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## Marriage and the crisis of peasant society in Gujarat, India

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### ABSTRACT


This contribution takes marriage as the example of a crisis of production and reproduction in rural India. Through the juxtaposition of ethnography separated by six decades, we detail a shift away from land and agriculture as the primary markers of status among the Patidars of central Gujarat, western India, in favour of a hierarchical understanding of international migration. The paper discusses the disconnect between a cultural revolution in favour of migration, and the failure of many to live up to their own cultural standards. More broadly, we reflect on the forces that simultaneously strengthen and dissolve caste inequality in the context of India's uneven growth.

### KEYWORDS

Agrarian transformation;  
migration; marriage

The solitary figure of the bachelor staggering back to his isolated farmstead after the village ball is the key to Pierre Bourdieu's (2008) sociology of rural France. The farmer is unfashionable and backwards. Women are attracted to the excitements of the urban dandy; consequently, peasant society is unable to reproduce. The crisis of farming is thus combined with reproductive failure and the countryside truly stagnates. In Bourdieu's melancholic sociology, the farmer embodies the symbolic violence of the greater society and he brings his own inferior subject position to life. Bourdieu first developed this line of thinking in the late 1960s, when it was clear that the place of agriculture in rural French society was on the wane. The story he tells also resembles the course of events in other parts of the world.

In rural India, a growing number of men are today reported as 'unmarriageable' (Ahlawat 2016; Kaur 2008; Mishra 2016). This predicament reflects an old, ongoing demographic imbalance in favour of men. According to the 2011 census the national child sex ratio is of 914 females for 1000 males (Perwez, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2012). The ratio is even lower in certain regions of the country such as Gujarat (890 to 1000) and the district of Anand where this paper will be set (884 to 1000). The problem of missing girls has been well documented historically, through the practice of infanticide and the neglect of the girl child. In the past, the preference for sons was especially reported in rural and agricultural societies, where sons were needed to carry out the heavy work of agriculture, and among communities in the north-west part of the country, with a particular arrangement of patriarchy and hypergamy. Today, although regions such as Haryana, Punjab and

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Gujarat continue to lead this imbalance, the problem has broadened to include other regions, urban areas and elites (Srinivasan and Bedi 2007), and groups traditionally considered equalitarian (Still 2011). Old practices of infanticide have been substituted by foeticide and sex-selective abortion.

These skewed demographic figures intersect with a crisis of agriculture and the devaluing of rural identities. The repetitive findings of rural studies in India since the 1950s have pointed to the declining role of agriculture in economic and social life (for example, Bailey 1957; Marriott 1955; Mayer 1960; Srinivas 1955). When we hold up the literature from the 1950s in the light of today we can see the village no longer functions as it once did. The rituals and cycles of agriculture are no longer so embedded in the heart of village life. Relations between patrons and clients have ceased to exist in the same ways, because the patterns of agrarian production which gave them shape have disappeared (an argument made by Breman as early as 1974). The village has become part of other industrial and post-industrial systems of time-keeping, self-hood and expectation. The village is connected to cities, cyberspaces and industrial parks. According to the last census, the proportion of workers employed in agriculture has significantly fallen in recent times, from 70 percent in the 1980s to 56 percent in 2011 (Census of India 2011a). Agricultural holdings have declined in size, due to the fourfold increase in the population since the 1950s and the redistributive effects of land reforms (Gupta 2009, 89; Shah and Harris-White 2011, 14; Sud 2007).

In Europe, Polanyi (1944) famously described 'the great transformation' from agricultural to industrial society – a process that separated people from the land, as customary rights and systems of tenure were replaced by the practices of private property (Sen 1982). In India this shift has not been simply replicated, leading to what some see as a 'missed transformation' (Bernstein 1996, 2004; Breman and Mundle 1991). While employment in agriculture has fallen, the labour force in rural areas continues to grow and labour absorption in the formal economy has been slow (Lerche 2011, 2013). As a consequence, a large proportion of the workforce continues to be dependent on the agricultural sector through agricultural work, wage labour and non-farm related activities (48.9 percent employment share in 2011–2012) (Verick and Chaudhary 2016). Rural non-farm employment takes the forms of petty trade and commodity production and intersects with new forms of rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban and international migration (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). Besides farming, other kinds of time and values have been brought to the village: office and factory hours, shop opening times, television schedules and the demands of the economy of leisure. Landholding, which has been central to the history of power and governance, and indeed to the early post-colonial anthropology of India, suddenly appears to be only one element in the portfolio of livelihood strategies and resources. Farmers all over India are selling their land to enter the cash economy (Khanna and Kang forthcoming) – land has simply been devalued against the imperatives of consumption, access to markets and jobs. Modes of consumption have shifted, with the availability of cash and with consumer goods and brand items now available at the village level.

The crisis of farming is also a crisis of values and changing aspirations (DeNeve and Carswell 2014; Gidwani 2000; Gupta 2009; Parry 2003). For Polanyi, the transformation from peasant to industrial society in Europe involved a shift in the moral economy of the peasantry, from a system based on reciprocity and redistribution to one based on markets and individualism. In India, as the transformation away from agriculture has not

been a linear one, the transformation of cultural values has no simple pattern. Here too egoism and new claims to individuality deriving from education, mobility and the pursuit of consumption have brought new fractures in familial relations (Kumar 2017, 24). However, traditional institutions such as caste have transformed in uneven ways depending on the differentiated integration of localities to economic regimes, markets and cities. Scholars in this respect have recorded both a loosening of caste relations and a deepening of inequalities and traditional values (DeNeve and Carswell 2014).

A crucial economic and socio-cultural consequence of these new forms of impoverishment and precariousness in the countryside has been a crisis of masculinities. Being masculine in rural India is increasingly predicated on the ability to secure non-agricultural work, to pursue leisure and time off (Gidwani 2000; Jeffrey 2010) and the imperative of consumption – of buying and displaying consumer goods (Osella and Osella 2000). Conversely, the growing inability of rural men to meet new material and cultural standards of a ‘good life’ have led to staggering rates of ‘farmer suicides’, and to new forms of social organisation and anomie, including bachelorhood. In a recent study, Kumar (2017) argues that the widespread phenomenon of farmer suicides in India, rather than simply pointing to a crisis of agriculture is also symptom of crisis of family and masculinity in the twenty-first century. The failure of agrarian production intersects with men’s inability to display ‘entrepreneurial virility’ (2017, 273), and to uphold new norms of honour that are closely tied to the desire for newness, consumption and mobility. Those who are worse affected are not the poorest, but those who display the ‘risk-taking capacities’ to make investments in pursuit of progress. Dishonour also usually affects most those peasants who consider themselves manlier than others, either through caste or biographical background (Kumar 2017, 274); there are inevitably stigma, shame and personal failure in accruing unsustainable agricultural debt (see Vasavi 2012). The phenomenon of bachelorhood that we discuss in this paper must also be understood at the intersection of structural factors and the new cultural norms of masculinity that define young men’s capacity to marry.

In this paper, we explore some of the social, cultural and economic consequences of the crisis of farming and the new values and identities which are fighting for life in rural India. Our first argument, uncontroversial we think, is that agriculture played a significant role in the development of village cultures in India. Throughout the twentieth century, but accelerating in the post-colonial decades, population growth, new technologies and opportunities combined with the deregulation of the countryside to mean that farming employed fewer people and lost much of its status value. In light of the diminishing role and value of agriculture, we ask: what has happened to these ideas? What do farmers who no longer farm do with a farming culture? How do the new non-farmers think of farmers? We will address these questions with a focus on a particular village in Gujarat, western India, focusing on marriage practices and bachelorhood as our explanatory example. We will use the anthropology of a previous generation as a comparative resource and a baseline against which to think about agrarian and social change. We conclude with a reflection on the implications of our material for social theory.

## **Sundarana and the Patidars**

Anthropologist David F. Pocock conducted 18 months of fieldwork among the Patidar caste of Sundarana in the first half of the 1950s. Pocock had conducted his doctoral

research on the Gujaratis of Zanzibar and Tanganyika, under the supervision of Evans-Pritchard, and later turned to study the formation of individual castes in India (Parry and Simpson 2011). In India, he settled on the village of Sundarana for, compared to the more 'famous', prosperous but exceptional villages of the area, it was small, unremarkable and more 'typical', and therefore most suited to the research he had imagined. Pocock's first monograph, *Kanbi and Patidar* (1972), is about village life, caste identity and status competition between farmers. It is not a traditional village study, for Pocock largely focussed on one community (the Patidars), and on their interaction with the broader region. The book details a historical and anthropological transition from Kanbi or ordinary farmers to Patidar, a name that derives from a particular system of land tenure and that is also associated with status and prestige.

Alice Tilche conducted 12 months of research in the same village between 2012 and 2013, and among Patidars in the UK, asking questions which respected the original research but also pushing the agenda in new directions. The population of Sundarana has since doubled in size and the village is today home to 4824 people (Census of India 2011b). Sundarana is still a multi-caste village: Patidars make up less than 20 percent of the village population and own more than 80 percent of its land. The largest castes are the Thakors, Solankis and Bareyas (middle castes also known in the literature as Kolis and Rajputs) who fall in the category of Other Backward Classes (commonly abbreviated OBC; as with Scheduled Castes below, these communities are historically disadvantaged and are now subject to affirmative action policies); and the Vankars and Rohits, traditionally service castes, who fall in the governmental category of Scheduled Castes (SC). Alice's study also focussed on the Patidars rather than on the village as a whole, and on their networks of marriage and relation with the broader region and internationally.

We are fortunate to also be able to draw on other excellent anthropological and historical scholarship about this caste and region (notable contributions include Chaturvedi 2007; Gidwani 2008; Hardiman 1981). From this literature, we learn that the Patidars were involved in nationalist politics during the colonial era and had a strong association with Gandhi. The political leader Vallabhbhai Patel was also one of their number (Lyon 1996). They were also the main beneficiaries of post-colonial land reforms. Studies of the caste present them as farmers who, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, turned their hands to commerce. They became entrepreneurs and migrants, and are generally placed at the forefront of Gujarat's development and India's story of growth (Dekkers and Rutten 2011; Rutten and Patel 2003). Our story focuses on a lower-middling section of the caste, whose successes have not been so glorious or glorified.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We have retained the relative approach to hierarchy deployed by Pocock rather than conventional terms of class distinction. Pocock's use of terms such as 'lower-middleness' was inspired by his ethnographic encounters and the sociological precision of literature (he read English at Cambridge), in particular George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*: 'The religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable' – equally the necessity of being buried in a churchyard and having well-cured hams at one's funeral. 'A most conspicuous quality in the Dodson character was its genuineness ... [its] proud, honest egoism, which had hearty dislike of whatever made against its own credit and interest', its harshness to 'inconvenient "kin"' whom they would never forsake or let want for bread 'but only require them to eat it with bitter herbs'. As a description of many respectable Patidar, Pocock comments, it could not be bettered (1973, 165).

As Pocock's own work shows, although the Patidars have a strong caste identity, they are internally differentiated to the extent that Patidars of different status may regard themselves as an entirely different subset of people. In 2013, there were no more Kunbis in the village and this was a name and an identity that Patidars had voluntarily forgotten. But there was a new, key division between those Patidars who had 'made it' as professionals in Indian cities and abroad, and those who remained in the village as middle- and low-ranking farmers. Lower-middling is therefore a term that we use to combine Patidar's caste status vis-à-vis other castes, and class status and standing vis-à-vis one's own.

Pinakin Patel became Alice's research assistant and is also the central character in our story, for his life and concerns also speak to those of other men of his age and position. Pinakin's family owns sufficient land to make them count as middle-ranking farmers in the village. Pinakin speaks English and studied at a local university. Earlier in his life, as would be expected from a man of his status, caste and generation, he had dreamed of migrating overseas. He spent considerable time and money in trying to get a visa for entry to New Zealand. He hoped to study further and settle permanently. His efforts came to nothing and he returned to the village to supervise the cultivation of his family's land.

Pinakin is over-qualified and under-employed. In 2013, he spent his days riding a red motorbike, hanging about the village square, playing with his smart phone, and doing 'time pass' with his friends. The aimlessness, boredom and frustration of village life is plain to see. At 27, he was considered to be over the hill. Like Bourdieu's bachelor, Pinakin was haunted by pressure to marry, but the efforts of his family and friends to find him a bride had repeatedly failed. Girls do not want farmers, whose horizons are muddy; they want accountants and managers, with clean fingernails and supermarket loyalty cards. The families of the girls he approached presented their reasoning in no uncertain terms, their symbolic violence being embodied and lived by Pinakin himself. Conversely, the villages' significant number of unmarried men complained that there were no women left: women had become '*hi-fi*': too cool to marry a hick.

Since this paper was first submitted for publication, Pinakin married a poorer woman from his own caste after years of searching. The union was secret and went against the girl's parental wishes but was eventually and grudgingly accepted. This happy ending does not significantly change the story we outline at length below, for the struggles of young men to become recognisable adults continued.

## Hypergamy and the Patidars

David Pocock (1972) described a structuring tension at the heart of being Patidar, between the values of equality and hierarchy. Patidars strongly believed in the value of descent and the qualities of blood that are ascribed to different descent groups; at the same time, Pocock characterised Patidar society as intensely hierarchical and competitive. He concluded that hypergamy was *the* structuring principle within the caste and the key mode of social organisation.

Hypergamy involves marrying one's daughter to an 'equal' or, more commonly, 'up' the social ladder to a superior family (Dumont 1964, 89; Pocock 1972, 3; Parry 1979, 196). Looked at differently, such marriage practices involve men taking on women of a lower

status (Van der Veen 1972). According to Dumont (1964, 89), such marriages followed the pattern of the 'gift', by which a woman is given as the 'gift of a maiden' to a man in exchange for status. As such, hypergamous marriages 'indirectly contribute to the status of a group perpetuating itself through males' (Dumont 1964, 89). The 'gift' of the daughter in this fashion was traditionally accompanied by high dowries.

Hypergamy requires clear ideas about relative status. Indeed, amongst the Patidar such knowledge is practically ubiquitous: the way people dress, walk and carry themselves, make lunch or tea, what they offer at the temple, who they hang out with, are all subject to scrutiny and evaluation. Although the Patidar are keen on genealogy and keep records, status is always – to some extent – a matter of negotiation, self-presentation and reputation. The maintenance of status and reputation take up a considerable amount of Patidar time and energy.

Pocock's description of hypergamy drew on the Africa-derived segmentary lineage theory of Evans-Prichard, who had been his mentor at Oxford. For the segmented lineage, external threats disaggregated groups. Some groups could unite in opposition to other. Looking now to India, Pocock wrote: 'there is no sense or context in which all the Patidars could be imagined uniting in political opposition to another group' (1972, 67). Their unity, instead, is more ideological and 'can only be approached in terms of their disunity' (1972, 67).

Under British rule, the organisation of revenue collection was such that it enabled the formation of a Patidar oligarchy. They essentially ruled villages, accumulating wealth and prestige (Hardiman 1981, 37). Elite Patidars were able to invest surplus in agricultural innovations such as tobacco. Since famine at the end of the nineteenth century, Patidars also moved to cities in India and East Africa (Mangat 1969). This combination of land and successful commercial migration led Rutten (1995; Gidwani 2000; Rutten and Patel 2003) to define them as 'agrarian capitalists'. Elite Patidars engaged in processes of cultural distinction familiar in India: vegetarianism and teetotalism. They also gradually withdrew from farm labour and moved women to the sequestered domestic spaces. As Gidwani (2000) documents, these changes were accompanied by a significant shift from bride price to dowry.

Hypergamy leads to a shortage of women at the bottom of the heap. Women are seen by men to be an expensive and risky liability in such a marriage market, and certain interventions were made which further reduced their number. Colonial records report a 'tradition' of female infanticide among Patidars and other hypergamous castes (Vishwanath 2001, 3411). Infanticide was then understood as a rational method for landowning groups to maintain their dominance and avoid the financial drain of high dowries that often also caused land alienation through mortgages and sales. Although the British saw themselves as the saviours of women, colonial policies and the opening up of markets for the sale of land fuelled dowry escalation and, indirectly, infanticide (Parry 1979, 45). According to colonial reports, in 1891 the Patidar sex ratio was 100:66; and it was 100:73 when averaged over the nineteenth century (Vishwanath 1998).

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Patidar villages have been organised into horizontal and endogamous marriage circles (known then as *ekada*, and today as *gol* and *samaj*). These circles were formed as a solution to pressures of hypergamous society, as an attempt to regulate marriage, divorce and dowry, and as an affirmation of the values of equality. In idealised terms, marriage circles promote the value of descent and, as



Patidars see it, are a way to keep 'good blood' within the group. Circles vary considerably in both size and reputation and are forms of polity as well as kinship, rather than organic units. As such, they are just as liable to grow and fragment as other types of political organisation.

As with individual status, there are neither standardised forms of measurement nor centralised record-keeping. Therefore, the relative status of each village is open to endless negotiation, dispute and posturing. In the 1950s, the Six Village Circle was generally recognised as the most prestigious. Sundarana was then part of a circle of seven villages, which was placed in the unremarkable 'middle lower' of the order. Such circles were originally intended to flatten hierarchical distinctions within the caste group. In theory, marriages could be contracted between all seven villages. As Pocock (1972, 131) found out, however, some villages and divisions within them intermarried more than others according to their respective reputation. Those who could would still try to marry their daughter into higher circles, even if this led to fines and social sanctions. The result is a remarkably complex social polity which if given a shape resembles a swirling galaxy more than it does a pyramid.

In 2013, at a first glance hypergamy among the Patidars was alive and well, even if it had by now died as a topic of interest to anthropologists. Child sex ratios for the district continued to be below the national average and foeticide continued to be a widespread practice. Although it is illegal in India to report the sex of an unborn baby, sex-selective abortion remains common, and is not difficult to arrange through private clinics in provincial Gujarat. Village circles had restructured but continued to operate in a globalised form, following the new networks of migration that had brought Patidars to settle in other parts of the world. Village circles had websites and corresponding caste organisations in London, Seattle and New Jersey. Since 1968, the circle of the 7 of which Sundarana was part became part of the circle of the 22, which is in fact made of a total of 40 villages. This shift was a response to the heightened perception that brides were becoming harder to find. As Pocock noted in the 1950s, marriages between certain villages (for example between the villages of Sundarana and Jor) continued to be more frequent than others, though unlike the 1950s marriage out of the circle was no longer a punishable offence. The circle of 22 has an international wing, a social media profile and websites.

However, the structuring principles and values of the system have shifted. In the past, what counted as 'up' was closely related to the value of land. Today the underlying logic of land ownership has moved to a status politics derived from international mobility. This, we argue, represents a pretty fundamental shift in the way the Patidar caste understands and experiences the world. The values and regulatory framework that kept hypergamy in check, preventing it from spiralling into self-destructive paradox, have also eroded. Shadows of the old agrarian ideology remain, but set free by the agrarian crisis from the chains of provincial land politics, hypergamy has gone global. In the process, inflationary values of a hyperbolic order have been added to the politics and calculation of relative status, creating a growing number of bachelors.

### **Reframing status: land, descent, jobs and migration**

In the 1950s, agriculture occupied the Patidars and most other castes of Sundarana. Other activities were then restricted to the wealthier portion of the population who lived in



neighbouring villages. By the end of the 1950s, only one person had managed to leave Sundarana for East Africa. Then, the key measure of status was land and agricultural know-how. Also in the mix were descent and blood, and the identity and reputation of the marriage circle, village and sub-division. Pinakin, for example, belongs to the sub-division in Sundarana that Pocock himself had reckoned to be the most ancient and prestigious. Today, apical prestige belongs to others who have distanced themselves from agriculture through commerce and migration.

Farming has not withered in the region. Most of the available land is cultivated and continues to be highly productive in a land locally known as the 'garden of India'. The 'green' revolution in agriculture and the 'white' revolution in dairy production privileged Patidars (Gidwani 2008; Standing 2010). In Sundarana, Patidars invested the agriculture surplus in tobacco processing industries, fertiliser plants and irrigation businesses. They also introduced new cash crops. Chilli cultivation has been particularly lucrative. However, as in many other parts of the world, agriculture is simply no longer enough to keep the growing village going. In this case, however, in a land of hyperbolic cultural inflation, although farming remains economically remunerative, it has now lost its dignity. The 'work of the mind' is more valued than labouring with bent back in the field (also see Gupta 2009).

As Patidars began withdrawing from agriculture they also heavily invested in education. Educational opportunities in the area increased, with a proliferation of private schools and colleges. According to a recent survey of Sundarana,<sup>2</sup> 90 percent of Patidars between 20 and 30 years of age had been to university. Education is valued for its transformative value. It has the potential to turn farmers into non-farmers. But this potential does not translate for all into real possibilities. After finishing his MA in commerce, Pinakin returned to supervise labour on his family's fields. He also took up the cultivation of another chilli field as a sharecropper, with a group of peers who, like him, were educated but jobless. Pinakin earned enough to live well in Sundarana. His family and those around him complained: 'You have a postgraduate degree and you still work as a farmer. You should get some high-profile job instead'.

In the local hierarchy of occupations, manual and agricultural labour is regarded as the lowest form of work. The Patidars who were engaged in agriculture mostly supervised the labour of others and only engaged in certain activities, which they reputed their labourers unable to do. There are, then, distinctions between 'small farmers' who owned one to five *bigha*<sup>3</sup> of land, middle farmers who, like Pinakin, owned around 10, and large farmers who owned between 10 and 50, often alongside businesses related to agriculture. Small farmers were considered poor and lowly. Those with large farms still commanded status – indeed, some of these people are very wealthy – but they were not ranked as highly as those with 'jobs' (the English word being commonly used).

The category of 'job' applied to any kind of 'work of the mind': under an employer, in private companies, small shops or businesses. At the lowest level, this often implied a good amount of manual labour that Patidars were keen to conceal. 'Private jobs' could mean anything from working in an Information Technology (IT) company to delivering pizza, and often implied precarity. At the top of the ladder were traditional government

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<sup>2</sup>The survey was conducted in 2012–2013 by Alice Tilche, Pinakin Patel and Chandrika Patel.

<sup>3</sup>In this region one *bigha* equals 0.57 acres.

occupations, which provided stability, and 'business', which offered more money and prestige and indicated any kind of self-employed work. However, business related to agriculture was less valued than business to do with computers, for instance. These hierarchies of occupation interlinked with hierarchies of location, and it was the aspiration of most Patidars to move overseas.

In the post-colonial period, rates of migration from the region dramatically increased. Migration has become a way of life, a rite of passage and a key cultural concern. These days, the Patidar are a transnational community, marriage circles see themselves as international organisations, and there is great economy and traffic between western India and the many places in which Patidars have settled. The expulsion of 'Asians' from Africa during the period of high nationalism in the 1960s led many Patidars to the United Kingdom (Mangat 1969; Tambs-Lyche 1980). Since then, America has become the most desirable destination, followed by Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As the political situation stabilised in East Africa, old migration routes have re-opened. Patidars from less well-off families or villages like Sundarana often try their migratory luck there as it is easier to get entry and employment, with the hope of later moving to destinations of greater standing.

The old values of hard work and dignity associated with land and 'good blood' have faded in the light of the romance and rewards of transnationalism. These are values that Patidars in wealthier villages have firmly embraced. They have removed themselves from land, although many continue to own it for sentiment and security. The most successful are software analysts, engineers and doctors in America; and industrialists, diamond barons, politicians and real estate magnates in Indian cities. The upper middle level is well represented in service sectors, as owners and workers in post offices, motels and newsagents. Besides these stories of varying success, the large majority of Patidars still live in small, unremarkable villages like Sundarana, aspiring to leave. The distinction between successful and less successful Patidars has become amplified in recent years by a growing rural-urban divide in the region, with the rural population of Gujarat which now also lags behind the rural population of other states (Jaffrelot 2016). Today, the lower-middleness of the village also refers to the quality of the provincial education and the kinds of 'mind work' inhabitants of the village eventually pursue (see Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008). Generally, unless through marriage, the youth of Sundarana only make it abroad illegally or semi-legally as low-skilled migrants or students for short periods; or, like Pinakin, they fail altogether.

The real and perceived downward mobility of this lower section is such that in 2015 some Patidars requested their inclusion in the category of 'Other Backward Classes', and staged agitations against the government when their requests were rejected. The Patidars' sense of inferiority is not only in relation to their own caste fellows, but also against other traditionally 'lower' castes, whom they accuse of having received undue privileges which allowed them to step out of their customary and inferior social positions. Since the 1950s, lower and middle castes have to some extent benefited from affirmative reservation policies (relating to college places and employment quotas) for disadvantaged groups, and began detaching themselves from oppressive relations with higher caste groups. In Sundarana agricultural castes have dissociated themselves from traditional patron-client relations and, like the Patidars, also aspire to also dissociate themselves from the heavy work of agriculture through the pursuit of education, leisure and consumption. Many

especially among the lower castes have moved to work in nearby towns as teachers, clerks and cleaners, with the help of quotas. Others assert their freedom by working as daily wage agricultural labourers for those who will offer the best price, or by refusing agricultural labour altogether in favour of leisure and casual construction work. Young Patidars viewed migration as a compulsion and as the only solution to a job and educational market that disadvantaged them. They were bitter about the resources that came with affirmative action policies reserved for the traditionally downtrodden castes.

## Searching for a bride

When Alice met Pinakin he was 27 and had been assiduously looking for a bride for the past four years. He had no luck, for as a peasant he could offer nothing that girls seemed interested in, like 'jobs' and passports. In Sundarana, a bride is generally first sought from within the village marriage circle. Those in search of a bride will first draw on their own networks to ascertain the suitability and standing of the bride's family. If a plausible match is found, there will be an exchange of 'bio-data', which will include a photograph and details such as height, weight, education and job. The information will be scrutinised and if a match still looks plausible then the bride's family will visit the groom's family, with the girl if the family is keen. If nothing goes awry at this stage, then the potential bride and groom meet. Today, unlike in Pocock's time, the final decision rests with the couple rather than the family. Young people's power to veto gives them a new authority and the ability to stir decisions in their own favour.

In preparation for this most important quest, Pinakin's mother spread word of his intentions. In 2013 he found only four candidates. The first girl was willing, but Pinakin himself thought she was too dark, fat and ugly (Pinakin used these English terms). The parents of two other candidates met Pinakin and his relatives; neither brought the girl, suggesting a lack of enthusiasm. In desperation, Pinakin's mother sought the advice of a local priest. He suggested there was a ghost in their house which was impeding marriage. She followed his detailed instructions to remove the troublesome spectre, but ghost-busting aside, it was also evident that from the outset Pinakin anticipated failure.

Relatives of the fourth girl were sent to meet Pinakin, not even the parents of the girl herself. Like those that had come before, they enquired about Pinakin's mind, body and wealth, in addition to any plans he might have for long-term international travel. Thus far, Pinakin had been honest, explaining that although he had been well educated he had no plans to leave the village. The friend who had arranged the match with the fourth girl lied to pave the way by piquing their interest. He told them that Pinakin had applied for a Canadian visa. Pinakin was upset, but was persuaded to go along with the deception. When the question came, Pinakin was vague and uncomfortable, saying he was waiting for the consulate's response. The family phoned a few days later to ask if Pinakin could provide evidence of his move to Canada. As Pinakin could not, the negotiations fizzled out. It was as straightforward as that.

After five years of searching and innumerable rejections Pinakin got married in 2016. His auntie had come to know of a poor but suitable Patidar girl from a village within their circle. She knew people who knew the girl's family well, and a few women from that village had already married into Sundarana, which helped spread good word about Pinakin, his family, status and reputation. The family of the girl was convinced to

arrange for a viewing, and on the occasion Pinakin and the girl were allowed to talk on their own for 20 minutes. They liked each other but the girls' parents refused the match, offering similar explanations to the previous visitors. After two months of protracted negotiations Pinakin and Kinjal spoke over the phone and decided to marry secretly against her parents' will. It was a case of 'love marriage'. No money was spent on the ceremony, on dowry or bride price. The parents of the girl were furious but eventually agreed to recognise the union. In Sundarana, if in the past such marriage would have been punished by the caste association, they were now welcome. Not all cases of 'love marriages' were equally accepted. The consequences would have been much tougher if a woman had married out, and if the marriage had been contracted out of the circle or of the caste. In Pinakin's case, even the elders complimented him for there was now one bachelor less to worry about.

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In Sundarana men in their twenties lamented about the shortage of brides. In 2013, out of 151 Patidar men between the ages of 18 and 35, 86 were recorded as unmarried.<sup>4</sup> According to a more recent, possibly exaggerated estimate from 2016 calculated by the caste council, the figure was around 170 to 250, and Sundarana ranked the lowest in their village circle for their scores on bachelorhood. Anxieties and failures around marriage have been reported in other regions of India (Ahlawat 2016; Mishra 2016), among high-caste peasants such as the Jats who may lack enough land, education and employment; and among men from other castes with lower educational credentials and socio-economic status (taxi drivers, construction labourers, landless and unemployed).

Young men argued that the shortfall of girls had worsened in the last two generations, leading to a 'marriage squeeze'. They also attributed this shift to the changing lives and aspirations of women. 'Women have gained more education and even uneducated girls now gain some knowledge by watching TV, so now they do not want to work with cows and buffaloes and marry boys who are farmers in the village', argued one of Pinakin's friend. Young men complained that women were ready to marry uneducated men as long as they had passports, and men as old as their father. The marriage squeeze was also a consequence of the tight grip of status and of enduring community norms. According to Pinakin, neighbouring Koli castes did not face such problems for among them there was no obsession with status or migration:

Other castes do not care if their boys go abroad. They do not even bother if boys are doing jobs or not. They will just make sure to give food to the girl twice a day and a few clothes, and they will be ready to marry.

The older generation moaned the loss of tradition and saw bachelorhood as symptom of a culture that had gone awry: 'Today people marry out of caste, out of religion, out of everything!' They complained that youngsters, and in particular women, no longer respected societal and parental authority. The youth married for love, out of caste and for convenience. Sometimes, they claimed, people would marry in exchange for visas and then file for divorce. The influence of marriage circles had withered. They had become empty

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<sup>4</sup>Survey conducted by Pinakin Patel and Alice Tilche.

bodies with no regulating power to fine or excommunicate. In their view, the old ways were best; today was anomie. The perception of a great transformation away from tradition was not always substantiated, for although marriage circles had changed, broadened and relaxed their norms, marriages still occurred preferably *within* rather than outside them. The majority of marriages were still recorded within the traditional circle of the 7, followed by the expanded circle of the 22 and by marriages outside. It was true that young men and women entertained romances, but these occurred largely via the mobile phone. If phone affairs kept youngsters busy for hours at a time, they only rarely resulted in love marriages. In 2013, only three cases of elopement were recorded among the Patidars, and now of course there was also Pinakin's.

The traditions of marriage in India have transformed since independence. The age of marriage has generally risen. The authority of parents to arrange marriages has declined. Intimacy, beauty and romance play roles in decisions (Donner 2002). Love has become a concept around which marriage can be organised, but is often practiced in ways contiguous with traditional values of endogamy (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). These trends have found their ways into the marriage politics of places such as Sundarana too; however, the liberalisation of the marriage market should not be associated with the abandonment of all other systems of value, particularly relating to hypergamy and the inability of some men to marry.

Among the Patidars bachelorhood existed in the past too and was one among other solutions to the problem of skewed sex ratios; however, it was not then understood as the paralysing problem it is today. Pocock did not place emphasis on the condition, despite being a life-long bachelor himself. This has to do in part with an issue of methodology: while Pocock studied hypergamy as a normative system he focussed less on its 'exceptions'. Methodology aside, bachelorhood today combines with a feeling of inadequacy as farmers in the face of modernity. For those who farm and who are not familiar with the departure lounge at Mumbai's international airport, the inability to marry is a profound source of anguish and discomfort and illustrates clearly the symbolic violence of social values changing within a once agricultural caste.

As Pocock suggested, marriage was 'the sacrament of confirmation' that makes a Patidar (1972, 1). It was a compulsion and a proxy for becoming a householder in the village. For young men, marriage was about several things at once: providing security in old age, escaping parental pressures, entering the realm of adulthood and access to sex. Young men found some of the things that marriage can give, such as sociality and affection, in other ways. Pinakin spent most of his evenings with a group of male friends on a farm just outside of the village, enjoying the liberty of his boyhood. There, they had illicit 'chicken parties' that defied regional norms of vegetarianism, accompanied by occasional drinks and movie sessions sitting all crammed together in front of a computer on a woven bed. Some of his friends had had affairs with women, and sex workers were available in a nearby small town, although Pinakin did not have the right contacts and lamented being unable to avail himself of such services. Same-sex relations also existed, and might exist among Pinakin's peers although when confronted with the question he and his friends ridiculed such practices as 'gay'. They pointed further away, to a visibly feminine and unmarried man from a 'lower' caste, who was well known in the village for his sexual preferences. As a young unmarried woman in a sexually charged atmosphere, Alice found it difficult to explore the topic of sex with some depth and declined the invitations to participate in

young men's nocturnal parties. Her superficial insights on this matter, however, corroborate the thesis recently put forward by Khanna and Kang, that the pressure to marry among young boys is not about providing evidence of heterosexuality or proving that one is a 'man'; rather, it is a matter of transforming boys into adults. The fact that men may entertain non-normative relationships outside marriage is less cause for concern than the failure to make the transformation from boy to man (forthcoming, 36).

### Changing marriage markets: marrying down and inwards

The shift from ordinary Kanbi to the status of Patidar, which Pocock documented for the twentieth century, was also a shift of values: cultivators reformed their customs such as widow remarriage and substituted the tradition of bride price with dowry. Today, the combined situation of fewer girls and the new values of migration over farming is leading to a move back to bride price. New mass marriage ceremonies have also been instituted following the expansion of marriage circles, to help poorer Patidar families meet the high costs of marriage. The option is clearly second rate, but it aids families to avoid debt and excommunication from the community. The collective wedding is seen as a form of social development activity supported by community tax. Each household in a marriage circle contributes a fixed sum towards the ceremony, party and wedding gifts, although richer families may choose to donate more and display their largesse.

These transformations in matters of marriage go along with a generalised trend towards downward mobility among certain sections of the caste, which now also claim 'backward status'. In India, bride price has been generally attributed to more equalitarian societies and is, for instance, widely found among Tribal groups (although here too dowry is now taking hold). Collective marriages are also the practices of poorer groups. Pinakin's mother was prepared to pay to secure him a bride.

If marriage markets are expanding outwards and upwards, towards new international values and destinations, they are also expanding inwards and, from Patidars' perspective, downwards, towards lesser of parts of the region and of society. As a last resort to the problem of bachelorhood, some Patidar men now married *adivasi* girls from Tribal areas of the state. In India, 'Tribal' is a category of government, given to those who elsewhere in the world might be considered 'indigenous'. *Adivasi*, or 'original inhabitants', is a term of self-reference for these populations. These groups are generally considered to be at the lowest end of the social hierarchy although it should come as no surprise to learn that they do not see themselves strictly in these terms. However, these groups are often among the poorest, precarious and vulnerable, often living on marginal lands.

Marriages with *adivasi* girls were arranged through brokers (*dalaals*) on both sides. From the Patidar side, these were men who had already married into *adivasi* communities and now took money to arrange the marriage of others. Brokers demanded money for a bride price and for themselves. They targeted areas and communities where they had connections and where *adivasis* were willing to 'give' their daughters. Not all *adivasi* communities in fact took part in these practices, with some groups reported to be more protective and 'proud' of their women.<sup>5</sup> At marriage girls were usually very young and possibly below the marriageable age. There were at least three families in Sundarana with women who

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<sup>5</sup>Sonal Rathava, personal communication, 08 January 2017.

came from the Vasava community and from the district of Tilakwara. Their *adivasi* identity was a public secret that everybody knew but nobody openly talked about.

In the new society, *adivasi* girls had to learn to be Patidars. Among the long list of complaints, Patidars argued that these girls 'have no manners', 'do not know if one should drink milk before or after a meal', 'may be beautiful but have no common sense' and 'speak in a rude way'. Girls themselves complained of the constant discrimination and isolation they faced, and of the difficulties they incurred for visiting their families due to lack of money and freedom. These difficulties had led in the past to two tragic cases of suicide the truth of which, like the identity of the girls, only existed as rumour. Pinakin had been presented with the option of marrying an *adivasi* girl and had eventually decided against that possibility. The cultural difference and social pressure would have been too much, and he was happier single.

Like bride price, marriages with *adivasi* girls were not a new phenomenon. In the past, poorer Kanbis married women from neighbouring communities they considered to be lower than themselves and from Tribal communities. As Kanbis became Patidars, such practices were discouraged and punished and must have continued as public secrets, together with other customs such as widow remarriage. In the generation of Pinakin's parents, those who secretly married 'out' opted for matches with castes who were closer in terms of social status and geography. However, as middle castes such as the Rajputs and Kolis became more powerful and detached themselves from oppressive relations of dependence with higher caste groups (Shah 2010, 1988), they also stopped marrying girls into Patidar families. As a consequence, the marriage market shifted farther and more firmly away, to Tribal areas of the state.

The trend to marry in more distant regions and poorer communities has been widely reported across the country and especially in traditionally 'masculine' regions such as Haryana (Ahlawat 2016; Mishra 2016), Uttar Pradesh (Chaudhry and Mohan 2011), Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Some demographers have predicted that the 'marriage squeeze' will slow down dowry inflation, increase the value of women in the marriage market and eventually normalise sex ratios (Bélanger and Linh 2011; Das Gupta and Shuzhuo 1999, 363). However, while some Patidar women may now have greater influence in making marriage decisions, women from farther away are more readily subject to violence, because they lack protective local networks and the sense of sanction that proximate male kin would provide against potentially violent husbands (See also Jeffery 2014). Cross-region and cross-caste marriages easily result in situations of insecurity for women who find themselves suddenly displaced in faraway villages, with no support networks and little control over their condition.

## **Marrying up and outwards**

While young men complained of a shortage of girls, young women also lamented a shortage of marriageable men. There are 'too many boys roaming around the village doing nothing'. Women confirmed their aspiration to leave peasant life. Although in elite Patidar families women had since long withdrawn from agricultural work, many Patidar women in Sundarana were expected to get their hands dirty:



In the village the only work is farming. Farmers keep cows and buffaloes. If there are cows and buffaloes we have to do the work. Before they used to get labourers but now the labour of collecting cow dung is costlier so we have to do the work ourselves.

They also explained how their 'craze to migrate' was fuelled by the periodic showing off of returning migrants, with their golden watches and new jewellery. 'So we also want to go to London thinking that we will be able to gain that much'.

Patidar men portrayed a situation in which roles had reversed and women now lead the choice in matters of marriage negotiation. Yet this picture was only one side of the story, and bride price one of multiple marriage markets. In order to bring a wife to the village, bride price had largely substituted for dowry. However, for women who wished to travel for marriage, dowry continued to be subject to escalation. Although men were numerically greater than women, women experienced a shortage of men with the right marriage credentials. 'Good men' had queues at their door. In this respect, the ways in which boys and girls searched for suitable matches changes dramatically according to their social position and in relation to migratory potential.

Diasporic Indians generally return home in the winter when it is not too hot. These homecomings serve to maintain ties with the village, and fuel reciprocal sentiments of inferiority on the part of the villagers who welcome the well-dressed visitors, and superiority in those who return. Depending on their status abroad migrants may return to invest in the village, to reaffirm ties with relatives or to cherry-pick suitable brides. Marriage circles have been recreated abroad and second- and third-generation Patidars who live in London or New Jersey may marry (if they marry at all) within them. However, there is still a preference found in the logic of transnational hypergamy for the 'good, *desi*' (Indian) girls (Patel and Patel 2014). *Desi* girls are seen as more traditional and therefore most suited to uphold caste values in a foreign land, and as more docile and malleable. They are preferred for first-generation migrants, for whom second-generation Patidar girls would be unattainable.

Hiten and Pinakin had attended school together. Unlike Pinakin, Hiten had a lucky break. He returned in November of 2013 from Australia, where he was then studying computer engineering and working in a supermarket. During his three-week visit, he received 25 marriage proposals. He did not have to undergo the scrutiny and humiliation that Pinakin had repeatedly experienced. Hiten arranged to meet a few of the girls, and eventually settled for the prettiest. The choice was his. His family arranged a lavish engagement ceremony. For two days, they served food for all the Patidars of the village. Hiten returned to Australia, mission accomplished.

But securing a marriage with a migrant did not always result in happy endings. In order to leave the village women and their families were ready to pay high dowries and, while marrying within their *gol* remained the preference, marriage out of the circle had become widely acceptable when valued against migration. When a good match seemed possible, women often married in haste and, like Pinakin had done, men were not too scrupulous to lie to secure a bride. Marriages which traditionally take months to organise could be organised in a matter of days. Such hastiness disabled the kinds of relations and informal knowledge that is generally gathered beforehand and that also works as a safety net. In this respect, while women had definitely gained a new negotiating power in marriage decisions, they often ended up entering into other relations of exploitation, relations that, overall, they considered better than the rules of their tradition.

Pinakin's neighbour Sangeeta had recently divorced after an ill-fated marriage with a Patidar man in Uganda. The man had initially seemed like a good match: a good looking young man who owned 20 *bigha* of land and five cinema parlours, and had other businesses abroad. Although he came from outside of the village circle Sundarana was part of, the match seemed promising and Sangeeta's father worked hard to secure her a good dowry. In Uganda, the man turned out to be a fraud for he had no land and no work, drank heavily and was abusive. Back in the village, Sangeeta admitted that 'there is nothing so good about going abroad'. She wanted to find a job in a small town and her family was looking for a new marriage match. As people gossiped about her divorce and criticised her misplaced aspirations for independence, she continued to dream about moving to better lands, hoping it would work out better next time.

## Conclusion

Juxtaposition of ethnography separated by six decades highlights a shift from land and agriculture as the primary status markers to the cultural capital of international migration. Patidars still own land, and traces of the former agrarian polity frequently appear, but it is no longer the preeminent resource in the politics of status. What is essential, instead, is the ability to free oneself from agriculture, through education, employment and migration. In sum, international migration has become integral to the ideological structure of the caste, as the latest refraction of the hypergamous reason.

The world of the peasant in Central Gujarat has opened out since the 1950s. Circles of villages linked and ranked by the cultural particularism have become part of international mobility and class politics. Symbolic and economic regimes have moved closer together and away from land, skewed by the extraordinarily high premium placed on escape. There has not been a collective or wholesale conversion, and many people in villages such as Sundarana are struggling.

Their struggle is not simply about the rebellion of the youth against the conservatism of an older generation. In the midst of it all, the values which determined who they were in relation to one another have been undermined by forces far beyond their control and beyond reach.

In Bourdieu's rural France, women, the poor, younger sons, those who are objectively and subjectively less attached to the land, offered less resistance to the forces of urban modernity which undermines the values and valour of the peasantry and has depopulated the countryside. They become the vehicles for the urban world in the countryside, the Trojan horses of new values. Richer farmers will often fail to achieve the necessary conversions, bearing the burden of the symbolic revolution through bachelorhood. As Bourdieu writes, confronted with a world different from the one that produced it, there is a chance that the *habitus* will run 'so to speak, in neutral, projecting the expectations of the objective structures of which it is the product on a world from which they have disappeared' (2008, 184).

In Sundarana too, the conditions which made the village what it is are no longer what sustain it. People offer up old values with certainty and are surprised and confused when the result is not what they anticipate. Despite initial protests that the world had fallen into disrepair, fundamental ideas about hierarchy, status and standing remain as we have illustrated through discussions of marriage, hypergamy and endogamy. In this respect, the

Patidars have globalised hypergamy. The ways in which they used to rank people, villages and institutions in Central Gujarat have been applied to the world. A hierarchy once ordered by land and agricultural adroitness has been replaced by a league of nations and graded shades of white collars. Topping the Anglo-centric league are: America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom; East Africa dominates the second division.

For men, the likelihood of being able to marry directly relates to their occupation and migrant status. In theory, the values of jobs and migration are now superior to the calculations of blood and descent – so that a Patidar from a lesser marriage circle who is a successful engineer in America will have priority over a Patidar from a well-established marriage circle who has a farm in the village. In practice, the two tend to coincide, so that candidates from ‘superior blood’ and superior marriage circles tend to have better chances to be better migrants than all of those from lesser ones.

At the same time, a sub-category of people has emerged, the discontents, who must share in these aspirations in order to remain Patidar, while knowing that failure is almost certain. Failure is such that this group is reverting from a historically hard-gained mobility to claiming lower caste status and reviving matrimonial strategies associated with lowly rank. While this finding runs contrary to popular representations of the caste, which are couched in the language of success and mobility, it also has important consequences for thinking about the post-colonial career of hypergamy.

The unity of the Patidars, as Pocock had noted, is best understood in terms of their disunity – though the gaps of discordance seem to have greatly increased. The diverse matrimonial strategies we have highlighted show some of the contradictions which will make the future of the rural world. The Patidar do not want for all of their daughters what they want for all their sons. By wanting the best for their daughters they are contributing to the bind of their sons, at least of those who have not found a way off the land. In Bourdieu’s language, this is the peasant embodying the symbolic violence of what for him are urban values: ‘the violence of which one is both the object and the subject each of them is divided against itself’ (2008, 184).

We have redistributed Pocock’s analytical focus slightly in order to show how the updraft of hypergamy as discourse and practice rests on marginalisation and exclusion. Infanticide in the past and now sex-selective abortion, together with India’s general fertility decline, have created a skewed marriage market with ever-more men looking for proportionally fewer women. This has led to the substitution of high dowry with bride price, at least at the lower end of the hierarchy – a move that has both enhanced the value of women in the marriage market and made them more vulnerable. However, it is also the case that not all men are good marriage candidates because the values which make them have changed faster than they have.

In a village like Sundarana, ingloriously ranked as ‘middle-lower’, very few men have permanently clean finger nails or the right stamps in their passports. Those who made it overseas find it easy to marry and successfully request high dowries. In contrast, the realistic choice for those who remain tied to the land is between marrying a Tribal girl, remaining single and, for the lucky ones, defying caste norms and marrying for love. The incorporation of Tribal girls is key to Patidar’s social reproduction. In this respect, ‘proper’ hypergamous marriages are only possible because of the existence of ‘illicit’ or subversive practices and public secrets which enable the appearance of stability and immutability.

We have tried to show how and why these exceptions to the rule are today experienced as disturbing and anomalous with respect to the past practices. Bourdieu addressed this issue by showing how bachelorhood was previously seen as a sacrifice of the individual for the collectivity and as a way to prevent land fragmentation. Today, as land loses its importance and people move off it, bachelorhood becomes an 'absurd and futile destiny' (Bourdieu 2008, 39). Similarly, we have shown that if the perception of anomie in Gujarat may be linked to a numerical increase in 'marginal' practices, it is mostly due to older ways of understanding a world clashing with what has changed. Men like Pinakin uphold traditions which are now unsynchronised with the aspirations and values of those they upheld the traditions for.

For Bourdieu, the problem for the rural world was the advance of urban values which hollowed out the traditions of peasant society. Bourdieu grew up in rural France and the experience deeply marked him. As he moved to the urban intellectual sphere, he was constantly reminded of where he had come from. He was not a peasant, but his empathy and his own experience of inferiority are evident. The village where Bourdieu spent some of his early life now has a primary school named after him. It also has a factory which makes plastic models. A field on the outskirts of the village next to the factory is dotted with life-sized dinosaurs, gorillas and other plastic monsters, as it might have been with cattle a few decades previously.

What has taken root in Sundarana are new forms of aspiration, mobility and consumption. Despite a fundamental shift in the economic preoccupations of villagers over the course of the last century, the cultural and social values of hypergamy have remained. Relatively autonomous from the material conditions of production, they provide the same structuring logic to quite different forms of productive systems: agriculture and transnational labour. The dinosaurs in the fields of France might also suggest that Bourdieu's rural sociology requires updating as villages themselves are changing character. As they do so, change itself becomes an agent of change and the village becomes something else.

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