, meandered and ran into many lines because here the purpose was probably remembering a flourishing ancient lineage, whose prosperity was not limited to the material possessions of one principal line, but also the fecundity and proliferation of its many sons, just as the family history meandered to tell tales not just of gain, but also bravery and loss.

The family's insignia combined the themes of literacy and martial prowess, with an image of Jayanti *mātā*, the family goddess enclosed in a sword crossed over a pen. The love of books and interest in Persianate literary culture led *Thākur* Pratapchand I's grand-nephew and successor, *Thākur* Motichand, to commission a copy of the famous Persian–Hindi bilingual dictionary, *Khāliq bārī*, attributed to Amir Khusrau. In a beautiful tangling of social circles, the manuscript was copied by a certain *Qāẓī* Fateh al-din, a descendant of the great Khwaja Kamaluddin Chisti Mandavi himself. A memorial volume produced by the community associated with the shrine remembers the family as lovers of Urdu and Persian literature, with a library stacked with hundreds of books in those languages.[12]

[12] Mukhtar Ahmad Khan, *Hazrat Maulāna Khwāja Kamaluddin Chistī* (Piran-e Dhar: Urs Committee Hazrat Maulana Khwaja Kamaluddin Chisti, n.d.), p. 326.

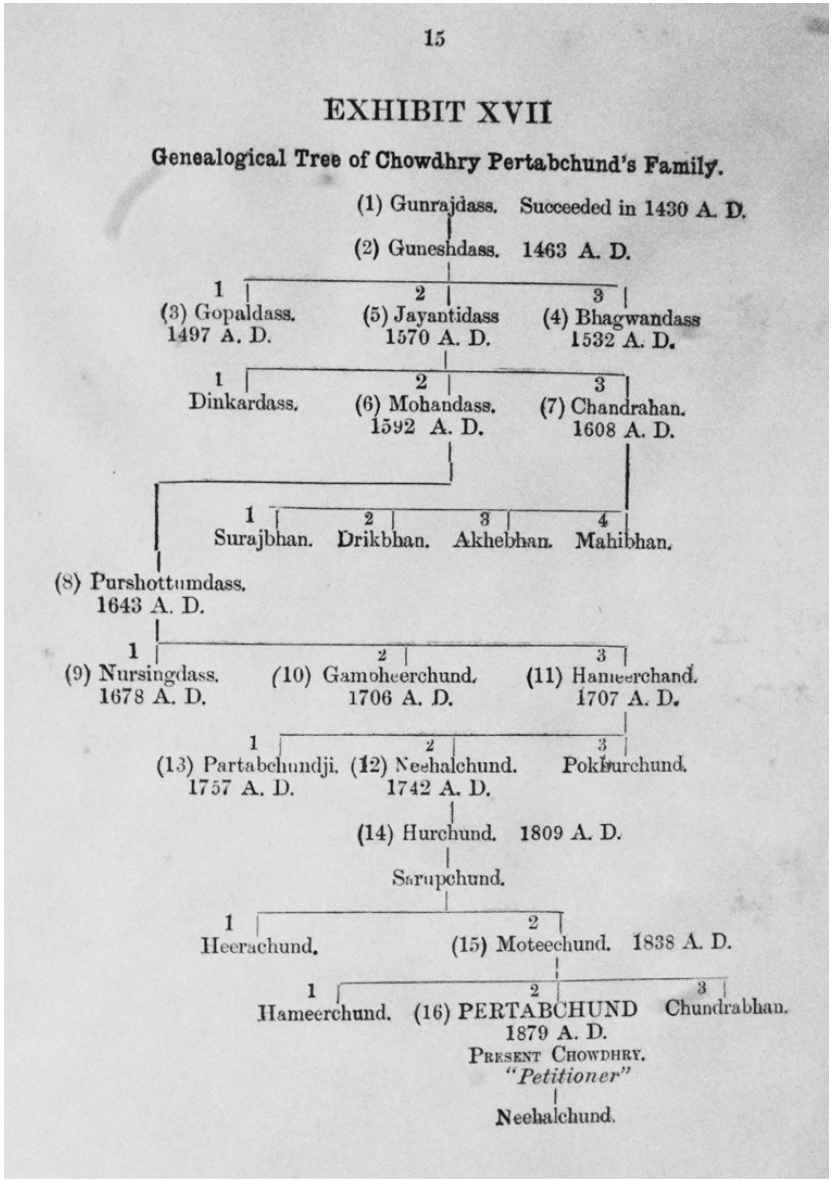
15

EXHIBIT XVII

Genealogical Tree of Chowdhry Pertabchund's Family.

(1) Gunrajdass. Succeeded in 1430 A. D.

(2) Guneshdass. 1463 A. D.

1 (3) Gopaldass. 1497 A. D.
2 (5) Jayantidass 1570 A. D.
3 (4) Bhagwandass 1532 A. D.

1 Dinkardass.
2 (6) Mohandass. 1592 A. D.
3 (7) Chandrahan. 1608 A. D.

1 Surajbhan. 2 Drikbhan. 3 Akhebhan. 4 Mahibhan.

(8) Purshottumdass. 1643 A. D.

1 (9) Nursingdass. 1678 A. D.
2 (10) Gamoheerchund. 1706 A. D.
3 (11) Hameerchand. 1707 A. D.

1 (13) Partabchundji. 1757 A. D.
2 (12) Neehalchund. 1742 A. D.
3 Pokhurchund.

(14) Hurchund. 1809 A. D.

Sarupchund.

1 Heerachund.
2 (15) Moteechund. 1838 A. D.

1 Hameerchund.
2 (16) PERTABCHUND 1879 A. D. PRESENT CHOWDHRY. *"Petitioner"*
3 Chundrabhan.

Neehalchund.

Figure 7.1 Family tree, produced in the early 1900s

Memorabilia preserved in the family include staged formal photographs of Pratap Chand II, which present a combined image of lordliness and erudition.

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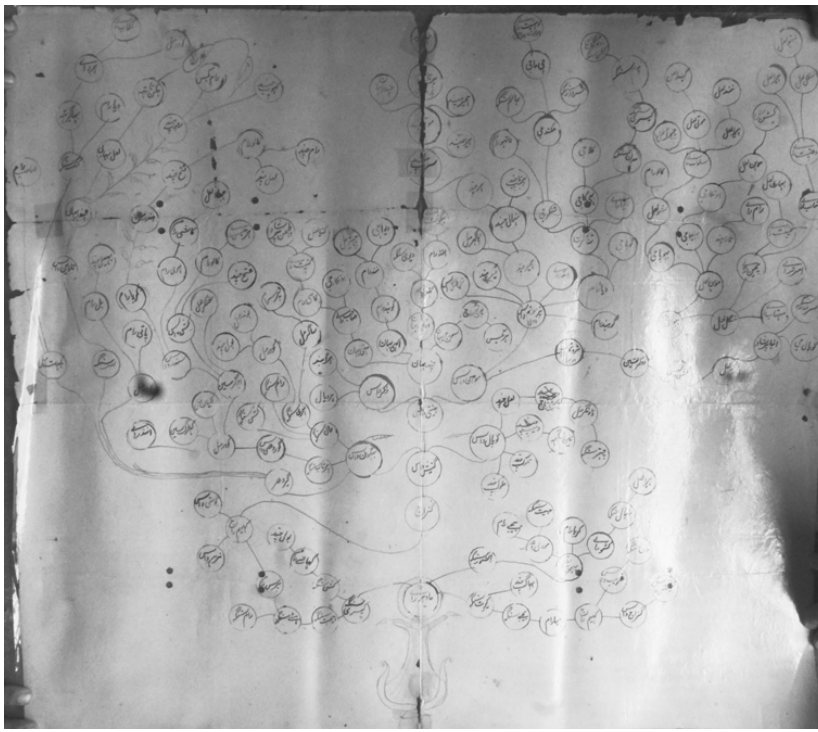

Figure 7.2 *Shajara* (also family tree)

When I discussed the sole photograph of *Thākur* Pratap Chand II with his descendant, Amit Choudhary (presented on the cover of this book) he asked me what I saw as the most striking feature of the photograph. When I couldn't quite identify it myself, he told me: 'Books, it's the books!'

Thākur Pratap Chand II's grandson, *Thākur* Nihal Chand is seen in a photograph taken in the courtyard of the *Baḍā Rāolā* mansion, seated on horseback with a young nephew. While this imparts an aura of feudal days, he also featured in the *Who's Who in British India and Burma*, in Indo-Western formal attire – a *sherwānī*, which famously evolved from the English frock-coat. Times were changing, leaving its mark on how rural aristocrats presented themselves. *Thākur* Nihal Chand himself was keen on such change; having studied in the liberal Allahabad University, he found himself better equipped than most landlords to deal with the enormous changes that took place during his lifetime, including the integration of the princely states and, perhaps most momentously, the abolition of *zamīndārī*. He educated his son Hamir Chand in

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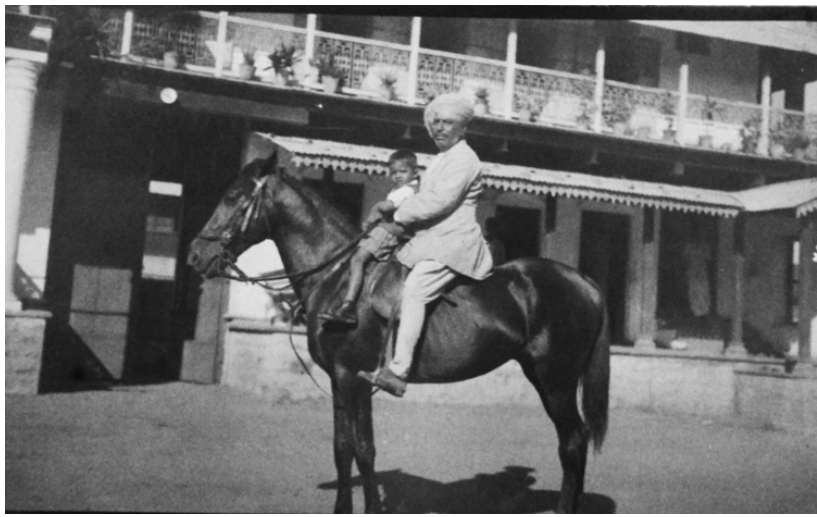

Figure 7.3 *Thākur* Nihal Chand on horseback in the *Baḍā Rāolā*, Dhar, 1920s. Choudhary Family Collection, *Baḍā Rāolā*, Dhar.

an elite boarding school in Indore, Daly College, and, when the son was grown, actively sought a marital alliance for him with the daughter of a remarkable Gandhian social and political activist. In 1964, when Hamir Chand and Abha were married, the bride and her younger sister still discovered a mansion in Dhar with four wings, hundreds of rooms, huge stores of silverware – a world away from their own.[13] When I met her in Dhar in 2016, *Thākurānī* Abha Choudhary smilingly recalled stepping into that feudal world, where respectable women never went out unveiled. She made her place within that world, combining her mother's social values with the cultural context of her marital home – working quietly for various charitable causes all her life.

Conclusion

Together, the scroll of family history, the petition, the family trees and the photographs offer us valuable, if belated, access to the self-perception of our principal protagonists. It is also striking that this self-expression took place in languages other than Persian – whether in Hindi or English. In both cases, the protagonists represented themselves in ways that are both in line with the stories told by the Persian legal documents, and divergent from them. Like

[13] Meenal Shrivastava, *Amma's Daughters: A Memoir* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2018), pp. 189–94.

the Persian documents, the family history and the petition tell stories of war, and of imbrication in empires. They reveal heightened awareness of law, or more accurately, of specific entitlements, and their basis in both their own achievements and in royal grants (or treaties between various sovereigns).

On the other hand, the Hindi family history and the English-language petition assert what the Persian documents do not quite say: that these *zamīndārs* saw themselves as warriors, as little kings in their own right, whose rights arose above all from the virtues of courage, loyalty and attachment to the realm. Both the Mughal-era Persian narrative documents and the Hindi family history emphasised martial ability; the Hindi family history went further, and valorised forms of violence that went far beyond state service, turning towards Rajput-style violent feminine self-immolation, for example. But the Hindi family history also contained in it elements that we would today see as more suitably part of *Kāyasth* self-identity, foregrounding, at crucial moments in the story, symbols such as the inkpot, and traits such as intelligence, diplomacy, hospitality and awareness of legal documentation.

And that is perhaps where we should leave this analysis; reminding ourselves that *Kāyasth*, Rajput and Maratha have not been insular categories from the early modern period until now. The story of this family, and of the many regimes they have inhabited, served and utilised, shows us that claiming entitlement and dominion in this corner of Malwa required travelling boldly between such different identities.