The Yeoman Jats of Punjab: Time, Expertise and the Colonial Construction of Jat Sikh Identity

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Abstract: This article explores the social life of colonial expertise regarding the Jat Sikh community and its intersections with contemporary Jat experiences. While there has been much scholarly attention to Jats as a martial race, here I focus on British iterations of the Jat as yeoman farmer and noble peasant. I argue that British expertise positioned Jats heterochronically in anterior modern time, even as it contributed to their comparative development, regional dominance and the constructed primordialisms of Jat identity. In closing, I suggest that this particular and privileged position is post-colonially discrepant and today mitigates against Jats occupying their colonially valorized identities.

Keywords: Jat Sikhs, identity, caste, post-colonialism, India, colonial ethnography

Résumé : Cet article explore la vie sociale du propos expert colonial à l'égard de la communauté Sikh Jat et ses intersections avec les expériences Jat contemporaines. Alors que la recherche universitaire a consacré beaucoup d'attention aux Jats en tant que « race martiale », je m'intéresse ici aux mentions répétitives des Britanniques à propos des Jats comme métayers et paysans nobles. Je soumets que le discours expert britannique a situé les Jats dans un temps différent, un temps moderne antérieur, au moment même où la puissance coloniale contribuait à leur essor comparatif, à leur dominance sur le plan régional, et aux prémices construites de l'identité Jat. Je suggère que cette position particulière privilégiée est en rupture avec l'ère postcoloniale et fait aujourd'hui contrepoids à l'occupation par les Jats de leurs identités valorisées en contexte colonial.

Mots-clés : Sikhs Jat, identité, caste, postcolonialisme, Inde, ethnographie coloniale

> The Jats of the Punjab proper have been truly described as "the backbone of the province" by character and physique, as well as by numbers and locality. They are stalwart sturdy yeomen, of great independence, industry and agricultural skill, and collectively form perhaps the finest peasantry in India. [Barstow 1940:71]

Introduction

In 1965, the slogan "*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*" (hail the soldier, hail the farmer) was raised in an India beset by war with Pakistan and proliferating underdevelopment marked by drought, food shortages and riots. Prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's equation of these two occupations as fundamental pillars of security, prosperity and progress asserted their essential roles in building the post-colonial nation, and indeed, that soldiers and farmers are consummate nationalists. In the decades that followed—through Shastri's death in 1966, the Green Revolution he had helped foster, another Indo-Pak war in 1971 and beyond—this catchphrase oriented the nation. In 1998, following liberalization, it was resuscitated following the nuclear tests at Pokhran by then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who added a third phrase, "*Jai Vighyan*" (hail science), creating a developmental triumvirate of soldiers, farmers and scientists and engineers such that a 20th century nationalism could be brought into the information age of the twenty-first century.

Now a maxim, Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan seems perfectly suited to the Jat Sikh community, a caste of Punjabi farmers and landlords who are also well-known for their martial traditions. Thus, we might expect that Jat Sikhs would be central to the Indian national project. Although this has been valid at numerous historical junctures, it is today at some odds with the social position and self-perceptions of the community in post-colonial India, as many Jat Sikhs assert marginalization within the nation-state. The modern, post-colonial trajectory of increasing disadvantage suffered by the community—as

minimally evidenced by the Partition, land reorganization, agricultural change, Khalistani nationalism, caste reservation, urbanization, ever-increasing emigration and growing regional underdevelopment—in some ways emerges from and responds to its position of relative colonial advantage. That British formulations of Jat Sikhs as a martial race of yeoman farmers have had such post-colonial influence speaks to the relationships of expertise, time and the makings of modernity in this case.[1]

The appellation Jat Sikh is a religious, caste and ethnic category. Jats are cultivators and may be Hindu or Muslim as well as Sikh. As farmers, all Jats are among the lower castes (Shudras), but in the Punjab region, Jat Sikhs comprise a "dominant caste" (Srinivas 1959) owing to both their demographic preponderance and the wealth and status associated with their frequently large landholdings. Following community parlance, I will simply use the term *Jat*—instead of *Jat Sikh*—when religious identity is not also at issue. While I cannot here attend in any detail to the category Sikh, or its relationship to Jat identity, and while these are separate but not inseparable categories, there is an ethnographic reason to collapse them. For their part, colonial ethnographers imagined the community as one of consummate soldiers (as Sikhs) and farmers (as Jats), thus attending to and conflating both aspects of Jat Sikh identity. Curiously and, importantly, analysis of the martial "race" construct has been well-developed in post-colonial scholarship, while the colonial construction of Jat agricultural character remains largely unexplored.

The ways in which the British recorded their imaginings of Jats as yeomen noble peasants and the contemporary currency of these characterizations are the subject of this article. I explore the dimensions of instrumentality, expertise and temporality that influenced colonial ethnographic constructions of Jats as both a martial race and a caste of yeoman agriculturalists, focusing particularly on the latter category to suggest that Jat encounters with British administrative expertise and instrumental interests contributed to the community's dominance, even as it positioned Jats in anterior colonial time. I argue that the displacements of British administrators from their own historic pasts and geographic presents effected a particular vision of the Jat community as constructed in regimes of colonial expertise and, brought into modern (if prior) time and space in British accounts, that Jats were positioned within the region and the nation in ways both advantageous and problematic. As historical associations with continued social force, jawan and kisan identities are regionally important primordialisms for Jats, as well as sources of expertise and authenticity, even as they force them into colonial, national and global agendas in ways that mitigate against their being either soldiers or farmers in the present or the future. Thus, the discrepant temporalities of diverse expert knowledges both buttress and destabilize the legacies of colonialism.

Time and the Colonial

Social constructivist approaches to knowledge, discourse, practice and identity, in which sociocultural frameworks are viewed as contingent on modern historical and social processes and the ways in which people locate themselves within them, have been prevalent for almost 50 years. In this approach, traditions are seen as the inventions of modern people with modern concerns and identities as the products of collective social imaginings organized around both of these frames (e.g., Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1997). Post-colonial readings, both before and after Said (1978), suggest that colonial cultures and identities were in large part imagined and thus constructed, through the Orientalist imperial gaze, which denied contemporaneous modernity to colonial subjects. However, the idea that modernity is necessarily Western is unsettled in the idea that those aspects of Indian society that might be labelled traditional are deeply enmeshed in those that might be termed modern (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). Moreover, while Indian social structures were in part constituted in the ways in which they were described by colonial outsiders, the narrators themselves were being constituted in this process (Inden 1990). Subaltern scholars (e.g., Chatterjee 1993) have challenged the narrative of the colonial construction of India, asking what is left for Indians to imagine of India if, for instance, Anderson's argument on the export of European nationalisms is taken at face value. Indeed, the nature, implementation and meanings of colonial knowledge have been considerably scrutinized (e.g., Appadurai 1993; Prakash 1992; Sivaramakrishnan 1995). Many of the central elements of colonial modernity were based on extant social formations and expertise: "Land classification and revenue systems, tax collection procedures, judicial protocols and welfare works that are viewed as distinctive hallmarks of European rule, were in fact heavily based upon administrative systems that pre-dated colonial rule" (Gidwani 2002:18). Moreover, Western science was itself "realigned by the structure of difference in which it was articulated" in its encounter with diverse native interlocutors (Prakash 1992:172). Thus, the social and epistemological realities of India as and when colonized, formed a significant foundation for colonial expertise.

The raj commissioned and depended on the production and implementation of a broad range of expertise: its diverse offices undertook censuses, surveys and maps, engineered canals and railways, recorded land titles and revenues and administered tax and legal systems, and its officers—in both public and private capacities—wrote diverse treatises on India: gazetteers, military guides, histories, religious commentaries, ethnologies, glossaries, travelogues, memoirs and so on. Colonial forms of knowledge and representation were paradigmatic exercises in power (Foucault 1994; Hall 1990), written within a project that sought to characterize India as in a state of "arrested development" (Owen 1973) that required British intervention. While they sought to formalize objective expertise, the British administered and wrote about India on a subjective basis that denied Indians contemporaneity and modernity. Skaria suggests that Europeans classified the societies they colonized in one of two modes: "Orientalist," which attempted to delineate cultural essences so as to individuate them within a grand universal typology, and "anachronist," which ranked societies in relation to the modern time of the metropolis (1997:727). Although these taxonomies were applied in distinct contexts so as to differentiate colonies comprised of former empires from those of tribal peoples, at times they overlapped and their intersection and simultaneous application made them especially forceful (1997:729). This is the case in British writings on Punjab and its Jats, as this article describes. Mukherjee's typology of colonial writing distinguishes between useful knowledge and the picturesque in British imperial writing, the former explicitly concerned with modernity and its implementation and the latter eschewing them (2009:24–25). As I shall demonstrate, while colonial writings about Punjab and its Jats were primarily utilitarian, they were also strongly infused with elements of the picturesque.

British expertise contributed to marking and making the boundaries around religious and caste communities, ordering them socially and in time. The idea that the British observed, located, fixed and effectively made hegemonic contemporary categories of Indian identity is both productive and problematic, not least because colonialism was based on expertise as much as on direct control (Cohn 1987:650). In the first instance, at least in the Jat case, there is considerable coherence between British colonial articulations of cultural traits and those voiced today by members of the community. But in the second, the agency of the colonial subject in the production of their own identity is denied, both because British characterizations are taken to be accurate without question of their provenance and because these Orientalist conceptions have become the prolific and dominant means of historically representing particular Indian communities. Indeed, an ongoing intellectual colonialism occurs in the necessity of reading both historical and contemporary Indian cultures through the theoretical frameworks of Western scholarship. The social impacts of colonial expertise also continue. Social and temporal hierarchies were established through the ways in which castes and tribes were characterized in colonial writing, through how their positions with regard to other social groups were fixed and vis-à-vis British assessments of their comparative evolution and modernity. The interests of the British in India and the forms of expertise they produced created not only economic and political but also cultural and intellectual colonization, via epistemologies of difference and superiority, which embedded Indian communities allochronically and differentially within the corpus of modern historicity and thus time.

The concept of time is often obscured in contemporary anthropology by processual notions of "flow and flux" (Hodges 2008); however, we have long and centrally been engaged with it. Colonial-era practices and texts subjected the world's diverse others to the flow of European time and the teleological and hierarchical schemes of European history even as they dominated their social, economic and political spaces. Fabian (1983) thus proposed that geopolitics is chronopolitics, while Munn observed that time is "a medium of hierarchic power and governance" (1992:109). Under the influence of evolutionary thought, "nineteenth-century anthropology sanctioned an ideological process by which relations between the West and its Other, between anthropology and its object, were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space and Time" (Fabian 1983:147). The authors and subjects of colonial ethnography occupied "split temporalities," divergent historiographic locations and different pasts and futures amid the ontological priority of Western modes of temporality and history (Birth 2008). Apparently unproblematic while the discipline was subject to a positivist paradigm,

> as soon as it is realized that fieldwork is a form of communicative interaction with an Other, one that must be carried out coevally, on the basis of shared intersubjective Time and intersocietal contemporaneity, a contradiction ... appear[s] between research and writing ... [which became] suffused with the strategies and devices of an allochronic discourse. [Fabian 1983:148]

Ethnographic, colonial and development encounters impose an epistemic shift concerning the introduction of European temporalities, altering everyday life and everyday time. In India, this occurred through the regimentation of British calendars and its Greenwich-based clock; the reconfigurations of timekeeping demanded by new technologies—such as railways and irrigation systems and the administration of tax and other offices—and through the reordering of peoples in history as an outcome of colonial ethnography. As I shall argue, British colonial writings on India established temporal hierarchies among Indians so that some Indians were closer to the colonial present, as well as its places, than others.

Caste and Colonial Expertise

The discourse of caste as hierarchical is commonplace (e.g., Dumont 1970), as is the colonial and post-colonial force—socioeconomic and political—of the ways in which those caste hierarchies were refracted, projected and established through the British lens (e.g., Dirks 2001). However, challenges have been raised to both the hegemony of caste as essentially Indian (e.g., Appadurai 1988) and its development, utilization and reality in colonial ethnography (e.g., Dirks 1992; Prakash 1992). British classification practices in India met up with their apparent equal in indigenous forms of the same, sharing the assumption that bodies "are the bearers of social difference and of moral status" (Appadurai 1993:319). Indigenous social taxa and systems were enlisted to justify colonial surveillance, discipline and control—for instance, through the use of "native" proverbs to speak to essentialist but putatively naturalized traits—thus evincing the "consensual nature of caste ideology" (Raheja 1996), even as caste was a matter that English intervention systematized and rendered more forceful (Dirks 1992, 2001). According to Gupta (2005), the British made three significant interventions in caste: first, ensuring (if not intending) Brahmin privilege by consulting them on custom and thereby inspiring lower caste mobilizations; second, creating a category of "depressed classes" to be enumerated and assisted with development; and, third, enacting laws to minimize the mistreatment of Untouchables (2005:413–414). The British were apparently concerned with greater caste equality but this was undone in their focus on the classification of difference among castes. Caste distinctions were categorized, quantified, administered and imposed to preserve and extend imperialism through the well-known tactic of divide and rule and religious categories were joined to caste and similarly reconfigured and fixed in tactics of colonial domination. In delineating communities as based on caste and religion, colonial ethnographies "supplied a library of ethnicity, its shelves lined with tribal monographs," which "were also, in a potent way, ethnic charters" for "a once and future reality" via the ethnographic present (Young 1994:233). As well, in locating colonial communities in particular social, economic and political positions, colonial ethnography thus placed communities in time and in history.

This process occurred through the evaluation and location of communities in relation to European notions of history and time, under the influence of social Darwinism and in relation to "Orientalist empiricism" (Ludden 1993). Their deployment in colonial writing and administration established new hierarchies over those social groups perceived as "tribes:" communities were frequently distinguished on the basis of evolutionary distinctions between settled agricultural modes of subsistence and production rather than forest-dwelling (*jangli* or wild) ones. Particular peoples were associated with particular landscapes, agrarian or otherwise, so that *adivasis* (indigenous "tribal" peoples) such as Rajasthan's Bhils were depicted as wild and independent and celebrated as "noble savages" (Skaria 1997:733). While the colonial nuances of the notion of the tribe have since been scrutinized and rejected in anthropology, it is notable that several colonial treatments (e.g., Cunningham 1966) suggest that Jats comprise a "nation" rather than a "tribe." This label situates Jats as a community akin to those in Europe in some important ways and, thus, apparently of the same order of modern time. However, just as the noble savage motif was applied to adivasi communities, I suggest that agricultural communities such as Jats were depicted and celebrated as *noble peasants* in British accounts. As such, Jats were clearly positioned above Untouchable/ Dalit, adivasi and other regional communities[2] but, nevertheless, their classification also positioned them in a time anterior to the British present for it depended on British nostalgia concerning its own past.

In Punjab, classification was a vexed matter: a heterogeneous population with a hybrid religiosity was forced to identify according to the categorizations of Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, causing or exacerbating the massive dispersal, bloodshed and anguish of Partition at independence in 1947. While Partition marks a significant point of departure for the recrafting of post-colonial Jat Sikh identities and can be pursued to later events such as those of 1984, it is also true that this history is shaped in large part by British theories, representations and ideologies. One of the most central of these has been the notion of the martial races, which served British

interests through an essentialist and masculinist view of the men of particular communities, not races nor necessarily castes or religions but ethnic groups—among them Dogras, Gurkhas, Marathas, Pathans, Rajputs and both Jats and Sikhs—as being especially suited to military recruitment by virtue of their bravery, fortitude and heroism. The male Jat body, like those of other martial races, met the requirements of the ideal colonized subject—health, strength, virility and loyalty—with little need for disciplinary intervention. Not incidentally, the Sikhs were loyal to the British in the rebellion of 1857, after which the impossibility of reconstituting the majority of Indians as moderns was recognized (Prakash 2002:85). But the martial races, being partly assimilated to European norms, particularly European masculinities, were considered to have a modern and "hybrid imperial subjectivity ... at once familiar and alien" (Rand 2006:14). Following the rebellion, the focus of military recruitment shifted to Punjab and the northwest frontier; this rewarded the loyalty of Sikh troops but was also linked to "the Great Game" and the familiarity of northwestern troops with the terrain and climate in which its battles were likely to be fought (2006:8), as well as to the local service rate that could be paid to soldiers serving in their own region, so that by 1875, a third of Indian army recruits were drawn from Punjab and, by 1914, three-fifths (Talbot 2007:4). Significantly, "the central constituents of martial aptitude were located in apparently timeless village communities" (Rand 2006:13), a matter to which I will return.

The martial race discourse is emblematic of the way in which the British classified and differentiated ethnic and caste communities, both in writing and social practice. In effect, for Jat Sikhs, the martial *race* theory was a martial *caste* theory. In the Sikh case, the martial designation was associated with social distance from caste Hinduism and the belief that they opposed caste practices such as commensality (Streets 2004:179). Overt practices of caste and religious manipulation were used by the British; thus, "when existing Sikh recruits were few on the ground, the army sometimes found it useful to ensure 'Hindu Jats be encouraged to take the Pahul[3]'" (Streets 2004:9). For their own part, Indians sometimes transformed these categorizations for their own purposes; for instance, in the early 20th century, Hindus enumerated themselves as Sikh so as to participate in Akali[4] anticolonial protests (Fox 1985:120).

Importantly, while the British certainly had instrumental interests in propagating martial race theory, in the case of the Sikhs, they used categories with indigenous meaning. Having very recently had their own empire in the region[5] and having formed a military response to Mughal colonization before that,[6] Sikhs were militarily skilled. They had also developed a religious framework for armed defence; colonial ethnographies and regimental reports noted the martial history and character of Sikhs, relating them to Sikh theology, hagiography and religious identity and locating their traits in the history of the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh's religious "army of the pure," which defended against oppressions under the Mughal empire, refused distinctions between socio-political and spiritual realms (the doctrine of *miri-piri*), and developed the ideal of the *sant-sipahi* (saint-soldier). As well, the predominantly masculine nature of Sikh militarism intersected the gendered paradigm of *izzat* (honour), so that military service was status-enhancing and privileging. Still, indigenous martial traditions were significantly reorganized and inflected with new meanings: despite their important role in administering India as well as serving in the British world wars, the martial races were nonetheless subject to British power and authority in their official orders and also in a range of everyday bodily regimentations including their uniforms, diet, living conditions and, in the case of Sikhs, turbans, hair and beards. For Punjabis, one critical outcome of this social engineering was the elimination of non-Khalsa identities (Oberoi 1994:373) and, thus, the creation of a singular—and until today contested—Sikh identity. Streets (2004) suggests that the application of martial race theory in India was based on its prior use to refer to the Scottish Highland regiments, which like those of the Sikhs and Gurkhas, were comprised of colonized peoples seen as fierce, manly and thus ideally suited to the military. Like the classification of the Sikhs as a nation, the martial race designation brought the Sikhs into European historical time, albeit in a colonized fashion (like the Highlanders themselves). In this way, it is apparent that martial race discourse transcends and complicates the poles of metropolitan and imperial; thus, understanding it demands attention to the ways in which such ideologies were framed and practiced in both empire and colony. While the connection between martial race theory and Jat military prowess has often been observed and while the links between service and land rewards have been widely noted, there has been remarkably little scrutiny of the construction and representation of Jats as *farmers* in colonial accounts. It is now scarcely thinkable to posit an "agrarian race" theory, although this notion is not unworthy of analysis, not least because it too is related to the intersection of metropole and colony. I now turn to an examination of some colonial

descriptions of Jat Sikhs, focusing primarily on their representation of Jat agrarianism.

Colonial Constructions of Jat Punjab

The lumpen term *colonial ethnography* is a problematic gloss, for it throws together all ethnography written during the colonial period, regardless of the origins, aims, methods and ideologies of the ethnographers (see James 1973). In India, colonial officers rather than professional ethnographers were the frequent authors of colonial ethnography, and thus their work had particular interests and outcomes. Such ethnography is rightfully an object of post-colonial suspicion, although of course all ethnography is produced within differential relations and dimensions of power (Asad 1973; Narayan 1993). However, we must also attend to the fact that some colonial ethnographic writing concurs with social identities and conditions as claimed by the communities so described. It is likely that some colonized peoples were convinced by both subtle and overt exercises of colonial power to shape themselves to colonial images and expectations, whether to gain particular forms of advantage or simply to be left as much as possible alone. And clearly, colonial forms of knowledge were produced with the assistance and participation of at least some members of the communities in question, so that their veracity is not improbable. Before moving to an examination of colonial treatments of Jat martiality and agrarianism, I would note that these descriptions concur with many of the stereotypical and essentialist characterizations that Sikhs, and Jats in particular, still hold true for themselves as a people today, whether in their own descriptions of themselves and their authentic and timeless identities—often represented in popular culture and the media—or in a romanticized construction of nostalgic Jat identity that I call "the rural imaginary" (Mooney 2011).

Much colonial writing heaps superlatives on Jats, establishing a British-engineered grandeur of Jat caste credentials. As a racialized discourse, the genre is much concerned with Jat origins, and many commentators speculated that Jats were originally Rajputs. Ibbetson opined that Jats, having begun to practice widow remarriage and "degrading occupations," were "demoted" Rajputs (1994:100), but it was "exceedingly probable, both from their almost identical physique and facial character and from the close communion which has always existed between them, that they belong to one and the same ethnic stock" (Crooke 1890:93). The equivalency of Jat and Rajput raised the Jat position in the *varna* framework considerably, from Shudra to Kshatriya and, not incidentally, rendered the Jats a martial race. An 1878 anonymously authored treatise entitled *The Punjaub and North West Frontier of India by An Old Punjaubee* stated that "hardy in frame, fierce in nature when aroused and when the welfare of the 'Khalsa' was at stake, it would be difficult to find an oriental nationality producing better soldiers than the 'Sikhs'" (1878:14); "there can be little doubt that the 'Sikhs' were the most formidable enemies the British troops ever encountered in the field in India" (1878:13–14). Crooke asserted:

> His disregard of caste rules, particularly of the futile restrictions which surround the eating and drinking of the ordinary Hindu, make the Sikh peculiarly valuable to our Empire. He does not, like the Hindu, object to leaving his village and crossing the "Black Water." Thus, we find him gladly volunteering for foreign service in China, the Malay Peninsula, and East Africa ... for steady, deliberate courage in the face of extreme danger, he is surpassed by no native troops in our Indian army. [1972:431]

Elsewhere, he remarked that the Jats supply "some of our best Sikh sepoys" (1973:93). Cunningham, in another overture quite typical of the genre, attributed Sikh military accomplishments to the enthusiasm incumbent to the Sikh faith:

> *They* are persuaded that God himself is present with them, that He supports them in all their endeavours, and that sooner or later He will confound *their* enemies for his own glory.... The Sikhs do not form a numerous sect, yet their strength is not to be estimated by tens of thousands, but by the unity and energy of religious fervour and warlike temperament.[7] [1966:11–12]

These descriptions produced a notion of uniform community organized around the martial aspects of the Sikh tradition. In relation to this convention, many accounts referred to Sikhs as a nation (e.g., Cunningham 1966). Martiality and its recognition encouraged notions of dominance: "Under the Sikhs the Rajput was overshadowed by the Jat, who resented his assumption of superiority and his refusal to join him on equal terms in the ranks of the Khalsa ... [so that the Jat] preferred his title of Jat Sikh to that of the proudest Rajput" (Ibbetson 1994:100). The origins of martial race discourse concerning Jats are patently clear.

But, colonial accounts are also replete with laudatory references to the farming skills of the Jats, and, indeed, the formations of kisan and jawan are linked: the preface to Barstow's *Handbook for the Indian Army* (1940), a guide for British officers, states that

he had included a chapter on agriculture "for the chief reason that the Jat Sikh is primarily an agriculturalist, and that an understanding of what this implies is essential to those who have any dealings with him." Cunningham wrote that "the Jats are known in the north and west of India as industrious and successful tillers of the soil, and as hardy yeomen equally ready to take up arms as to follow the plough" (1966:12); in his opinion, "they form, perhaps, the finest rural population in India." Crooke (1973:92–93) described the Jat as "the typical yeoman, the finest farmer in Northern India. His knowledge of crops and cattle is unrivaled, and his industry is unceasing." Ibbetson used similar terms: "He is the husbandsman, the peasant, the revenue-payer *par excellence* of the province.... Sturdy independence in deed and patient vigorous labour are his strongest characteristics" (1994:102). Rose's compilation—based on Ibbetson's census report of 1883 and MacLagan's of 1892—remarked that "these men are the backbone of the Punjab by character and physique as well as by locality. They are stalwart, sturdy yeomen of great independence, industry and agricultural skill, and collectively form perhaps the finest peasantry in India" (1911:12). And, in 1925, Darling observed:

> The Jat ... is the very marrow and soul of the peasantry. [Jats] have a tenacity of character and a skill in farming which make[s] them the best cultivators in India.... It would be difficult in any country to find a more remarkable combination of cultivator, colonist, emigrant and soldier. Educated and organized, and relieved of the handicaps imposed upon him by custom and debt, he might well become the foundation of a new rural civilization in the Punjab. [38–40]

That yeoman Jats are India's finest peasants is clearly a common and recurrent theme—they are an ideal type of the colonial oeuvre.

Because Jats are Punjab's dominant caste and preeminent agricultural producers, the idea that farming comprises the central strand of authentic Jat identity is normalized in both colonial and post-colonial histories. However, given the semi-arid pre-colonial environment of much of the region, agriculture was limited before the introduction of an extensive canal irrigation scheme under the British.[8] Because greater Punjab did not reliably benefit from monsoon rains, intensive cultivation was only possible in the foothills and near the rivers, and most of its indigenous inhabitants were seminomadic pastoralists who populated the region only sparsely, particularly in its western (and southern) desert reaches (Ali 1987:114), moving seasonally between the rivers in summer and their inter-riverine tracts in winter (Muhammed 2011:68). Xeric landscape and climate notwithstanding, the British clearly noted the prospects for fertile productivity in the greater Punjab plains, doubtless encouraged by the five rivers that give the region its name.[9] They expanded the arable area by putting massive irrigation systems and new agrarian settlements known as the canal colonies into place in the inter-riverine tracts. Even under colonial agricultural schemes, large landholdings dominated by landlords and farmed by tenant sharecroppers became prevalent in the canal colonies, while peasant-proprietors with smaller holdings were more characteristic of the areas reliant on rainfall or indigenous wells (Fox 1985:31). Agriculture and military service were closely linked, as one of the rewards for being a good soldier was to be given *zamin* (land) titles in newly opened canal colonies or land revenue titles in the *jagirdar* scheme, a land rights system traceable to the Moghul period. Indeed, the canal colonies were so imbricated with military agendas that they were effectively "militarized" (Ali 1987:128–129). Moreover, Jat military experience had the potential to create a particular kind of cultivator whose training and experience closely attuned them to the necessitudes of modernity: "a type of officer, energetic, intelligent, thrifty, and often much travelled, who is keen to improve his farming and ready to make experiments" (Darling 1934:332). Importantly, as Punjabi agriculture was commoditized and both prosperity and debt exacerbated (Darling 1925), the military provided an important means of financial recourse to struggling families, as did the burgeoning opportunities of the Punjabi diaspora. Thus, Punjab's military predominance in the raj was closely related to its agricultural prowess and farming and soldiering became evermore central registers of Jat status and identity.

Punjab was annexed only in 1849 and thus was a comparative latecomer to British India. The comparative late-coming of Punjab's annexation meant that it escaped the vagaries of early colonial land tenure experiments, some of which expropriated land so as to lease it short-term to the highest bidder; rather, the Permanent Settlement legislation of 1793, which sought to economically improve the colonies through the development of a landowning class of loyal and entrepreneurial farmers with inalienable land rights and fixed revenue rates, was in place (Guha 1996). In just over a decade, Britain saw Punjab as its "model agricultural province" (Talbot 2007:3). During the late 19th century, land values and agricultural prices increased dramatically, and by the 1920s, a third of British India's wheat was grown in Punjab, while other new cash crops such

as sugarcane, cotton and tobacco flourished (2007:5). Agricultural development intensified the development of the region in other ways; for instance, the railways were rapidly expanded to export food (Das 2011:40). British bureaucracy regulated and systematized the land, formally dedicating portions to canal, farm, village, *mandi* (market) and forest use (Muhammed 2011), while urban planning schemes were also introduced: "Nowhere were the ideal of the modern rational state better epitomized than in the neatly laid squares of land in the canal colony villages, and the eight bazaars in the new market town of Lyallpur radiating out from the central clock tower" (Talbot 2007:7). The raj also established a highly paternalistic administrative structure over both land and people: it is reputed that "the peasants considered the administrators their 'ma-bap' (parents), and they believed that the availability of water was impossible without" them (Muhammed 2011:70). As problematic as this observation might be in terms of local agency, it nevertheless asserts the radical and totalizing nature of colonial reconfigurations.

The agricultural expansion made possible by the canals and the agricultural prosperity facilitated by their construction, demanded new configurations of land tenure, new relationships between the British and Punjabi cultivators and the migration of farmers from the more populous areas of east Punjab. Several agricultural castes were granted land in the region, including Arains, Gujars, Kambohs, Sainis and Jats, whether Sikh, Hindu or Muslim (Ali 1987:117, n15); however, Jats were "the most numerous peasant grantees," with "the more prominent Jat families" being awarded the largest grants (1987:122, n29). An entire canal colony land grant category was the "yeoman grant," an allotment of 50 to 150 acres; a larger grant entitled the "capitalist grant" intended to encourage entrepreneurs to invest in and improve the land but, in reality, was awarded to those with "social influence" or who had rendered some sort of service; and a still larger "landed gentry" grant was awarded to an elite class determined primarily by their extended service to the empire, particularly in terms of military service, especially during World War I (1987:123). These grants sought to maximize land revenues by minimizing intermediary claims on land (Fox 1985:32), as well as by ensuring that more land was farmed. Thus, the raj made agriculture more possible and profitable in the region through the introduction of massive irrigation systems and through land, title and revenue reorganization—and by rewarding soldiers, predominantly Jats, with land titles. In doing so, I suggest, they looked to their own agricultural economy and its history as a model. British imaginings of the agricultural bearing of the Jats therefore relied extensively on a symbolic language drawn from their own experience; thus, the yeoman Jat, that noble peasant of British India, is deserving of some further scrutiny.

The Jat as Noble Peasant

Although a curious hybrid of nobility and peasantry, the two poles of feudal production, the noble peasant is not an oxymoron: nobility need not refer to ascribed status; rather, it might signal superior moral character and, in conjunction with the connection to land evoked by the peasant, serve to emphasize place, nature, intuitive affect, wisdom and the continuity of past and future. The noble peasant possesses and represents rootedness amid the rapid, dislocating and deterritorializing changes accompanying industrialization, urbanization, transnationalism and globalization and thus is a "moral guide" (Olson 1998:389); recourse to this rural figure of natural and moral economy is both a critique and an obfuscation of "the actual and bitter contradictions of the time" (Williams 1973:45). The yeoman farmer of England, upon which the noble Jat peasant was modelled, was an ideal type of the early modern era, manifesting particular ideas about Englishness, landscape, farming and identity, as well as elements of the Protestant ethic. A landowner, who toiled on his own farm and loyally joined the security forces when necessary, the yeoman became a national icon. British yeomen farmers formed a rural middle class between the serfs and the gentry; as proprietors of the land they farmed they were industrious, ambitious and thrifty in their agrarian pursuits, a sturdy basis for the nation and an increasingly valuable counterpoint to encroaching industrial capitalism. As an idealized and naturalized notion, the yeoman was exported to the colonies with the British. Joe Powell notes that, by the 19th century, "the 'yeoman farmer' had become a central symbol in 'a popular and politically useful agrarian idealism' in the lands of the English diaspora" (Gaynor 2006:55), especially the European settler colonies of the Americas and Australia. The yeoman ideal was also used in the non-settler context of India, where it was applied to those caste communities embodying the virtues of the noble peasant.

While socioeconomic benefits accrued to the creation of a yeoman class under colonialism, British imaginings of noble Jat peasantry should also be linked to the trajectory of British agrarian development and the particularly nostalgic ideals which infused the colonial ethnographer's imagining of agriculture both "at home" and "in the past." Colonial writing engaged in implicit and explicit comparisons between Britain and India and, moreover, between their histories and speculative futures.

The British had for a considerable time been writing travelogues of their own rural society, a social fact that suggests a certain distance of authors from agrarian occupation and rurality itself. In such texts of the early 19th century, the yeoman was the historic other of "the [modern] metropolitan bourgeois," a romantic symbol "exhibited as a human showpiece, a monument to England's glorious agricultural past;" collectively, yeomen were "living reminders of a vanished culture ... a largely autonomous community sustained by domestic manufacture and family self-sufficiency" (Pordzik 2006:74). Such romantic tropes provided colonial writers with "a ready-made language and a rich array of images and associations through which to render exotic India intelligible" to self and others, and one important element of this was "the need to attach India to more familiar literary, historical, and geographical associations" (Arnold 2004:343–344, 345). At the same time, this process of creating imperial landscapes entailed "both a conscious and an unconscious tendency to transplant British ideas and ideals ... [and] British notions of property, resource ownership and use and social organization to distant lands" (Brayshay and Cleary 2002:6). There are elements of Skaria's Orientalist and anachronist modes here, as well as Mukherjee's utilitarianism and the picturesque, and the assumption that Indian farmers would necessarily inhabit the same historical trajectories as British ones brought Jats firmly into metropolitan and modern, if anterior, time.

Colonial preoccupations with land, agriculture and farmers were variously instrumental and romantic, their expertise grounded in colonial rationality but tinged with the demise of yeoman agrarianism. In an early 20th century article arguing for small holdings and agricultural co-operation in contemporaneous Britain, C. R. Fay noted that the English yeoman class had been "squeezed out of existence ... by the harsh terms of the enclosure acts" (1910:500). This legalized seizure of previously common land throughout England (and its adjacent colonies) had occurred over the preceding three centuries (Linebaugh 2010:14). Moreover, the transformation of self-sufficient peasant farming to the market conditions of the emerging capitalist world system hastened the death of yeoman agriculture. In the colonies, as they went about reconfiguring relationships to land by asserting both administrative and scientific expertise, the British "replicated the social upheavals that accompanied the transformation" of open-field agriculture by enclosure (Sivaramakrishnan 1995:16), as well as the commoditization of agriculture. Under the Moghuls, land was not transferred or sold (Kain 2002); inheritance and ownership were the purview of cultivators, not absentee landlords (Banerjee and Iyer 2005). The colonial shift toward land and agriculture as commodities effectively enacted enclosures in India and the introduction of capitalist agriculture was, thus, a fertile environment for the re-creation of peasant ideals from a pre-enclosure past. Thus, colonial ideas about yeoman agriculture in India hearkened to notions of a prior golden age in Britain.

In the early years of the raj, the British debated whether to govern India in a feudal mode through its indigenous lords or in a modernist vein according to its own modes of governance (Cohn 1987:633). It is clear that hinging on this decision was the ability to place Indians in historical or contemporaneous time and, while British governance demanded knowledge, their expertise had salvage elements. Both synchronous and asynchronous temporalities were manifest in British India, for they allowed that they occupied the same timeframe as some Indians, even as their rule relied on powers given by their purported evolutionary superiority and associated rights. The tribes, lower castes and mutineers were beyond British time and incapable of being brought into modernity, while the "noble" castes, whether princely, martial or peasant, were an anterior version of British yeomen that could be brought out of history to serve British interests and be modernized—and in some ways Anglicized—in the process. For instance, class was developed by placing agrarian practice in a new capitalist framework: although land tenure was allocated based on caste, its benefits were experienced in terms of class. My fieldwork among urban Jats in the late 1990s revealed that most considered themselves middle class, even as they vigorously espoused their autochthonous agrarian character through rural nostalgias (as well as their pride in their contributions to the nation).

Jawan and kisan identities signal important constructed primordialisms among contemporary Jats. Yet it is problematic to simply reiterate yet another form of colonial imagining that denies the formerly colonized community the right to imagine itself, especially as there is no doubt that, however highly they praised Jats vis-à-vis other Indians, British writings also malign them. And to suggest that Jats did not "own" or originate their most essential identity as farmers calls into question, in some ways, their colonial privilege. A range of postcolonial issues arise in these taxonomic strategies of colonial rule, not least of which is their ongoing influence on contemporary constructions of identity and the communal and, at times, violent politics they inspire. Jat

martiality and agrarian prowess should have made the community central to post-colonial development; yet, because their minority religious identity is linked to their military renown and because the successful inculcation of their agriculture into colonial modernity has prompted many to leave farming, they have been particularly subject to new forms of stereotyping, colonization and regimentation within independent India.

Post-Colonial Jat Sikh Identity and the Vagaries of Time: Some Conclusions

The ethnic characters and histories surveyed in colonial ethnographic surveys and the writings based on them, once thus textualized, became objects and sources of knowledge for both internal and external use. These texts provided ethnic charters for colonially identified social groups to claim particular collectivities and subjectivities in the Indian nationalist movement as well as in the contexts of post-colonial nationalism; thus, they are charters to future politics and entitlements (and potentially, marginalizations). Colonial statements concerning caste group identities have taken on a new role in the past two decades of Indian affirmative action policies because British records have been used to document historical caste status. Indeed, the Indian government remains as interested as the British in documenting national differences (Jenkins 2003).

From the perspective of contemporary ethnography, an examination of the social life and impacts of colonial expert knowledges on Punjab reveals that British interests created particular understandings of Jats as peerless farmers and soldiers which have influenced the formation of community identity until the present day. Moreover, as jawans and kisans, Jats find themselves in a post-colonial position of some privilege relative to many other Indians. I have described that Jat Sikhs are a large caste community of farmers and landlords, typically wealthy, prosperous and thus influential members of Punjabi society. Although it is members of less dominant and Dalit castes who perform most of the farming in the region, whether as tenant farmers or labourers, Jats predominantly own the means of production and most often do so as a result of their position of relative colonial privilege as a martial race (which indeed curtailed their labour on the land). Despite the fact that many Jats do little agrarian work, they remain renowned for their agricultural contributions to the colonial and post-colonial economies, particularly in terms of wheat and other cash crops. Characterized in colonial accounts, by present-day Indian agrocrats and in their own narratives as skilled, industrious and open to new farming methodologies, there is a central claim to regional and national—and transnational—modernity throughout. Jats also continue to be well-known as soldiers, and until the introduction in the 1990s of post-Mandal commission affirmative action processes in which economically and politically marginal castes were reserved positions in university seats, civil and military services and local government, Jats comprised nearly 20 per cent of the Indian army, despite comprising less than 2 per cent of its population.

But the situation is not simply one in which the relative colonial privilege of jawan and kisan is replaced by either a straightforward post-colonial exchange of status nor, yet, an increase or diminution of status in both roles. Although positioned by the British in allochronic but modern time and thus ahead of many other Indians, the vagaries of socioeconomic, political and historical processes—regional, post-colonial and global—resituate Jat modernity and temporality. Significantly, Jats were recently labelled an "Other Backward Caste" in Rajasthan, where they form a significant community of both farmers and urbanites in the northernmost district of Sri Ganganagar, adjacent to the Punjab border; thus, they can now avail of reservations policies, for instance, to obtain places at university. Regardless of the ways in which "backward" status is potentially claimed, this trajectory from colonial advantage to post-colonial disadvantage emerges from and is congruent with several regional issues and Jat concerns: the political events around Partition redrew and substantially reduced many Jat Sikh landholdings; the Green Revolution introduced significant new economic and ecological pressures; a further linguistically based division of the region in 1966 heightened ethnic sensibilities; the Khalistan nationalist movement brought further invasions and privations upon the region; the attacks on the Golden Temple and the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984 confirmed national minoritization; the Mandal reforms drastically reduced Jat entry into the military and coincided with and exacerbated extant underemployment of Jat youth; ongoing rural-to-urban and transnational migration weakened Jat ties to agriculture (and thus, according to a well-known aphorism, Jat culture); and in its characterization as an agrarian state, Punjab has been on the periphery of the post-liberalization development of vighyan. This litany of factors contributes to perceptions of alienation and marginality in this otherwise wealthy and influential community. (And, the obvious efforts of post-colonial India to bring all communities into modern time are potentially misread as neglect.) Yet, according to the developmental paradigm

espoused in Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jat Sikhs should be central to the Indian nationalist project. The picture of regional development in Punjab, despite increasing inaccuracy, has, for the most part, been one of emphatic fecundity and prosperity, but the region has become essentially as underdeveloped as other regions of the global south due to property regimes and capitalist market forces introduced under colonialism—and they continue today. Vis-à-vis post-coloniality, the nation-state and global neoliberal regimes, the pre-colonial sovereignty that is at the root of indigenous Jat understandings of farming and soldiering is significantly diminished.

Jats continue to imagine their martial and farming identities as authentic and timeless, although these formations cohere with colonial representation and practice and are economically, politically and socially interrupted in the post-colonial Jat experience. The jawan and kisan identities, recognizable in, if not entirely derived from, the British noble yeoman guard, suited imperial purposes, and in the calculus of the colonial system, Jats were privileged ideologically and rewarded materially for living within colonial representational categories. The real politik of the colonial system thus ensured that Jats took on the roles the British articulated for them: British representation intersected British practice as former soldiers became *zamindars* (landlords) and *jagirdars* (titleholders), regardless of their former status. To some extent, Jats still live in both material and imagined privilege based on their roles as soldiers and farmers in colonial and immediately post-colonial contexts. Despite much land loss at Partition and post-colonial land reforms that now limit individual landholdings (regardless of obfuscation of landownership within this system), the system of colonial reward and privilege continues to reinforce military and farming identities in the region owing to the impetus of national development and a coeval Jat primordialism that views them as natural, authentic, timeless and uniquely Jat.

However, the vagaries and actualities of time, as enmeshed in a post-colonial politics of caste and religious recognition, have cohered to erode this situation. While contemporary Jats tend to be educated, prosperous and middle class, they are also eagerly engaged in urban and transnational pursuits, and for these reasons, they are scarcely farmers or soldiers, although they may well continue to own rural land. And, while the "new rural civilization" that Darling (1930) envisioned has perhaps come about with the development of Punjab within post-colonial India, his claim that Jats would be at its foundation seems paradoxically both commonsensical and contestable. In part because of their colonial privilege, Jats now occupy a neocolonized position within India, which mitigates in several ways, including caste reservations, against their becoming soldiers, while post-colonial and neoliberal development agendas have encouraged migration, diminished local agricultural knowledge and created a plethora of agrarian problems—including advancing agricultural debt, the spectre of farmer suicide, land despoilation and ecological crisis—that drastically curtail the likelihood that they remain farmers. Indeed, colonial ethnographic expertise did not foresee these considerable marginalities, arising in temporal shifts and reconfigurations, in the privileged Sikh jawan and Jat kisan they so fervently and nostalgically imagined.

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Notes

1 I am very grateful to Sandra Widmer and Jean Mitchell for suggesting this theme and for their "yeoman" service in putting together this theme.
2 Some of whom, owing to their socioeconomic marginality and possibly their nomadism, were often labelled "criminal tribes," such as the infamous "Thugs"; this label contributed to the demise of these groups via active suppression.
3 The Sikh initiation rite, which marks Khalsa identification; also known as *amrit*.
4 A movement for *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) and agrarian reforms.
5 From 1799 to 1849, primarily under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.
6 A key feature of this being Guru Gobind Singh's founding of the Khalsa (Sikh army) in 1699.
7 Guru Gobind Singh is attributed with the saying *sava lakh se ekh laraaoon* (125,000 will be inspired to fight against 1), with the implication being that the one Sikh will be victorious in such a battle.
8 Pre-colonial Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi texts exist which describe Jats as nomadic (Gurinder Singh Mann, personal communication, May 2011).
9 Punjab, or *panj aab* (five waters), means five rivers: a reference to the Beas, Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi and Sutlej, all tributaries of the Indus, which flows to their west; however, Partition divided the rivers, as well as the land.

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