1 Introduction

Signs, the Census, and the Sanitation Labor Castes

The census of India is a vast undertaking. Once a decade, every person residing in India—roughly one-sixth of humanity—is to be counted, named, and known. In 2011, I found myself in the midst of this monumental endeavor.

The scene was Lucknow, famed for its kabobs and culture of *politesse* yet also the capital of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (or "UP," as it is called), known for its rancorous caste and communal politics. I had not anticipated being present for the decennial census—its fifteenth iteration since the inaugural British attempt in 1871–72—but I arrived in Lucknow, by chance, on the second day of its implementation. Though observing such a state exercise had not figured in my research design, the potential value it held for an ethnographic study was undeniable, and within a few days I began accompanying census workers on their rounds.

My companions were surveying a Dalit neighborhood along a railway track when I began to sense that foundational premises about caste and religious belonging were misplaced. The words with which the enumerators filled their forms told one story, but the silences and circumlocutions of the enumerated seemed to hint at something else.

I wanted to understand Dalit religion. I sought, that is, to learn from those who suffer the structural violence of untouchability how their experience of stigma shapes their sense of religious belonging. My interests lay particularly with the caste cluster that supplies virtually all of South Asia's sanitation workers. Today the sanitation labor castes are widely regarded as simply and self-evidently Hindu. In swaths of north India, indeed, they have a reputation for displays of Hindu zealotry and support for Hindu majoritarianism. Yet little more than a century ago none of this was the case. The sanitation labor castes were known then for defying, in more ways and to a greater extent than other groups, categorization under the religious taxonomy of the colonial state. Far from appearing as straightforwardly Hindu, they featured in the reports of the decennial censuses as a secretive, "chameleon-like" community

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whose company Hindus abhorred, a community whose syncretic religious observances generated "a great deal of confusion," making them "the chief disturbing element" in the mapping of India's religions (Rose 1902: 113).

Here, then, was a riddle: how had a community whose social abjection and religious proclivities made it the paradigmatic confounder of order in colonial times come to be regarded in the postcolonial period as commonsense constituents of an unquestioned majority? How had despised outsiders to the house of Hinduism come to be seen as bricks in its very foundation? However this had transpired, the contours of the change seemed to suggest a more fundamental historical relation between the politics of untouchability and the rise of religious majoritarianism—phenomena ordinarily treated as separate or only glancingly related—than is generally admitted. Perhaps observing the census, where caste and religion appear arm in arm as categories through which the state offers its citizens a kind of recognition, might offer some clues.

I was therefore grateful when the census director of UP generously granted me permission to accompany enumerators on their rounds. The census, in one major line of argument, bears responsibility for the reification or calcification of caste and religion as categories of social difference in colonial modernity (Appadurai 1993; Cohn 1987; Dirks 2001; Gottschalk 2013; Kaviraj 1992). Bringing ethnography to bear on this largely historical contention might build upon its insights or reveal its limits. Whereas most accounts of the census consider only the remote guise of the state, as a distant power that determines the categorical schema according to which recognition and other political goods will be distributed, firsthand observation would reveal the state in its proximate guise, as a neighborhood schoolteacher or city employee called in for census duty, bringing local relations of power into play in the generation of official knowledge. It was an opportunity to witness how people talk about caste and religion in those brief, tense conversations between enumerator and enumerated that cumulatively produce such seemingly transparent demographic facts as India's 79.8 percent Hindu majority.

Thus I found myself on a grey February morning going door to door with a pair of census workers, participating in a once-in-ten-years irruption of state officialdom into the weekday routines of a working-class, largely Dalit neighborhood or *bastī* squeezed between the bungalows and bougainvillea of a posh housing colony and the rubbish-strewn tracks of one of Lucknow's

secondary rail lines. Shankar,[1] a municipal clerk, was the enumerator officially responsible for the *bastī*, but on account of his failing eyesight he had brought along his son Narayan, a mass communications student, who carried the clipboard and forms and conducted most of the interviews. In a lane of small brick apartments, a middle-aged woman fielded Narayan's questions from her doorway, giving her family's surname as Gautam. When she disappeared inside to find out her mother-in-law's date of birth, Narayan turned to his father.

"What does Gautam come under?"

"Chamar!" Shankar replied in a loud, somewhat theatrical whisper. "SC!"

Narayan wrote "SC" in the appropriate box, identifying the woman and her family as Scheduled Caste, the governmental designation for Dalit or "untouchable" communities.

When the woman returned, Narayan skipped columns seven and eight; that is, he asked her about neither caste nor religion, but proceeded to literacy status, disabilities and so on before completing the interview and moving to the next home. Though puzzled, I said nothing at the time. Later in the day, in the privacy of the home of a friend and caste fellow of Shankar's, the enumerators filled in the blank columns, marking everyone in the Gautam family thus:

Caste: SC (Chamar)
Religion: Hindu

As the father and son explained to me, when Shankar *knew* (*jānte*) a person's caste, there was no need to ask the caste question, and when the caste fell within the Scheduled Castes, there was no need to ask about religion. This method contravened rules in the government's instruction manual for census workers, rules that underscore that the enumerator is "bound to record faithfully whatever religion is returned by the respondent for herself/himself and for other members in the household" and that warn specifically against assuming a correlation between caste names and religion (Chandramouli 2011: 44–45).

[1] Here and throughout the book names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors. Exceptions are public figures (members of parliament and the UP legislative assembly like Kanhaiyya Lal Balmiki, Narain Din, and Achhe Lal Balmiki in chapter 5, Lucknow's mayor in the afterword), and two individuals, now deceased, who insisted in their interviews with me that their real names be retained: Govind Prasad and Lalta Prasad (chapter 5).

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In practice, though, Narayan and Shankar's policy of inferring the caste and religion of Dalit interviewees was the norm—not only for this pair, but for teams of census enumerators I accompanied on their rounds elsewhere in Lucknow as well as in Benares and Mirzapur. The fact that great numbers of Chamars in UP have converted to Buddhism and that the surname Gautam—a name of the Buddha—is preferred by many Dalits precisely on account of its Buddhist resonances was not a consideration for the enumerators. Each Gautam they encountered was recorded as Hindu, without the question having been asked.

So it went at the next home, and the next, and several more after that: each family bore a recognizably Dalit surname, rendering the caste and religion questions, from Shankar and Narayan's point of view, superfluous. A burst of cold rain sent us running for shelter under the blue tarpaulin awning of a chai stall. When it cleared, we made our way to another cluster of brick apartments, where we found a group of women and men watching children play in the puddles while geese noisily snapped up water nearby. As we approached, one of the elderly women in the group, observing us, called out, 'Panditji has come [*Panditjī ā gaye*]!' Not certain I had heard her correctly—and unaware of Shankar and Narayan's caste—I discreetly asked Shankar what the woman had said.

Continuing to walk toward the group, he replied loudly, "She said, 'Pandit ji has come!' Because we are brahmins."

"Brahmins," his son confirmed.

"Brahmins by caste," Shankar added, this time in English.

We were now standing before the elderly woman. Shankar's words seemed to hang suspended in the air during the long, uneasy silence that ensued, until finally one of the men in the group brought over some red plastic chairs, gestured for us to sit, and began to answer Narayan's questions.

"Surname?"

"Balmiki."

Hearing this, Narayan marked dashes under the columns for caste and religion—he would fill them in later as "SC" and "Hindu"—and proceeded to other questions. After finishing with this man's family, Narayan turned to the next-door neighbor, Rajesh, who had just emerged from a bath and answered questions standing in a towel and tee-shirt. After his family's form was complete—again with everyone marked "Hindu" though the question had not been posed—another neighbor stepped forward to be interviewed, while Rajesh lingered to observe.

Narayan asked the neighbor, "And what work do you do in the municipality?"

The man did not reply.

"Sanitation worker [*Safāī karamchārī*]," said Shankar, speaking for the man and gesturing at his son to fill in the space accordingly.

"Wait," said Rajesh, still standing in his towel and watching the enumerators. "You all never asked me what work *I* do."

"I put you down as 'worker' [*karamchārī*]," said Narayan.

Rajesh explained that he worked as a network technician for a telecommunications company. "It's not as though all of us are sanitation workers," he continued. "We also have big positions. We have officers."

"Only in a few houses," Narayan retorted.

"But this is discrimination [*Yeh to bhed-bhāv hai*]. I'm not a sanitation worker."

"I wrote 'worker.' 'Worker' is alright."

"'Worker' is totally misleading. Even big officers are 'workers.' Also," here Rajesh pointed at the column where Narayan had written surnames, "that should be *V*almiki, not *B*almiki."

"Yes, yes, I'll fix it," Narayan replied with unconcealed irritation. But he changed nothing—neither the spelling of the caste title nor the designation of type of labor.

Behind this row of brick apartments ran a dirt lane along which stood a line of *jhoṁpṛī*s: improvised dwellings of brick, mud, thatch, tin, and plastic. Beyond the *jhoṁpṛī*s lay the railway tracks. In a home on this lane we were met at the door by a woman in a *salwār-qamīz* who looked the three of us over and asked, "What's this about? What's this for?"

Ignoring her, Narayan said, "Head of household?" The woman eyed him coolly and disappeared inside. A silver-bearded man emerged wearing a pink tee-shirt and a *lungi* perforated here and there by cigarette burns. From his threshold he fielded the enumerators' questions. He worked as a sweeper in a private hospital; his children took up whatever work they could find, in sanitation or anything else.

"Caste?"

After a substantial pause, he said, "Balmiki."

Narayan came to the religion column, and this time he chose to ask. "You're Hindu, aren't you [*Āp Hindu haiṅ, na*]?"

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A long silence ensued. The hospital sweeper idly observed children playing in the lane while Narayan looked to his father and Shankar began to fidget. Finally the man said, "Yes, Hindu."

Shankar, visibly perturbed by the man's hesitation, pursued the matter. "You're not, for instance, Lal Begi, are you? Because, you know, there are Lal Begis who are Muslim."

"You mean the Dilliwals," the man replied. He then delivered a roundabout discourse on the essential interchangeability of the terms Lal Begi, Balmiki, Dilliwal, Panch Sau Tirasi (the number 583), and other names by which his caste is known locally. He neither affirmed nor repudiated the allegation of Muslim-ness.

Shankar reiterated his contention that some Lal Begis are Muslim, and again probed whether the man was Lal Begi. His interlocutor said nothing but watched Shankar and Narayan impassively. Eventually, Narayan wrote "Hindu" in the religion column of the form and wrapped up the interview.

A few doors down we came to a one-room brick structure before which plastic tarps had been stretched to shelter an open cooking area. Stooped beneath this was a woman in a green sweater, stirring a pot of boiling lentils. She stood up, greeted us, and asked, "What will we get out of this?"

"This is the census," said Narayan.

"You people are the future of India!" Shankar added.

When Narayan came to the caste question she answered, "Balmiki." Narayan proceeded to column seven, religion, and again decided to ask. "Your religion is Hindu [*Dharm Hindu hī hai*]?"

"No." She spoke quietly but distinctly. I was startled by her response but tried not to indicate it. Narayan and Shankar gave no apparent reaction. Nobody spoke. The pot of lentils steamed and bubbled.

After an interval, Narayan repeated the question with slightly different wording, "You're Hindu [*Hindu haiṅ*]?"

"Yes."

Shankar turned to me as though to explain the necessity of the question, "Some people do convert [*Kuchh log dharmparivartan karte haiṅ*]."

What was going on here? The woman offered no explanation for her *volte-face*, delivered in the same steady tone as her initial reply. Equally flummoxing was Narayan's bald disregard of her initial response, as though such words could not be countenanced. If his father sought to assure me—or himself?—of the normativity of Dalit Hindu-ness by pointing to the rare event of formal

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conversion to another religion (*dharmparivartan*) as its only exception, this effort seemed undercut by his own repeated insinuation that the family at the previous house might be crypto-Muslim Lal Begis. And what to make of the man whose reticence and elliptical speech elicited this charge? Caste titles and religious labels mingled and converged in his periphrastic response to Shankar's queries, suggesting a mode of belonging at variance with prevailing regimes of distinction, indecipherable in the language of the state. Why was the enumerator so vexed by this man's studied ambiguity? If his silences were to speak, what would they say?

The Story Line in Brief

The book that lies ahead attempts to answer this question. Without giving the plot away entirely, let me sketch its trajectory, indicating in brief some of its key historical and ethnographic arguments. This is a study of the disparate yet deeply entwined histories of religion among the sanitation labor castes and Hindu majoritarianism. One cannot be told without the other: no account of Dalit religion in modernity can afford to ignore the past century of interventions in that domain by Hindu nationalists and the state, as those interventions have produced the very terms in which discussion is now legible. Hindu majoritarianism, for its part, has been driven by the fear of Dalit religious autonomy—a fear partly in response to collective practices of the sanitation labor castes in the colonial period—from its very inception. If the interreligious antagonism known in India as communalism has long been animated by the politics of caste (Basu 1996; Hansen 1999; Menon 2010), some of the most foundational sociological assumptions about caste have been manufactured, largely undetected, by communalism.

This book is an effort to make sense of that February morning with the enumerators in Lucknow: why the woman stirring lentils first told Narayan that she was not Hindu, and then, when asked again, that she was. Or why the man in the pink tee-shirt replied so obliquely to the question of religion, or, equally, why his long pauses incited the enumerator to say, "You're not, for instance, Lal Begi are you?" Attentiveness to contradiction and circumlocution, as well as to non-verbal signs like silence and gesture, may guide us toward insights altogether at odds with the "final word" of authorized discourse. It is one of my arguments that a semiotic approach to the study of caste and religious belonging—an approach attentive to signifying practices, the composition and interpretation of signs by which identitarian affiliations are

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sustained—makes possible the apprehension of social phenomena that have remained opaque to other analytical traditions. These phenomena challenge established paradigms in the study of religion in South Asia and trouble some of the ethical presuppositions that modernity urges on us regarding secrecy, subterfuge, and self-identification.

Contemporary politics in South Asia is predicated on the figure of the primordially Hindu untouchable—a figure that conceptually confines Dalits within the framework of Hinduism, securing for Hindus a demographic majority in the present and a claim to religious and cultural hegemony in the past. In this book I argue that the idea of the transhistorically Hindu untouchable emerged scarcely a century ago, and that it ran athwart the collective self-perception of the sanitation labor castes. Drawing on a range of sources from the 1870s to the 1920s, I contend that the sanitation labor castes of north India during that period widely understood themselves as neither Hindu nor Muslim but as members of a *qaum* or *ummat*—a cohesive, autonomous socioreligious community—centered on Lal Beg, an antinomian prophet (*paighambar*) who moved in a largely Islamicate narrative world. Hindus and Muslims, moreover, acknowledged the religious alterity of the Lal Begis, as they were called. Thus Hindu census enumerators in the colonial period often refused to record the sanitation labor castes as their co-religionists. The colonial administrative decision to classify untouchables as Hindus by default contradicted prevailing sociological common sense. In chapter 2, I analyze evidence from the liturgical songs and other oral traditions of the Lal Begis that speak to Dalit perceptions of self and other in that period.

All of this began to change as techniques of colonial governance stimulated a politics of numbers in which castes and religious groups, increasingly assuming the politicized character of "enumerated communities" (Kaviraj 1992), vied to constitute majorities in local, provincial, and pan-Indian representative bodies in the early decades of the twentieth century. These conditions gave rise among some Hindus to the "fear of small numbers" that Arjun Appadurai (2006: 52) names as a signal feature in the emergence of majoritarianism globally. It was in the context of a Hindu fear of small numbers—of being a "dying race" demographically and politically threatened by growing Muslim and Christian numbers—that the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization, systematically took up efforts at *achhutodhhār* or "untouchable uplift," and to persuade Hindus and Dalits to reimagine one another as co-religionists. I will show that the idea that the sanitation labor castes and other Dalits are and always have

been Hindu—an idea that struck some contemporary observers as offensive and others as absurd—was mooted for the first time in the 1910s and 1920s by the Arya Samaj as a strategy of what we may call *majoritarian inclusion*, an effort to secure a majority against a potential rival by incorporating a heretofore despised outgroup. In chapter 3, I describe this effort and the skepticism with which it was often met through a reading of key Arya Samaj materials, unearthing in the process the degree to which Arya Samajists wrestled with their own *ghṛṇā*—a north Indian emotion-concept similar to disgust—as they began working with Dalits, and the ways in which Arya Samaj authors encouraged fellow Hindus to suspend the *ghṛṇā* they felt toward Dalits and to redirect it, instead, at Muslims. It is in these Arya Samaj texts, as well, that the sanitation labor castes were first provided a Hindu pedigree in the form of a genealogical connection to Rishi Valmiki, author of the Sanskrit epic the Ramayana.

It was not until the 1930s, though, that the newly conceived figure of the primordially Hindu untouchable came to appear credible to a larger public. Though the colonial state and the Arya Samaj had laid the groundwork, the political maneuvers and representational interventions that were decisive in giving majoritarian inclusion the mass traction it ultimately achieved were those of Gandhi, the Harijan Sevak Sangh ("Servants of Untouchables Society"), the Indian National Congress, and literary figures inspired by Gandhi such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mulk Raj Anand. Their contributions to the discursive and political confinement of Dalits within Hinduism are the subject of chapter 4. "I know infinitely more than you do what Harijans *are*," Gandhi (1934d) said to his "untouchable" critics in 1934, referring to their caste fellows with his preferred nomenclature of Harijan or "people of Hari"—Hari being a Vaishnava Hindu name for god—"[I know] where they live, what their number is and to what condition they have been reduced." The mahatma's welding together of an enumerative, panoptic, governmental imagination with a decidedly brahminical social ontology set his approach apart; his monological manner of speaking *for* largely overrode the Arya Samaj's dialogical effort to speak *to* and to *persuade*. Thus the missionary majoritarianism of the 1910s and 1920s yielded to the trustee majoritarianism of the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, which declared that "no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste," and in doing so, elevated the Gandhian representational strategy to the law of the land, securing postcolonial India's Hindu majority by fiat.

How did Hinduization work out on the ground? In chapter 5 we return to Lucknow for a more fine-grained and local study of majoritarian inclusion and its resistance from the late 1940s onward, based on interviews with many of the individuals directly involved and archival materials their families have preserved. Seizing on the institutional space opened for Dalits by the Arya Samaj and the Congress, a subset of the sanitation labor castes took up—and in the taking up, altered—the majoritarian project. Once the Congress's strategy achieved the status of law, apparent signs of Hinduization, like the wholesale refashioning of names, swiftly followed. The ancient Sanskrit poet Rishi Valmiki, who had no following among the sanitation labor castes of Lucknow before 1947, was introduced to the community as their ancestor. Valmiki became the sign of a new regime of recognition: a government holiday in honor of Valmiki was instituted, streets and parks were renamed after the *rishi*, and Congress and Harijan Sevak Sangh leaders like Ghanshyamdas Birla began funding Valmiki statues and temples intended for the sanitation labor castes.

More contested within the community was the abandonment or repudiation of Lal Beg that the advocates of Hinduization championed, and corresponding transformations in ritual, in the food, drink, and equipment of nuptial and death ceremonies, and in everyday relations with Muslim neighbors. The degree to which leaders of the newly named Balmiki community succeeded in bringing about their reforms correlated with their capacity to deliver concrete goods of housing, access to education, stable employment, and the curtailment of untouchability practices. Leaders tackled the latter by means of one of the strategies of majoritarian inclusion bequeathed them by the Arya Samaj: pursuing legal action against practitioners of untouchability—so long as the offenders were Muslim, not Hindu.

Yet this is not only a tale of people coming to inhabit the categorical niches allotted them by the postcolonial state. Part of what I am tracking is a process of this sort—what Ian Hacking (1985) calls "dynamic nominalism" or simply "making up people." But there is more than this to the history and present of the religious life of the sanitation labor castes, and we will need to turn from historical to ethnographic methods to arrive at other key findings of this book. Having witnessed the decline of Lal Beg and the ascendance of Valmiki over the twentieth century, we turn in chapters 6 and 7 to the practices by which the old caste prophet is remembered and the new caste god is celebrated in Lucknow today. Here we analyze ways in which normative ideas of appropriate modes of signifying and relating to the sacred—semiotic ideologies—structure religious

practice and self-representation, and ways in which signifying practices render certain social realities hypervisible (and hyperaudible) while making others, equally real, invisible or concealed in plain sight. Through a description and analysis of processions (*jhāṅkiyāṅ*) and speech-making functions (*kāryakram*) on Valmiki Jayanti—the annual celebration of Valmiki's advent in the world—we examine how a declamatory mode of identitarian self-disclosure has come to characterize Dalit religious practice, and perhaps religious ways of being in South Asia more generally, and we obtain a feel for the texture and the limits of the inclusion the sanitation labor castes have been offered as Hindus.

Of all the "weapons of the weak" identified in James Scott's (1987) influential formulation—the "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage," and other everyday tactics by which disprivileged groups "avoid direct, symbolic confrontation with authority" even while securing a measure of relief from structural violence—surely the most difficult to study is dissimulation. While all of these "infrapolitical" (Scott 2012) techniques keep a low profile in the historical record, the latter not only does not announce itself as a form of politics, it actively conceals its own tracks. Methodological and epistemological questions fly thick here: when the very definition of successful dissimulation is invisibility, and unsuccessful efforts are necessarily disavowable and disavowed, then on what basis can an enquirer make anything more than a speculative claim about the practice? Chapter 7 contends with these and related questions while giving an account of gestures, ways of signifying the sacred, and what happens now on the day that colonial accounts described as the annual feast of Lal Beg. This chapter contains developments that are better not summarized in advance. My interlocutors taught me that valuable knowledge is not disclosed quickly, in the first week or even the first year of a relationship, but only after a certain thickness of context and commitment to understanding is established. I have structured the book accordingly. For now, suffice it to say that the continuing vitality of traditions of tactical concealment may lead us to reconsider what Hinduization may have meant all along.

The Sanitation Labor Castes

To speak of caste is to conjure a babel of discourses all at once. The English word routinely translates two distinct concepts present in Sanskrit and the vernacular languages—*varṇa*, the four ranked classes or "colors" of brahman, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra that together constitute the social organism

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in conceptualizations of society from the Purusha Sukta of the *Rig Veda* onward, and *jāti*, meaning species (cognate, in fact, with the Latin "genus"), the multitudinous endogamous hereditary groups that regulate reproduction and set the terms of interaction in actual social life. At the same time caste also conveys the early modern European ideology of blood purity encoded in its own Iberian etymology, as reflected in the application of *casta* (related to "chaste") to social groups in New Spain as well as in Portuguese Goa. British imperialism decisively influenced the history of European representations of Indian society, fashioning caste into a trope, a sign of India's difference from the West, a ready justification of the "rule of colonial difference" (Chatterjee 1993: 18) that has cast a long shadow over popular and scholarly discussions of the social form (Appadurai 1988; Dirks 2001). Yet the critical historicization of the European trope of caste does not preclude analysis of the social form—caste qua *jāti*—that, in places like Lucknow, continues to exert profound and far-reaching influence over collective life, from sex and diet to political representation and waste management. Though related in complicated ways, the two are distinct intellectual projects, oriented, as it were, toward different "castes."

South Asian history over the longue durée renders a view of caste as a "highly involuted, politicized form of ethnic ranking shaped by the constant exercise of socio-economic power" (S. Guha 2013: 2). An "adaptive structure" (Lynch 1969: 3), it continues to ensure inherited advantage for some and disadvantage for others through interpersonal and institutional networks that have made accommodations with, rather than fallen victim to, such consequential political, economic and technological changes of the last century as the universal franchise, the democratization of education, the integration into a cash economy of agrarian systems of labor exchange, and the mechanization of a host of traditionally caste-based crafts and forms of labor (Natrajan 2012; Subramanian 2019). Organizing social perception and inscribing meaning onto bodies so perceived, caste, in a more intimate register, is both a "state of mind" (Dumont 1980: 34) and "a form of *embodiment*" (Rao 2003: 5). Like its equally insidious cousin race, caste works its way simultaneously into large-scale institutional systems and the interstices of our bodies and minds.

Among the most apposite characterizations of caste for our purposes is that of Bhimrao Ambedkar, India's first law minister and a towering figure in anti-caste theory and praxis, when he describes it as an "ascending scale of reverence

and a descending scale of contempt" (Ambedkar 1990: 26). This framing draws attention to affect, suggesting ways that caste shapes the inculcation of emotion norms and the cultivation of distinctive emotional repertoires according to social location (Guru 2009b; Lee 2020; Lynch 1990). The affective structure of caste will play a significant role in our story of majoritarian inclusion. Ambedkar's formulation is felicitous as well for its foregrounding of hierarchy, that hoary element of caste analysis that innumerable popular and scholarly accounts, partly in response to its perceived overemphasis in the work of Louis Dumont, have sought to consign to the dustbin of social theory, yet which refuses to cede ground in the empirical domain of quotidian social relations. While there is a desire in several quarters for the concerns of prestige, purity–pollution, and inherent quality-substance in a ranked system to be seen as located in the past, it would be disingenuous to downplay their force in the caste-segregated *bastī*s of Lucknow at the center of this study, where hierarchy is inscribed in the organization of urban space and the sensory matter that circulates within it (Lee 2017), in the dispensation of resources, in the ubiquity of the vertical metaphor in references to caste status in everyday speech, and in the distribution of waste and death labor.

The nether terminus of Ambedkar's "ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt"—its lowermost extremity, subject to demonstrations of intense affect peculiar to such a location on such a gradation—is inhabited, according to broad consensus, by the sanitation labor castes. Novelist Madan Dikshit (1996: 40) cites a Hindi proverb: there is "no insult worse than whore, no caste lower than Mehtar." This adunation of sexual and caste hierarchies indexes the constitutive significance for the preservation of caste order of control over women's sexuality; caste is nothing if not a patriarchal endeavor (Chakravarti 2019). Further, the adage points to a parallelism between subordinated threats to the order of endogamy: the whore whose womb cannot be harnessed to the project of caste reproduction (Ramberg 2014: 146–77), and the Mehtar—a collective term for the sanitation labor castes—long known for accepting into its ranks persons and groups excommunicated from "higher" social locations, frequently for having transgressed prohibitions against sex or marriage outside caste (Shyamlal 1997). As a destination for downward mobility, as receivers of and minglers with refractory elements, the Mehtar community, like the proverbial whore, embodies a principle of mixing that is antithetical to the principle of discernment and separation essential to caste endogamy and prized in brahminical thought more broadly.

Mehtar, a Persian word that in the Mughal period denoted prince and now designates sanitation worker, is but one of the welter of names by which the protagonists of this book are known. We have seen already that Lal Begi and Valmiki/Balmiki designate this group as well, and that these terms seem haunted by a past that troubles both the namers and the named. Caste nomenclature is a vexed domain, a field of contestation in which every name bears the affective charge of a history of usage as a term of awe and deference, scorn and revulsion, or gradations of esteem in between. Reflecting on the struggles of Dalits to wrest control of the labels by which they are known on this uneven field, Ambedkar observed:

> The name "Untouchable" is a bad name. It repels, forbids, and stinks. The social attitude of the Hindu towards the Untouchable is determined by the very name... [T]he Bhangis call themselves Balmikis.... [T]hey give themselves other names which may be likened to the process of undergoing protective discolouration....The name matters and matters a great deal. For, the name can make a revolution in the status of the Untouchables. But the name must be the name of a community outside Hinduism and beyond its power of spoliation and degradation. (Ambedkar 1992: 419–20)

Ambedkar's portrayal of a grappling over names invested with ideological content and charged with affective force—the name "repels, forbids," but can also "make a revolution"—assumes that words alter reality rather than merely describing it, and that naming constitutes a tactical maneuver in an agonistic social field more than an exercise in disinterested classification. Ambedkar's implicit theory of signs, that is, converges with those of mathematician-philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1955: 269–89), for whom signs are assessed not in terms of correspondence to pre-given meanings but in terms of their consequences in the world, and linguistic philosopher Valentin Vološinov (1973: 23), for whom the "sign is the arena of class struggle." The analysis of the politics of naming, knowledge, concealment and recognition that runs throughout this book is well served by such a framework. It helps account for the striking instability of nomenclature over time at the "lower" reaches of the caste order. When different classes (castes, in our case) belong to the same sign community (that is, speak the same language), the divergent ideological assessments they make of a given phenomenon come to intersect in the sign that represents it. Shot through with these various evaluative "accents," the sign becomes what Vološinov calls "multiaccentual": the casteist contempt with

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which deployments of the term "Bhangi" are conventionally associated jostles alongside the paternalist sympathy of the Gandhian, the empirical precision of the social scientist, the hate speech concerns of the human rights lawyer and the confrontational reappropriation of the Dalit radical, each vying with the rest for the successful interpretive claim, for efficacy in a given communicative moment and in the habits of interpretation that are built of such moments.

The multiaccentuality of the sign is not mere polysemy, where everyone is equally free to select an interpretation or have one's interpretation validated. Rather, it is ineluctably structured "by the hierarchical organization of communication" wherein socially dominant groups enjoy greater representational agency, especially in the domain of the written word, where they strive "to impart a supraclass, eternal character" to the sign, to make the sign "uniaccentual" (Kockelman 2007; Vološinov 1973: 21, 23). Efforts of this sort help account for the devaluation, over generations, of several of the collective labels by which the sanitation labor castes have been known: Mehtar ("prince"), Jamadar ("head of any body of men," usually an army or police officer) and Halalkhor ("one who earns an honest living"). These relatively dignified terms adopted in the Mughal and colonial period have all suffered semantic pejoration (Hill 2008: 134–37) over recent centuries of association with sanitation workers (Lee 2018: 10–13). The fashioning of even staid governmental terms like Scheduled Caste into terms of disparagement like "Schaddu" on university campuses (Guru 2009b: 18) bears witness to the ongoing "power of spoliation and degradation" that advantaged castes exercise over caste names in Ambedkar's diagnosis. Nonetheless, the struggle continues, and if the word is "the most sensitive index of social changes" (Vološinov 1973: 19), then the careers of caste titles—like Lal Begi and Balmiki, whose shifting fortunes this book tracks—may be among our most valuable guides to the past and present of contemporary India.

Acknowledging that there are no neutral terms—no caste titles innocent of ideology or untinctured by hierarchical affect—let me clarify those that I provisionally employ. "Sanitation labor castes" is a translation of *safāī kāmgār jātiyāṅ* (*safāī*: cleaning, cleanliness, sanitation; *kāmgār*: worker, laborer; *jātiyāṅ*: castes), a collective self-designation in Hindi–Urdu that many though by no means all of my interlocutors use, as do a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose members belong to these castes and writers and journalists of a sympathetic bent. By this term I mean to denote those Dalit castes that perform the great majority of sanitation work in contemporary

South Asia. In north India this means the Chuhra (and its Sikh branch the Mazhabi), Dhanuk, Hela, Dom (also Domar), Bansphor (also Basor), and Halalkhor, regional castes affiliated by occupation, overlapping traditions, and myths of shared origin but kept clearly distinct by endogamy (and, in the Halalkhor case, openly Muslim identification). "We are like the bristles of a broom," my friend Daulat Ram once told me. Like the emblematic tool of their trade, he explained, the sanitation labor castes are tightly bundled at one end, dispersed at the other. In the ethnographic literature this caste cluster has been described as the "Dom group" (Briggs 1953; R. Guha 2010) or simply as "the sweeper castes" or "the scavenger castes" (see, for example, Gait 1902; Ibbetson 1970; Searle-Chatterjee 1981; Temple 1884). In the north Indian vernacular the more popular collective designations are Mehtar and Jamadar, described above, and the much-contested Bhangi. Likely derived from the Sanskrit root *bhañj* (to break, shatter, split, defeat), this word's etymology has been speculatively plotted into tales of defeat (the "broken ones"), occupational specialization (basket and broom makers, "splitters" of bamboo—precisely the meaning of Bansphor), or aboriginal revolt ("breakers" of invading Aryan armies) (Das 2007; Kumar 2004). See Table 1.1.

My main reservation in using the term "sanitation labor castes" is that it risks reifying the contingent link between a people and an occupation.

Table 1.1 North Indian Sanitation Labor Castes

Individual castes (*jātiyāṇ*)	**Collective designations** (in order of historical appearance)	**Titles referring to a caste prophet or tutelary saint** (primarily associated with the Chuhra yet sometimes applied collectively)
Bansphor/Basor	Halalkhor*	Lal Begi
Chuhra	Bhangi	Valmiki/Balmiki
Mazhabi (Sikh Chuhra)	Mehtar	
Dhanuk	Jamadar	
Dom/Domar		
Halalkhor*		
Hela		

Note: *Halalkhor from the late sixteenth century—when the Mughal emperor Akbar popularized it—to the early twentieth century collectively designated the sanitation labor castes as a whole; by the late twentieth century the term's reference narrowed to denote primarily a regional Dalit Muslim caste preponderant in eastern UP and Bihar (see Lee 2017).

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Ramnarayan Rawat (2011) cautions against identifying subaltern caste groups primarily by reference to stigmatized "traditional occupations" for empirical and ethical reasons: insofar as only a minority of the group may actually engage in such forms of labor, the identification can mislead; more troublingly, it can reproduce brahminical stereotypes. It is indeed the case that some of the sanitation labor castes entered this domain of work relatively recently; Dhanuks, for instance, appear to have taken up sweeping and scavenging between the 1870s and 1940s (Ibbetson 1970: 266–96, Searle-Chatterjee 1981: 26–30). The most populous of the sanitation labor castes, though—Chuhras and Doms—have been associated with these forms of work for far longer, as attested in their own oral traditions and in Al Biruni's eleventh century chronicle *Tārikh al-Hind*, which describes Doms removing filth from villages (Bīrūnī 1983: 85). The expansion of demand for sanitation labor accompanying the unprecedented urbanization of the twentieth century, alongside the withering of these castes' other "traditional occupations" due to mass production (of sieves, baskets, and chemical fertilizers), has led to urban waste work becoming by far the largest sector in which these castes are employed. In over a hundred interviews in the Balmiki *bastī*s of Lucknow I came to know of only two families that had no living member employed in sanitation; all other families had at least one and often several or even all adult members working with waste. This is not to gainsay the occupational diversity that obtains among an upwardly mobile minority of the community that lives outside the *bastī*s. Even they, however, in their dealings with people outside the community, are forced to contend with the stigma of their caste's association with waste work. In the same spirit that my interlocutors employ it, then, I use the term "sanitation labor castes" not to naturalize the historically produced association between waste work and a cluster of endogamous communities but rather in order to acknowledge the degree to which this domain of labor impinges on the community life of this caste cluster and on the lives and life chances of its members.

As the Hindi proverb cited earlier suggests, the ascription of abjectness to the sanitation labor castes obtains not only vis-à-vis the privileged castes but also relative to other Dalit caste formations. In north India, notably, the sanitation labor castes are seen as "lower" than the Chamar-Jatav cluster. Notes of resentment, admiration and envy of this more populous and politically organized caste cluster are not infrequently sounded in the meetings of sanitation labor caste associations. As with the numerically weaker rivals of politically

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assertive Dalit caste clusters in other regions of India (for example, Mangs, Madigas and Arunthatiyars vis-à-vis Mahars, Malas and Paraiyars, respectively), this resentment has often been exploited by political parties seeking to blunt the force of the critique of Hinduism and caste dominance that the regionally "dominant" Dalit castes, following Ambedkar, have tended to mount. This state of affairs—both the resentment and its exploitation—helps account for the fact that caste-critical social and political movements inaugurated by Chamars in north India have had difficulty retaining significant participation by the sanitation labor castes (Juergensmeyer 2009: 62–63, Rawat 2011: 155, 159; Shyamlal 2016). While there are significant exceptions, the sanitation labor castes on the whole have remained *Ambedkar se vimukh* or "turned away from Ambedkar," to use Darshan Ratan Ravan's (2010) apt phrase.

How large is this community? Scheduled Castes as a whole constitute 16.6 percent of India's population, but census data on individual castes has not been published since the late colonial period. In the 1901 and 1911 censuses the sanitation labor castes of north India amounted to some four million persons and made up 6.3 percent of the overall population of Punjab and 1.9 percent of that of UP (Risley 1902; Gait 1913b).[2] If these proportions have remained stable, the sanitation labor castes would now number something in the vicinity of 1.7 million in Punjab and 3.8 million in UP.

The fieldwork that informs this book includes interviews with members of most of the north Indian sanitation labor castes—Chuhra, Dhanuk, Dom, Halalkhor and Hela, though not Bansphor or Mazhabi—conducted in Delhi, Bihar (Sasaram and Patna), Haryana (Panipat), and UP (Azamgarh, Bara Banki, Benares, Bhadohi, Faizabad, Gorakhpur, Lucknow, Mau, Meerut, Mirzapur, Pratapgarh, Sitapur, and Tanda). Ultimately, though, this study is based in Lucknow, and grounded foremost in the community life of the regional clan of the Chuhra caste that lives there and supplies half of the city's sanitation workers (the other half are Dhanuk). Of the sanitation labor castes by far the most populous and transregional are the Chuhra. They figure prominently

[2] The sum of the all-India population totals for Bansphor, Bhangi, Chuhra, Dhanuk, Dom, Halalkhor, Lal Begi, Mazhabi, and Mehtar—where they are tallied separately and not as subsets of one another—was 4,142,224 in 1901 and 3,928,504 in 1911. In the United Provinces—the colonial UP, predecessor, with modifications, of postcolonial Uttar Pradesh—their percentage of the population was 1.86 in 1901 and 1.88 in 1911; in Punjab 6.33 in 1901 and 6.29 in 1911. These figures exclude Chuhra converts to Christianity, likely in the hundreds of thousands by 1911 (see chapter 2).

in both the rural and urban population of a region extending from central Pakistan to central UP, concentrated especially in Punjab. Awadh, the region surrounding Lucknow that is the setting of this study, is the easternmost swath of this Chuhra "heartland." Sections of the caste migrated to cities and cantonments across the subcontinent following the expansion of railway and military networks in the colonial period and the demand for labor they produced. Settled in cities from Karachi to Calcutta to Pune and Hyderabad in the Deccan, Hindi- and Punjabi-speaking Chuhra communities often nurture links of marriage and communication stretching back to the heartland (Campbell 1885; Streefland 1979).

In Chuhra oral traditions transcribed in the nineteenth century, the community remembers itself as being none other than the Chandal (*chāṇḍāla*), the brahminical discursive tradition's paradigmatic "untouchable" and archetype of alterity, a figure loathed and feared in two millennia of Sanskrit texts (Aktor 2010; Jha 1986). It was overwhelmingly among the Chuhra caste in the colonial period that the "cult of Lal Beg" thrived and the title Lal Begi was adopted, though there is evidence that Dhanuks and to some extent other sanitation labor castes participated as well. Likewise in the twentieth century it was (and remains) primarily among the Chuhra that the veneration of Valmiki and the adoption of that title obtains, though adjacent castes in the cluster are often assumed to be Valmiki/Balmiki by outsiders and make strategic use of the identification themselves.

In Awadh, for reasons absent from the archive and lost to collective memory, the Chuhra caste is constituted by clans (*qabīle*) known not by names but by numbers: the Hazara (Thousand) of Mahmudabad, the Bara Ghar (Twelve Houses) of Sitapur, the Baisi (Twenty-Two) and the Nau Sau Nawasi (Nine Hundred Eighty-Nine). Most of the people we will meet in this book belong to the Panch Sau Tirasi (Five Hundred Eighty-Three, hereafter 583), easily the largest of the *qabīle*. The traditional territory of the 583 stretches between the Gomti and the Ghaghra rivers from Sitapur in the northwest to Faizabad in the southeast: the better part of three administrative districts (see Figure 1.1). At the geographical center of this territory stands the Sufi shrine of Dewa Sharif, where the 583 traditionally convene their *panchayat* or caste council. The clan is organized into exogamous patrilineages, each of which must be prepared to supply men to perform prescribed functions at *panchayat* meetings: the *chaudhury* adjudicates, the *nāyab* deputizes, the *pyāda* serves summons, the *khūnī pyāda* enforces summons, and so on. The administrative, even

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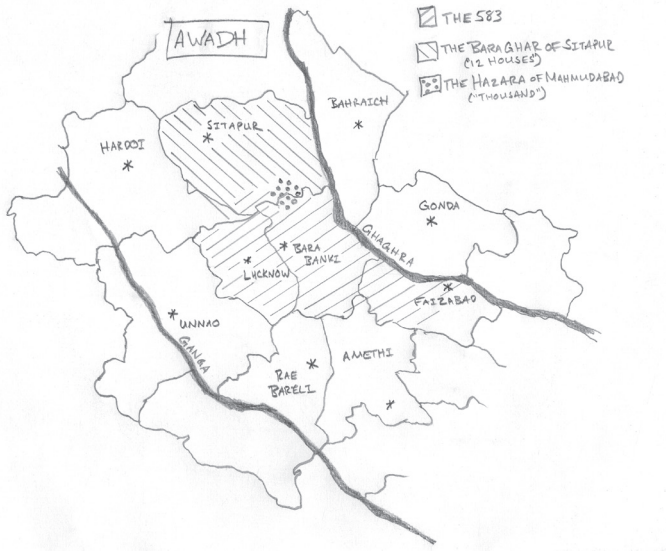

Figure 1.1 Awadh, with traditional area of settlement of the 583 and neighboring *qabīle* (clans)
Source: Map by author.

quasi-military paradigm for the organization of these kinship units sets them apart from *gotra*s (exogamous patrilineages common among north Indian Hindus) and corresponds closely with principles of sanitation labor caste organization noted in the colonial period (Burn 1902: 233; Greeven 1894: 9–14). The 583 trace the origins of this institution to Jumma Mehtarani, a shrewd and sagacious (*dimāghdār*, *chatur*) ancestress whose strategic dealings with her royal employers won the caste concrete benefits in land, patronage, and protection. Some say she came from Iran or accompanied Babur's Mughal army; others place her centuries later, as an accomplice of Begum Hazrat Mahal, the queen of Awadh known for sponsoring native insurgents against the British in the great rebellion of 1857.

Unlike the Chuhra caste elsewhere, the 583 do not raise or sell swine, but do rear and trade horses and mules, notably at the annual horse-trading festival at Dewa Sharif. The 583 also distinguish themselves by observing a strict prohibition on the consumption of pig flesh, whereas in many parts of north India pork is central to Chuhra ritual and social life. Finally, the 583 enjoy a reputation for affectations of the lifestyle of Awadh's erstwhile Muslim elite: a fondness for biryani and other rich and meaty foods, a predilection for hosting

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lavish feasts, and a tradition of women bequeathing their daughters beautifully wrought brass *pāndān*s and consuming much *pān*, a mild stimulant of tobacco, areca nut and slaked lime wrapped in betel leaf. The incongruity of all this with the abject picture of the lives of Dalit sanitation workers that circulates in the wider society is not lost on the 583, who often make their allegedly *nawabi* tastes an object of banter.

I was introduced to the 583 by Tara Balmiki, a Lucknow-based activist for whose Dalit feminist organization I worked as a volunteer (preparing grant proposals, doing Hindi–English translation and research assistance) in 2003 and later as a collaborator in a four-state advocacy study on caste and gender violence. Her introduction opened doors and conversations. Living in Lucknow in 2011–12 with my family, and then alone in shorter stints spread over the subsequent eight years, I was received in the community with warmth and reciprocal curiosity. That I sought to research and write a book on the sanitation labor castes and their religious history was broadly accepted, by some even encouraged; I was graciously invited to weddings, engagements, *panchayat* meetings, labor union functions, all-night *jāgaran*s and *qawwālī* sessions, goat sacrifices to local goddesses, pilgrimages to Sufi shrines, journeys to the hospice of a guru in distant Punjab. My new acquaintances enlisted me as a teacher of conversational English in an afterschool program for youth in one of the *bastī*s. As relations deepened, friends brought me as well to burials, feasts in honor of the dead, and rituals of a more clandestine kind. My efforts to learn by collecting genealogies and family histories; accompanying sweepers, drain cleaners, carcass collectors and sanitary supervisors on their daily rounds; cross-checking findings from the UP state archives and Amir-ud Daula public library with the narratives and personal collections of community elders; and conversing endlessly on matters of religion and community life were met, on the whole, with forbearance. Yet a sense of the weight of the collective experience being shared—and the expectation that the book I would write would convey the gravity of this history—wove through the tolerant good humor.

Harijan Politics

For good reasons, the historical study of Dalit politics and religion has often centered on the Ambedkarite movement and its homologues in other regions, movements defined by bold critiques of caste and Hinduism, an emancipatory discourse and confrontational style, and religious conversion or the assertion

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of autochthonous religious identities such as Adi-Dravida and Ad Dharmi (see, among others, Aloysius 1998; Jaffrelot 2005; Juergensmeyer 2009; Lynch 1969; Paik 2014; Rao 2009; Rawat 2011; Rege 2006; Zelliot 2010). These were usually led by the regionally most populous Dalit caste cluster, marginally "higher" than the sanitation labor castes in local reckonings: Mahars in Maharashtra, Namashudras in Bengal, Chamars/Jatavs in north India, and so on. Comparatively less is known of the religious politics of somewhat smaller caste clusters, like the sanitation labor castes, that the Congress sought to cultivate as a counterweight to Ambedkar and his allies (although see Dube 1998: ch. 6; Jangam 2017: ch. 5; Jaoul 2011; Prashad 2000: chs. 5–6). In significant ways, our story charts this less studied pattern—a trajectory of politics not of emancipation but of upliftment, not of Ambedkarite confrontation but of Gandhian conciliation, not Dalit politics but *Harijan politics*.

When non-Ambedkarite Dalit engagements with Hinduism *are* taken into account, the framing question is often this: why do particular Dalit and other disprivileged caste formations, under particular conditions, embrace or appear to embrace a politics that valorizes brahminical ideology, when the ontological inferiority of Dalits is an axiom of that very ideology (Bandyopadhyay 1997; Basu 1996; Gooptu 2001; Hansen 1999; Jangam 2017; Menon 2010; Narayan 2009; Prashad 2000; Rawat 2011)? Vijay Prashad (2000: ix–xi) throws this question into sharp relief by citing allegations of Balmiki participation in the anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi in 1984 and in subsequent smaller-scale skirmishes with Muslims in Delhi and parts of UP, a concern reignited after the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, an instance of orchestrated violence against Muslims in which Dalits were reported to participate. There are reasons to exercise caution here: the extent of Balmiki involvement in these incidents has been questioned on evidentiary grounds (Kolenda 2003: 432–53), and it is important not to collapse distinctions between acquiescence to Hindu majoritarian discourse by Balmikis (itself a matter of degree), and active engagement in anti-minority violence. But there is no denying that some Balmikis in some regions have earned a reputation for a full-throated, even militant embrace of Hindu majoritarianism.

I began fieldwork expecting to encounter this "counter-intuitive alliance between activists dalits ... and the forces of Hindutva" (Prashad 2000: x). What I found, however, has led me to invert the question, important as it is. When one considers the geographical breadth and historical depth of efforts by

hardline Hindu nationalists to enlist the sanitation labor castes in mobilizations against Muslims, what is perhaps more astonishing than their success in a handful of cases is their failure everywhere else. Unlike in the examples Prashad cites, in Lucknow and its hinterland—despite the region being the epicenter of Hindu nationalist mobilizations around the Babri Masjid dispute, and despite militant Hindus' wooing of Dalits in particular—the sanitation labor castes have repeatedly declined the invitation to majoritarian violence. What is often missed in studies of communal conflict, as Laura Ring (2006) and Bhrigupati Singh (2015) point out, is that everyday amity between groups is as much a consequence of sustained social labor as is violence, and warrants equal analytical attention. Let us ask, then, how it is that the sanitation labor castes in Awadh have *not* become footsoldiers of Hindutva despite a century of attempts to make them so. What tactics and traditions have facilitated the reproduction of Dalit neighborliness with Muslims when political forces have encouraged its opposite? To understand how the sanitation labor castes in Awadh (and indeed most of India) have resisted elements of the majoritarian project, even while embracing or appearing to embrace others, is at least as important as to explain why some of their caste fellows in other regions have assumed a militant posture.

The Politics of *Pahchān*

It had been a long day of census work. Delayed by episodes of rain rare for a Lucknow winter, Shankar and his son Narayan, with me in tow, had surveyed some twenty-six homes over the course of the morning and afternoon when we arrived at one of the *bastī*'s provision shops. Its owner Joshi, a friend and caste-fellow of Shankar, greeted us effusively and insisted on taking us home for cup of chai. A brick apartment upstairs from two Balmiki families, Joshi's was the only brahmin household—and one of very few non-Dalit families—in the *bastī*. Joshi introduced us to his wife, asked her to prepare tea, and sat us on couches around a table. It was here, out of earshot of neighbors and passersby, that Shankar and Narayan explained to me their method of filling columns seven and eight of the census form by inferring caste from surname, and religion from caste—most of the time, at least. Drawing our host into the conversation, Narayan elaborated that since he knows that Joshis are brahmins and Hindus, he need not ask the shopkeeper's caste or religion. But what of surnames that have been adopted by more than one caste? The question brought smiles to the faces of Shankar, Narayan, and the Joshis. They named several "Backward

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Castes" and Scheduled Castes whose members sometimes adopt brahmin and other high-sounding surnames. Such affectations, Shankar assured me, do not escape his notice or lead him to misidentify "backwards" as brahmins.

"I *catch* them [*Maiṅ pakaṛ letā huṅ*]," said Shankar.

Narayan added, "Papa *knows* [*Pāpā jānte haiṅ*]."

"I have lived here many years," his father continued, evidently savoring the discussion. "I *catch* them."

What is it, exactly, that Shankar *knows*? This book takes as one of its central concerns the politics of knowledge, particularly sociological knowledge instrumental to the operations of the postcolonial state and foundational to scholarly representation. What Shankar *knows* becomes, through its inscription on the census form and entry into databases of the Ministry for Home Affairs, demographic *facts*: facts on the basis of which state policy is created, debated, and implemented; facts that determine the allocation of government resources; facts published and republished in textbooks, sociological studies, academic monographs, newspapers, websites, government statements, NGO reports, and a host of other nodes of official discourse; facts that hold aloft the canopy of popular and scholarly common sense that shelters and makes possible the public sphere.

Yet the knowledge claims advanced with such certitude by the enumerators at their friend's home had worn a more anxious aspect earlier in the day. As we have seen, the religious coordinates of the residents of the *bastī*—their invariable "identities" as Hindus—were obtained over a chorus of silences, ellipses, reversals, questions not asked and questions answered in the ambiguous affirmative. Behind the assuredness of "Papa *knows*" was the doubt in Shankar's voice, the perturbation in his manner as he questioned whether the silver-bearded man might be Lal Begi. The enumerators clearly had the last word in determining demographic facts. But in the conversations in the gullies, was Shankar upholding sociological order by "catching" would-be caste imposters, or, in a web of multilayered signs composed so as to simultaneously affirm and undermine the state's regime of recognition, was it he who was caught?

To do justice to our story, we need fit concepts. "Identity politics" is the frame thrust upon collective Dalit action in all too many popular and scholarly accounts. Identity politics implies inferior politics; deployments of the term usually judge the action so described either insufficiently universal (because grounded in the experience of a particular social group rather than an abstract

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collective like "the poor") or insufficiently radical (because allegedly oriented toward symbolic rather than substantive demands), or both (for example, Gudavarthi 2019; D. Gupta 2005). "Identity" itself, moreover, cannot escape its conceptual mooring in "absolute or essential sameness" (*OED Online* 2020b) and the homogenizing and dehistoricizing tendencies that follow from it (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Theoretically more promising is the politics of recognition (Hegel 2018; Povinelli 2002), but its application in the caste context has tended to reduce Dalit politics to an effect of governmentality and to concede too readily the success of the totalizing ambitions of the modern state (for example, Chakrabarty 2002: 84–95; Dirks 2001: 255–96; cf. Certeau 2011: xv, 48).

Better analytical purchase may be had from concepts closer to our context. *Pahchān* is such a concept. This unassuming, everyday word from the north Indian vernacular does what the anglophone social science concepts it partially resembles fail to do; it condenses in a single term the intersubjective action of the identity–recognition dialectic and foregrounds the semiotic terrain on which that action transpires. How so? In official contexts *pahchān* does what "identity" or "identification" does for the modern state: a police officer may ask for your *pahchān patra*, identity card, and newspapers publish photographs of unidentified corpses with appeals for their *pahchān*. But the identification thus secured permits no conceptual traffic with ideas of interior selfhood or enduring self-sameness, as "identity" does; rather, *pahchān* derives its primary sense from the transitive verb *pahchānnā*: to recognize, discern, distinguish. This conjures a scene of dynamic intersubjectivity in which it is not the self but the other—the discerner, the conferrer of recognition—who holds the relative advantage in determining a given subject's status. Well and good; *pahchān* thus far distills in a word the insights of many a treatise on subject formation, lexically highlighting the asymmetrical transitivity of the encounters through which "identities" are produced, supplying a pragmatic Hindi-Urdu substitute for and improvement upon the English "identity."

Our vernacular concept, however, has two further advantages. First, *pahchān* has a long history of entwinement with caste. In literature and in everyday speech the two often make joint appearances—*jāti* as the object of the verb *pahchānnā*—and have done so since at least the early modern period. In the corpus of the Punjabi poet Bullhe Shah (c. 1680–1758), for instance, we find this oft-repeated couplet:

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Chal Bullhe chal ūthe chalie jitthe sāre annhe
Na koī sāḍī zāt pahchāne na koī sānūṅ manne[3]

Let's go, Bullhe, let's up and go where everyone is blind
There no one will recognize [identify, discern] our caste, no one will measure our status
(N. Ahmad 2008: 18, translation adapted from Puri and Shangari 1986: 457)

Yearning for liberation from the oppressive social conditions of *zāt* (that is, *jāti*, caste), the Sufi poet reveals the extent to which, in South Asia, *social recognition is caste recognition*—the degree to which, in this milieu, to identify a person is to discern his or her caste. Centuries of development in this social context have shaped *pahchān* into a more sensitive instrument for taking the measure of caste than concepts calibrated to European and Christian historical experience.

Second, *pahchān* puts the identity–recognition dialectic where, arguably, it belongs: on semiotic conceptual ground. Consider a nineteenth century dictionary entry for the word: "knowledge, acquaintance, ascertainment, recognition, experience, discrimination, discernment; distinguishing mark, characteristic; indication, token, sign" (Platts 2004 [1884]: 284). Indeed, *pahchān* derives from the Sanskrit root *chihn*, meaning "sign" (Monier-Williams 2004: 399).

An example of *pahchān* in context may help clarify both points. Omprakash Valmiki (1950–2013), whose autobiography, fiction, and writings on aesthetic theory have decisively shaped the field of Dalit literature, writes in his short story "Andhaṛ" (Sandstorm) of a young Dalit man who works in his father's piggery. The protagonist rises before dawn each morning and performs the labor of killing pigs, burning off their hair, and cleaning and butchering their carcasses—work that leaves an olfactory trace on the body of the worker. The story explains:

> The moment he got free, he would bathe with a very thorough scrub down. Despite this the smell of pig flesh did not leave his body. This smell became his *pahchān*. In school nobody wanted to sit next to him. (Valmiki 2010: 88)[4]

[3] I am grateful to Sudipta Kaviraj for directing me to this verse.

[4] Here and throughout the book, unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hindi and Urdu are my own.

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A *smell*—manifestly external in its origin and indifferent to the protagonist's view of himself—becomes his *pahchān*. The relationship of odors and other sensuous signs to the caste order will make itself felt periodically in this book; it is a topic I take up more systematically elsewhere (Lee 2017). For our present purposes, what this passage makes clear is that *pahchān* denotes something very different from the deeply held self-descriptions or enduring intrinsic properties of individuals or subaltern collectives, or from anything like *authenticity*. The protagonist does not discover *pahchān* within himself; nor does he alone decide what his *pahchān* will be. On the contrary, it is his classmates who determine the protagonist's *pahchān*, his soapy efforts at suppression notwithstanding. Collectively they know and identify him by an olfactory *sign*—a faint whiff of pig flesh—which, in brahminical social ontology, can only mean that he belongs to an "untouchable" community, as only those communities rear and butcher swine. *Pahchān*, then, is a "distinguishing mark," *a sign by which a person or group is recognized by others.*

Signs mediate between the objects (ideas, statuses, people) they represent and the persons who interpret them. When signs are fashioned by humans (as distinguished from natural signs: the sway of a tree branch indicating the direction and force of wind, smoke indexing fire), the arbitrariness of social convention swings into play, affording the sign-composer room for maneuver, making possible artistry in pictorial, rhetorical, and other modes of representation, introducing the pleasures and perils of ambiguity and multiple meaning. Verbal signs, with their famously arbitrary connection to the objects to which they refer, offer especially wide latitude to their users, but even icons (which represent their objects by similarity) and indexes (which represent their objects by contiguity) enable those who deploy them potentially to misguide even as they guide, or to direct different interpreters down divergent paths of interpretation simultaneously. The boy in the piggery of Omprakash Valmiki's story, after enduring caste humiliation throughout his childhood, develops expertise in the crafting of such signs. Having excelled academically he obtains a prestigious job in a distant city, changes his name, alters his speech habits, conceals his origins and "passes" as privileged caste. Wresting control of the signs by which he is identified—or better, developing a capacity for the composition of those signs greater than the capacity of discernment of the people among whom he lives and works—he refashions, at great cost, his *pahchān*. As a concept, then, *pahchān* directs attention to the semiotic terrain on which identitarian struggle takes place and the malleability of the signs on which recognition depends.

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Thus when the utterance *Valmiki hamārī pahchān hai*—one I have often heard in the course of my fieldwork—is translated "Valmiki is our identity," we are on the cusp of a fundamental misapprehension. This is a statement primarily about strategies of signification: Valmiki is the sign by which we are collectively perceived. It is not a statement about ontology or even, necessarily, belonging, though ontology and belonging are also semiotically produced. Valmiki in this utterance has as little to do with inward or essential selfhood as does the odor of pig flesh that constitutes the *pahchān* of the protagonist of "Sandstorm" during his school days. Yet scholarship in religious studies has long labored under a misperception of this sort, reading the sanitation labor castes' traffic in the sign of Valmiki as transparent evidence of a deep, enduring, collective attachment to the Ramayana and to popular Hinduism (for example, Richman 1991: 3). To follow the conceptual path urged on us by *pahchān*, rather than shoehorning these phenomena into all-too-familiar frameworks of identity and recognition, is to avoid such pitfalls and, attuned to the complex verbal and nonverbal signifying practices of our guides in this book, to be led to unexpected places in the anthropology of caste and religion.

In his landmark study of caste slavery and Dalit religion in Travancore, Sanal Mohan (2015: 265) argues for the value "of returning to the sources of the community and redeploying the past in such a manner that historical experiences, however terrible they are, become a resource for imagining a social praxis of liberation." The story that fills the pages ahead is in no obvious way liberatory—indeed much of it is quite the opposite. Yet, as with Mohan's account, the experience of the sanitation labor castes—the 583 in Awadh and their caste fellows across north India—stands to make strange some of our familiar truisms of religion and society in South Asia, exposing the contingency of a majoritarian project that thrives on appearing inevitable, and opening possibilities for other social imaginations.