CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, around 1820, a farm servant named Ghasidas initiated a new sect primarily among the Chamars (traditionally, leather workers) of Chhattisgarh, a large linguistic and cultural region in central India. Ghasidas was born into a family of Chamar farm servants in the late eighteenth century, possibly in the 1770s, in Girod in the northeast of Raipur district. The Chamars constituted a significant proportion—a little less than one sixth—of the population of Chhattisgarh. The members of the untouchable group either worked on their own land or were sharecroppers and farm servants; but the ritual association of the community with hides, leather, and carrion meant that collectively it carried the stigma of the death pollution of the sacred cow. The close connections between divine, social, and ritual hierarchies located the Chamars at the margins of the caste order, and excluded them from Hindu temples. Ghasidas is believed to have thrown the idols of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon onto a rubbish heap. The rejection of these deities and the authority of Brahman specialists of the sacred, of temples and the Hindu *puja* (worship) offered in them was accompanied by the call to believe only in a formless god, *satnam* (true name). The new sect was called Satnampanth and its members, Satnamis.

There were to be no distinctions of caste between Chamars and a few hundred members of other castes within Satnampanth. The Satnamis had

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to abstain from meat, liquor, tobacco, certain vegetables—tomatoes, chilies, aubergines—and red pulses. They were prohibited the use of cows, as opposed to bullocks, in any of their agricultural operations and from ploughing after the midday meal. With Ghasidas began a guru *parampara* (tradition), which was hereditary. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Satnamis had fashioned an organizational hierarchy and developed a stock of myths, rituals, and practices that were associated in the main with the gurus and challenged the tenor of ritual power, upper-caste domination, and colonial authority in the region. Over the next hundred years the Satnamis coped within transformations in the agrarian social structure and the changing relations of power in the region, negotiated different efforts to regulate the internally differentiated community, and drew upon symbols of authority to question and contest their subordination. The community, which has combined the features of a caste and a sect, continues to be a significant presence in Chhattisgarh.

Analytical Overtures

This book constructs a history of the Satnamis, but it does not present the past as a mere unfolding of a chronologically sequential set of events. My story of Satnami endeavors, encounters, and experiences, with its inevitable subplots, is an interpretive exercise, an exercise in which the perspectives of history and anthropology are each inseparably bound to the other, where archival and nonofficial sources are read in an ethnographic mode and field work is cast as an engagement with the historical imagination. The account addresses a clutch of theoretical issues, a range of key and inextricably bound relationships between sect and caste, religion and power, myth and history, orality and writing, gender and order, community and hegemony, reform and authority, and resistance and domination. The arguments are woven into the larger tale, involving a dialogue between history and ethnography and an interplay of archival and field work.

Indeed, the book attempts to bring together the perspectives and possibilities defined by three overlapping but distinct theoretical developments that have all been elaborated in recent years: first, novel renderings of anthropologies and ethnographies of the historical imagination; second, critical constructions of histories from below, particularly by the collective *Subaltern Studies* endeavor; and, finally, a conceptual emphasis on the "everyday" as an arena for the production, negotiation, transaction, and contestation of meanings, often in a "local" and quotidian key, within wider networks and relationships of power.[1] By casting these analytical tendencies in an implicit critical dialogue with one another, my account works toward questioning

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some of those overarching oppositions—for example, between ritual and rationality, myth and history, tradition and modernity, and community and state—that have formed the conceptual core of several of our inherited traditions of social and political theory within the academy in both Western and non-Western contexts. Far from the fashioning of a new nativism, the challenge to such grand oppositions—and the teleologies and determinations they engender—is actually a mode of resisting conceptual schemes that obfuscate the many imaginative pathways of human practice. There are many ragged but meaningful bridle paths of the past, and this book highlights the distinct perspectives and the practice (but also the problems and the predicaments) of ethnographic history, an interpretive endeavor that still remains a somewhat fledgling enterprise in the South Asian context.[2]

A key emphasis in this endeavor, it seems to me, consists of writing against the grain of those *ur* blueprints of history and meaning, often (but by no means solely) derived from Eurocentric imaginings, which specify the trajectories of the past and the present across cultures by orchestrating particular historical and ethnographic cases, cases that are in turn cast as irremediably narrow illustrative material whose entire purpose is to fit into and elaborate a predetermined larger pattern, grist to the mill of overarching theoretical frameworks. Moreover, an abiding irony reigns here, for even those "alternative" writings which range themselves against teleologies and "foundational" histories are not entirely immune to the seductive charms of a motor of grand theory running specific historical and ethnographic cases, and critiques of Eurocentric imaginings often run the danger of reproducing the givenness of categories derived from the very frameworks they set out to question.[3] Clearly, this is not a plea for the eschewing of theory. Rather, it is a call against the rendering of theory in the capital case that only paves the way for its further aggrandizement. A sustained mutual dialogue and the play of concept (and categories) with evidence (and the empirical), where the domain of facts and information is simultaneously bound to the less conscious realm of popular imaginations, theory needs to be interwoven into narrative as a critical interpretive act, a crucial aspect of the telling power of tales, in elaborations of ethnographic histories.

This brings up the question of the place of the "particular" in our ethnographies, histories, and ethnographic histories. Here, let me rehearse a passage by Michel de Certeau that evokes this issue, a statement whose wide resonances run throughout my work.

> For what I really wish to work out is a *science of singularity*; that is to say, a science of the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances. And only in the *local* network of labor and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socio-economic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly estab-

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> lish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic). The characteristically subtle logic of these "ordinary" activities comes to light only in the details.[4]

In this book on the Satnamis, a critical reading of the "singularity" and the "details" of a particular historical and ethnographic case and the wider analytical implications and theoretical import of the study are not artificially separated one from the other. Rather, they are rendered as inseparable domains, which mutually fashion each other. This Introduction does not cast matters on a resolutely grand theoretical scale, characteristic of writings that turn theory into a touchstone of truth, but takes the path followed by the rest of the book.

Meanings and Margins of Hinduism

For long years now the very categories of "Hinduism" and "Hindu" have been variously debated, dissected, and defended by students of religion(s), historians, and anthropologists.[5] More recently, scholars of different persuasions from one another have taken up matters of philology, etymology, and taxonomy to argue that the category of Hinduism, and to a greater or lesser extent the realities it encodes, is a nineteenth-century creation of colonial imaginings.[6] As for the term *Hindu*, although of a much older vintage than *Hinduism*, it had originally an ethnogeographical reference (the people of the lands around and beyond the river Indus) that was retained in the form in which it entered the English language in the seventeenth century, and it was only gradually that Hindu came to mean someone who was indigenous to India but was not a Muslim (or a Christian).[7] *Hindu* as a term, the argument proceeds further, also seems to have been barely used by the people whose religious affiliation it purported to describe, since the very homogeneity of the category ran counter to the fabric of the "interpenetration and overlapping of communal identities," characteristic of the "highly localized" nature of religious formations in India, that continued well into the nineteenth century.[8] Thus, it was only in the nineteenth century that the categories of Hinduism and Hindu, in conjunction with each other, came to clearly specify an Indian's religious affiliation, and this involved a twin birth but a single conception, a conception that was largely Christian but far from immaculate because of its colonial implications. Indeed, the picture was complete when the English-educated, often middle-class, social reformers and nationalists in nineteenth-century India responded to such Western appraisals of Indian religions by undertaking a series of different steps toward constructing their vision and practice of Hindu and Hinduism,

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blueprints that often tended to fashion homogeneous meanings and to reproduce the significance of colonial categories in their very articulation of difference from the West.[9] (Significantly, these blueprints came to be elaborated alongside the measures constructed by the imperial government with regard to religious communities.)

On the other side, historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion have emphasized (in both implicit and explicit ways) that, philological and etymological issues notwithstanding, far too much is "currently [being] made of the colonial construction of caste and religious categories and too little of the precolonial basis for these categories, on which the colonial state had its impact."[10] In brief, precolonial India was not devoid of supralocal identities, and these historically constructed identities, from the twelfth century onward, involved different renderings of a Hindu "self" and various constructions of a Muslim "other" in wider contexts of processes of state formation, the development of a royal cult of the god-king Ram as a political theology, and the fashioning of discursive, linguistic, and popular-devotional communities in several significant parts of the subcontinent.[11]

Taken together, these emphases suggest both the need to question the givenness of the categories of Hindu and Hinduism and the necessity to explore the ways in which the relationships and arrangements that came to be named and ordered by these categories had a basis in precolonial India. Yet the very design of this debate also involves a somewhat single preoccupation with the "origins" of categories, and a casting of the definitions of Hindu and Hinduism rather exclusively in relation to other religions. One of the ways of going beyond the terms of the debate at hand is to explore the diversities, differences, and discontinuities in the production of the many meanings of Hinduism, the construction of multiple Hindu identities as a negotiated and contested resource, particularly by groups and communities who stood on the margins of these religious categories.

Indeed, it is these margins, rendered here as a history of the Satnamis, that provide an important filter to examine the constitution of the meanings of Hinduism and the articulations of Hindu identities—fashionings and elaborations not merely of these words themselves, but of the wider structure of the lived beliefs and practices to which they refer—over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For when I write of Hindu and Hinduism in these pages, I allude to patterns and arrangements of lived religious meanings and practices, the everyday transactions of the different members and groups within the sacred universe of an Indic religion, where the social, ritual, and cosmic domains have been integrally bound one to the other. Indeed, a crucial aspect of these transactions of meanings and practices concerns the several elaborations, negotiations, and contestations of the intermeshing of divine, ritual, and social hierarchies, which have been cen-

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tral to Hinduism.[12] I need to add here that mine is not a call for the jettisoning of sacred texts in constructing our understanding of Hindu religion, rather it is an argument for exploring the practices that underlie the construction, dissemination, apprehension, and appropriation of these texts, an emphasis that reveals processes of the canonization and of the radical reworkings of textual traditions by historically and politically situated interpretive communities within Hinduism. To be sure, this is neither a foolproof nor an exclusive definition of the categories in question, but in highlighting the issues of what Fuller has called "hierarchical inequality" and the "partial continuity between humanity and divinity"—both matters inflected by power—it foregrounds two interconnected aspects that are central to lived Hinduism.[13] In a related move, my emphasis on practices, processes, and power in our historical and ethnographic understanding of Hinduism allows us to treat it as a religion that has been variously constructed and contested in, through, and over time. Finally, my endorsement of the perspectives of margins, a history of an untouchable community, in discussing the historically constituted meanings of Hinduism and Hindu identities permits us to explore these issues as part of a wider dynamic between religion and power.

Clearly, religion is not treated here as a hermetically sealed-off domain of the sacred, a static repository of timeless traditions. Instead, it is understood as an inherently historical set of signifying beliefs and practices whose meaningful constructions—and active refiguring of perceptions—of the social world are at once tied to processes of domination and to strategies of resistance to authority. It follows that the processual character and the simultaneously symbolic and substantive nature of religion are closely linked to wider transformations in culture and society. Power in turn extends far beyond the exercise of authority grounded solely in control over political and economic resources to include manifest and diffuse processes of domination, hegemony, and control—cultural schemes, disciplinary regimes, and discursive practices—which inform everyday social relationships structured by the interlocking of different principles of social division. Now, if these inclusive working definitions set the stage for a discussion of the complex dynamic between religion and power among the Satnamis, there are important issues at stake here. This dynamic reveals the negotiated and interrogated, reworked and contested meanings of Hinduism and Hindu identities—powerful resources in the subterranean and self-conscious simulations of Satnami strategies and struggles—over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To take but two examples here. We explore issues of the formation and elaboration of Satnampanth, a subaltern religious endeavor that fashioned its distinct identity by questioning the ritual power embedded within caste and by constructing "otherness" within the Hindu social

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order in the nineteenth century. Equally, a little later in the account, we also discuss novel renderings of Hindu identities by the Satnamis under the regime of caste associations, within the wider context of culturally constituted understandings of Hinduism by nationalists and social reformers, understandings that were elaborated alongside measures constructed by the colonial government in relation to religious communities between the 1920s and 1940s. Indeed, the perspectives drawn from untouchable pasts, the meanings gleaned from margins, raise several important questions for central themes in South Asian history and ethnography. It is to these critical issues and key problems that I now turn.

Formative Issues: Rethinking Sect, Caste, Power, Contest

The formation of Satnampanth was informed by the wider context of Maratha rule (1742–1854) in Chhattisgarh, and my analysis of the early making of this religious endeavor locates it within the broader processes of state formation and revenue practices in the region. In fact, my arguments here constitute a part of a larger analytical endeavor, an attempt to attend to the changes and continuities in the domain of political economy while elaborating the fluid but constant interplay between cultural schemes, social relationships, religious meanings, and ritual power. Turning to the issue at hand, during the past few years nuanced historical accounts of economic and social institutions and processes in Maratha polities have revised our understanding of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in India. The somewhat crude sketch of Maratha rule as a predatory empire of the saddle has been replaced by a more finely drawn picture that shows significant continuities between the Mughals and the Marathas, an expansion in cultivation in Maratha territories, and the crucial place of local expectations and resistance in the shaping of Maratha administration.[14] Chhattisgarh as a frontier province within the Maratha dominions shared features of this wider picture. The region also had its own peculiarities. The administrative measures of British superintendents—who governed Chhattisgarh between 1818 and 1830 when the Bhonsle raja Raghoji III was a minor—compounded these complexities. Satnampanth was a response to cultural and economic processes that had a contradictory dimension for the Chamars in the region. These processes allowed members of the group to establish their own villages and thereby to negotiate and partly escape the authority of upper-caste officials. But they also led to an increasing subordination and further marginalization of other Chamars in villages dominated by higher castes in the face of a growing rigidity of the norms of purity and pollution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. My account

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of the formation of Satnampanth, while providing a filter to examine wider arguments about processes of continuity and change in the period at the frontier of Maratha polity and the East India Company's dominions, highlights the centrality of conflict and innovation in the arena of popular religious practices. It explores the symbolic construction of a subordinate religious initiative that carved for itself a distinct religious identity in relation to the ritual power of the social and divine hierarchies within the caste order in Chhattisgarh, an endeavor that worked toward reconstituting the ascribed untouchable status of Chamars by incorporating them as Satnamis.

Sect and caste generally tend to be conceived of as binary categories, a legacy of Louis Dumont's theory of asceticism in Hindu society that rests on a set of homologous oppositions between caste and sect, Brahman and renouncer, man-in-the-world and individual-outside-the-world, and householder and ascetic.[15] This influential model, based upon a Brahman householder's construction of renunciation and asceticism, ignores the fact that sects do not necessarily recognize the householder/renouncer opposition and adopt different approaches—from total rejection to varying forms of acceptance—toward rules of caste.[16] Now, these differences cannot be explained away through Dumont's physiological analogies of Brahmans "absorbing" renouncers and sects "degenerating" into castes.[17] Both, Richard Burghart's short but elegant formulation of the perspective of a set of nonhouseholding ascetics, the Ramanandis of Janakpur, who believed in caste rules of commensality within the sect, and Peter Van der Veer's detailed and sensitive account of the processes of "sedentarization," accompanied by a strong emphasis on the social origins of the ascetic, among the "open category" of renouncers of the Ramanandi monastic order of Ayodhya, provide a case in point here.[18] Indeed, Dumont's conception of caste and sect, householder and renouncer, ignores the perspectives of the ascetic and the non-twice-born caste.

Against the grain of Dumont's overarching oppositions, the career of Satnampanth, a sectarian formation that has elaborated the perspectives of a non-twice-born caste, underscores the importance of recognizing the diverse articulations and permeable boundaries of caste and sect, householder and ascetic in South Asian religious traditions. From the moment of its inception, at each step, Satnampanth has been governed by a logic avowedly committed to reconstituting the overwhelmingly untouchable caste status of its exclusively householder members. This has involved the forging of a particular set of relationships between principles of sect and caste within the subaltern religious endeavor. Thus, the symbolic constitution of Satnampanth as a sect in the first half of the nineteenth century involved both reworkings of the beliefs, symbols, and practices of popular sectarian traditions such as Kabirpanth that had posed alternatives to the hierarchies

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of caste and the appropriation of a set of focal signs from the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution embedded within the caste order. At work here were two simultaneous movements: a rejection of Hindu gods and goddesses and of the *purohit* and *puja* within temples, involving an interrogation of the close connections between divine, ritual, and social hierarchies; and the creation of Satnampanth as a pure body through its accent on the appropriation of signs of ritual purity, which removed the impurities of the bodies of its members. It is hardly surprising that these seemingly contradictory moves worked together to question the ritual subordination of Satnamis, since the twin articulations were governed by a single logic that was made up of a fusion of the codes of caste and sect. As we shall see, to be and to become a member of Satnampanth involved both the initiation into a sect and the incorporation within a caste. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, the elaboration of an organizational hierarchy within Satnampanth, with the guru at its head, further clarified this pattern. Indeed, the fashioning of the figure of the Satnami guru constructed new meanings of asceticism: the guru, ever the householder, came to combine within himself the truth and purity of *satnam*—through a rejection of the integrally bound hierarchies closely connected to the Hindu pantheon and the creation of Satnampanth as a pure body—together with the attributes of a *raja admi* (kingly person)—derived from schemes of ritually fashioned kingship within the caste order—to become the living symbol of worship within the Satnami community. The guru and the Satnami organizational hierarchy enforced the norms and practices, an amalgamation of the principles of sect and caste, that maintained the boundaries of Satnampanth. All this provides a forceful reminder to reconsider the relationships between caste and sect, householder and ascetic, developed by Dumont and later deemed a dominant design in the scholarship on South Asia. At the same time, these principles governing the forms of organization, norms, and practices within Satnampanth also set limits to the group's challenge to caste society: Satnampanth not only rejected and reworked, but it also reproduced the significance of meanings embedded within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and ritually fashioned kingship.

This brings to the fore questions of the wider interplay between religion and power in caste society in South Asia. Louis Dumont has argued that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution is the overarching organizing principle, the underlying structural logic, of caste within the Hindu social order.[19] In recent years, we have had forceful critiques of Dumont's exclusive preoccupation with a normative order presided over by the Brahman and defined by purity and pollution. The emphasis on "the complex and conjectural foundations of hierarchical relations" and the "several contextually shifting relations of intercaste relationships apparent in everyday

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village social life" has focused on the ideological, religious, and cultural character of kingship and the dominant caste.[20] Actually, the debate underscores the issue of power in the caste order. The influential work of Dumont encompasses power within the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, and renders it epiphenomenal.[21] The writings of Nicholas Dirks, Gloria Raheja, and Declan Quigley in turn open up possibilities for discussions of the intermeshing of caste structure, ritual form, and cultural attributes of dominance, but tend to locate power, almost exclusively, in constructs of ritually and culturally constituted kingship and dominant caste. In the end, these positions—an exclusive emphasis on the hierarchical concerns of purity and pollution, which brackets power from religion; and an embedding of caste within the political context of a culturally central, ritually fashioned kingship and dominant caste—seem to be mirror images.[22]

A history of the Satnamis constructed in the ethnographic grain suggests a different perspective on the nature of power in caste society in South Asia. The low ritual status of the group and its exclusion from the web of relationships defined by service castes—including the barber, the washerman, the grazier—in village life underscores that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the principles of a ritually central kingship and dominant caste were not separate and opposed principles but rather the two constituted intertwined cultural schemes, both charged with meanings grounded in relationships of power within the caste order. These distinct but overlapping schemes of ritual power worked together and reinforced each other in the definition of the subordination of the Satnamis and other untouchable communities. The formal establishment of colonial rule in Chhattisgarh in 1854 compounded these patterns of authority—a process, I would venture to suggest, also enacted with somewhat different emphases, over slightly altered time frames, in other parts of India. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idioms and practices of governance of the colonial order were critical in structuring the forms of dominance and power within caste society in South Asia. This was not a mere matter of the articulation of caste "movements" and identities, often (but by no means only) in the domain of institutionalized politics defined by the colonial administration. At work here were rather more complex and diffuse processes involving novel elaborations of hierachies of power and fresh renderings of rituals of dominance, which drew upon aspects of colonial governance, in the constitution of caste in village relationships and local arenas.

Now this issue too has generally tended to be ignored by the main protagonists in the debate about the nature of power in the caste order, which is possibly in keeping with their emphasis on constructing a synthetic theory of caste in order to reveal the *internal* logic of the Hindu social order. Of the different arguments rehearsed above, only Nicholas Dirks directly

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addresses the question of the links between caste and colonialism to argue that under colonial rule the embedding of caste in kingship lost its essential moorings in power, a characteristic of precolonial India. What was left in its place was a panoply of royal ritual devoid of power, a "hollow crown."[23] As a result, the masterful ethnohistory of a "little kingdom" produced by Nicholas Dirks accords little importance to the reworkings of colonial governance in local arenas, and his argument moves in a rather different direction from my focus on the symbols, metaphors, and practices of colonial rule as reinforcing and constituting the forms of power in the caste order. Indeed, Satnami oral narratives about village life in the colonial period elaborate how the constitution of authority within caste society, ordered by the metaphor of *gaonthia zamana* (the era of landlords), involved an intermeshing of the closely bound axes of dominance of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and ritually fashioned kingship with the forms of power derived from the colonial order. Once again, historical margins reveal the need to rethink central theories of the relationship between caste and power in South Asia.

And what of arguments extending Dumont's position about a cultural consensus centering on purity and pollution within the Hindu social order to untouchable castes? I shall focus here on the most detailed account, Michael Moffatt's study of the untouchables of Endavur in Tamil Nadu, south India. Moffatt argues that the untouchables, a "discrete set of low castes," who are excluded for reasons of their extreme collective impurity from particular relations with higher human and divine beings, are also included in other relations with the same higher beings. The untouchables, in contexts of inclusion, complement higher beings by playing their appropriate low roles that are necessary for the maintenance of the human and divine order. Moreover, the consensus extends to situations of exclusion: the untouchables replicate and recreate among themselves the set of ranked relations of which they do not form a part.[24] My account shares Moffatt's concern to situate the untouchable castes within the broader set of cultural continuities in the caste system. However, it also highlights aspects of the pasts of the Satnamis that question the universal cast and the rigid form of the overarching oppositions underlying Moffatt's tidy picture of the principles governing untouchable communities.

To begin with, the Satnamis refused the "complementarity" of their position as lowly untouchables. As we have noted, the former Chamars, regrouped as members of Satnampanth, stopped accepting substances of death pollution of a higher being (the cow) from upper castes, and they also rejected the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and the close connection between divine and social hierarchies, all of which had defined the low ritual status of the group within caste society. Yet such redrawings of

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the boundaries of Satnampanth also reworked—not, as Moffatt would have it, merely "replicated"—the symbols and practices of the cultural schemes of the caste order. Now these acts of refashioning on the part of the Satnamis followed varied paths. The group drew upon the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution in ways that may seem—at certain points, and in some readings—to be consonant with the logical patterns of replication established by Moffatt: but these acts of appropriation were conjoined with novel fashionings of the cultural and ritual attributes of kingship, a distinct scheme of authority within the caste order, and with fresh renderings of elements of popular traditions, traditions tied in turn to contestations of the interlocking hierarchies of caste. These reworked signs, drawn from different traditions but now situated next to each other within the matrix of Satnampanth, pressed new associations and critical meanings, and together they interrogated and challenged the low ritual status of the Satnamis.

Of course, it can be argued that the Satnamis—and indeed other related examples—provide an exception which in fact proves the general rule of Moffatt's arguments concerning the principles that govern untouchable communities. But this would be to ignore at least two critical analytical issues, quite apart from the sheer weight of empirical evidence about untouchable groups that militates against Moffatt's scheme.[25] First, in our analyses of social practice, as Bakhtin has argued in relation to linguistic and discursive performance, "the task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity."[26] Second, these processes of the production of meanings occur within cultural fields defined by relationships of power, and the meanings constituted within social practices variously elaborate, negotiate, and subvert cultural *forms* that are tied in different ways to schemes of dominance and authority.[27] These twin perspectives clarify that Moffatt's model dwells on the identities of forms of ranked relations within the caste order that extend to the untouchable castes, but it accords little importance to the production of meanings involved in the appropriation and reappropriation of these forms by different castes, in this case by the untouchables of Endavur. A second general problem follows from the first. Moffatt's sharp distinction between "consensus" and "disjunction" also stands in the way of analyses of the construction of nuanced meanings of consensus and of elaborations of the disjunctive aspects of replication within the hierarchies of caste, the more so because his account, following Dumont, ignores the principles of power that are structured into the cultural schemes of caste society.

The Satnamis negotiated and contested these relations of power through a variety of cultural and ritual means in the nineteenth and twenti-

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eth centuries, and my analyses here seek to overcome what Sherry Ortner has identified as the "problem[s] of ethnographic refusal"—the severe lack of an ethnographic perspective—in the recent spate of studies of "resistance."[28] We have seen that the creation of Satnampanth initiated the challenge to ritual power within caste society in Chhattisgarh. In the last four decades of the nineteenth century, the Satnamis responded to their expropriation and exploitation under the new system of proprietary rights and *malguzari* (village proprietor) settlement, established by the colonial regime in the 1860s, with various strategies: they deserted villages, continued with the practice of *lakhabata*—the periodic redistribution of land—in Satnami villages, and their solidarity was evident in the challenge to upper-caste *malguzars* over the issues of rent and loss of land in the 1890s. The enduring and persistent contestatory practices of the Satnamis were rooted in the domain of the familiar and the everyday. The organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth, presided over by the guru who combined the twin, inextricably bound characteristics of the raja and the embodiment of the truth of *satnam* served as an alternative ritual and symbolic power center to dominant groups and their network of relationships with service castes. Over the nineteenth century, the group also fashioned modes of worship that combined an accommodation of the beliefs and festivals shared by the village with the creation of new divinities, which challenged the tenor of upper-caste Hinduism. The Satnamis developed a repertoire of myths, a part of their oral tradition, which centered on the gurus. The myths drew upon and questioned the relations of power constituted by the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, the cultural construct of kingship and dominant caste, and colonial authority within Chhattisgarh. Finally, in the midst of efforts (aided by upper-caste benefactors) to recast the identity of the Satnamis along the lines of recently constructed authoritative blueprints of Hinduism in the 1920s and 1930s, the group fashioned distinctive uses for the key emphases of the Hinduisms that were on offer, and its reworkings of Hindu identities were accompanied by a challenge to the upper castes. The Satnami criticism of domination, with its accent on the refiguring of the perceptions of the social world through ritual forms and mythic meanings, reveals the challenge to authority in a religious idiom, between the violent drama of rebellion and ordinary acts of daily subterfuge.[29]

Reworked Resources: Myths, Orality, Writing, Histories

The myths of Satnampanth, marked by a high degree of symbolic elaboration, were a part of the ongoing oral traditions of the community. They suggest the need to explore the relationship between myth and representa-

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tions of the past. Now the counterposing of history and myth as opposing categories reinforces the distinction between societies with a dynamic past and other people with unchanging mythic orders.[30] Indeed, this distinction is itself a part of a wider set of overarching oppositions—homologous to each other but articulated in various and often selective ways—between modernity and magicality, rationality and ritual, West and East, reason and emotion, and culture and nature. I repeat this truism because these oppositions and the meanings they engender are not mere specters from the past, now exorcised by a radical ethnographic will. They remain a persistent and palpable presence, a part of our here and now, within and outside the academy, in Western and non-Western contexts, their insidious influence exercising its enchantments over a wide spectrum of political and intellectual opinion from conservative think tanks, to mainstream liberals, to left ideologues, to strains of postcolonial radical and primitivist alternatives.

Clearly, we need to rethink these oppositions, and I take a small step in this direction here. First, myth can be a form of the ordering of historical consciousness and can embody specific cultural conceptions of the past. Moreover, the stratification of myth and ritual in temporally layered religious cults and movements underscores the importance of attending to the internal order and the structure of meanings of myths and rituals to elucidate the development of a mythic tradition.[31] My reading of Satnami myths combines these emphases and concerns. The myths ordered the past of Satnampanth. The Satnami gurus underwent trials, overcame obstacles, and negotiated and displaced figures of authority to define the boundary and orchestrate the symbolic construction of Satnampanth. The retelling of the myths in the performance of oral traditions reaffirmed the identity of the Satnamis as a bounded group, a community. Satnami myths allow us to trace, at once, the group's cultural conception of its past, and the creation of a new mythic tradition.

The Satnamis' telling of stories from their past, without the devices of literacy, invited those who stood outside the community—with manifest interests in the group—to intervene with written histories. It is, of course, difficult to sustain a view that writing and orality are entirely exclusive forms that exist independent of each other. The two forms constitute overlapping but distinct discursive modes, each with its own devices and ways of ordering the world.[32] This book explores the complex cultural encounter between orality and writing embedded in the Satnami past. The writing down of Satnami myths by Baba Ramchandra, an upper-caste outsider and former peasant leader of the radical Kisan Sabha movement of 1918–1920 in the Awadh countryside in north India, in a curious manuscript called *Ghasidasji ki Vanshavali* (the genealogy of Ghasidas) in the 1920s remained bound within the logic of orality. Even as Ramchandra sought to frame a continu-

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ously performed oral tradition in writing in the *Vanshavali*, the devices of literacy could not compromise the internal order of myth, and the written text actually derived its meaning from oral and mythic categories. Moreover, the writing of such outsiders came to define the contours of Satnami initiatives, and a key effort to reform and control the community and to redefine Satnami identity in the 1920s was conducted in an idiom of law and authority that was embedded within writing. The critical place of writing as an instrument of domination, in fact, meant that the Satnamis both contested and appropriated its symbolic and substantive power. Finally, the Satnami encounter with evangelical missionaries, which began in 1868, was marked by an interplay and interpenetration of oral narratives and written texts that produced a reordered past of Satnampanth. The Satnami converts to Christianity reworked their oral traditions and the "truth" learned from their evangelical benefactors to forge connections between Ghasidas and the gurus and Christ and the missionaries; the missionaries in turn seized upon these oral traditions to fashion alternative histories, contending pasts. The two processes fed each other. In the 1930s the pooled resources of orality and writing, of the converts and missionaries, resulted in an "authoritative" account of Satnampanth, an account that tried to link the Panth to the inexorable logic of the "truth" of Christ and formed a missionary's last bid to secure a metamorphosis of the Satnamis through their "witnessing" of the Savior. The short text, written by the missionary M. M. Paul, simultaneously took up the forms and idioms of popular religious discourse and followed modes of inscription that lent fixity to its allusions and tenor. This endeavor once again underscored the retention, subversion, and fashioning of meanings that lay at the heart of the relationship between orality and writing.

These processes involving the constitution of truths and the making of histories were a part of larger efforts to regulate the community and redefine its identity. The missionary M. M. Paul's narrative, which sought to string together speech and scripture, had its rivals. In the late 1920s Baba Ramchandra toyed with and then abandoned the myths he had so assiduously inscribed only a little earlier in the manuscript *Ghasidasji ki Vanshavali.* Instead, his *Satnam Sagar* staged an elaborate textual drama replete with the mysteries of classical cosmology, Brahmanical beliefs, and Vedantic vision. Its main protagonists were Hindu gods, goddesses, saints, and warriors, who now populated an esoteric and reified textual universe. The Satnami gurus put in a cameo appearance. The redemption of the Satnamis lay in following the path of the Vedas. Only a few years later, the Shri Path Pradarshak Sabha, a Satnami initiative to reform the community and to persuade the provincial administration to enter the group as Hindus rather than Harijans in official records, mapped a genealogy that re-

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worked the origins of the group. It drew upon the laws of Manu, that ancient codifier of caste, only to turn them upon their head, and also worked on other popular and esoteric, oral and textual traditions to construct a novel past of the Satnamis. These contending accounts, premised upon a recognition of the significance of their past for the members of the community, seized upon history as a negotiable and reworkable resource in their bid to transform the Satnamis.

Colonial Modernities and Evangelical Encounters

Far too frequently, historical accounts, drawing upon classical social and political theory, set up an overriding opposition between state and community. This problem characterizes a great deal of the influential new scholarship on modern Indian social history, a difficulty, as we shall see, that extends from the earlier constructions of the pasts of subordinate groups in *Subaltern Studies* to the more recent shift within this series toward discussions of the dynamics of power and the discursive agendas—or, to put the matter (only) slightly differently, an interrogation of the histories—of the state and the nation in South Asia.[33] Here, even those exercises that actually discuss the fashionings of a colonial modernity in India often retain the givenness of a binary divide between state and community in their elaboration of the play of difference in the articulation of civil society with the colonial state.[34] Now this opposition between state and community tends to ignore the different ways in which the symbols and metaphors of the state and governance are drawn upon and imbricrate themselves in the construction of communities, particularly in their fashionings of notions of order, legalities, and identities. Let me clarify that this is no mere trendy poltergeist of Foucault's illuminating but spooky rendering of "governmentality," although I cannot deny having learned something from the category in an idiosyncratic manner.[35] At stake here rather is the crucial importance of a working recognition, at once a theoretical need and an empirical necessity, of the interplay and interpenetration between symbols of state and forms of communities in the making of colonial modernities.

Illiteracy among the Satnamis, we have noted, provided political opportunities for mediations of change by those empowered by writing. These players often engaged with the provincial government, and the symbols, metaphors, and practices of colonial rule came to lie at the heart of efforts to remap Satnami identity and to reform the community. In the early 1920s, a set of influential members of Satnampanth got together with Sunderlal Sharma, a local upper-caste Hindu reformer, and G. A. Gavai, a leader of the depressed classes, to set up an organization called the Satnami

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Mahasabha. The Mahasabha was an effort to reform the Satnamis and to participate in the emergent organizational and constitutional politics within the region and in the Central Provinces. The interventions of outsiders were critical in the making of the initiatives sponsored by the organization. G. A. Gavai drafted a petition from the Satnami Mahasabha to the governor of Central Provinces that appropriated the demands of the Satnamis to the concerns and the vocabulary of the depressed classes, a provincial political constituency. The petition won its key demand—the government duly recognized the reconstitution of Chamars as Satnamis within Satnampanth and inscribed this on official papers—and has since come to be celebrated by the group as a charter of victory. But it also introduced tensions within the Satnami organizational endeavor. The reworking of Satnami identity in a language whose grammatical rules were defined by caste associations and the provincial government stood in an uneasy relationship with a reiteration of the beliefs and traditions of Satnampanth within the Mahasabha. Such simultaneous, often contradictory, movements continued to be played out in several other ways in the activities of this Satnami endeavor. Between 1926 and 1930, Baba Ramchandra—the chronicler of Satnami myths and Brahmanical pasts, whom we had encountered a little earlier—took the lead in shaping the Satnami Mahasabha. Under his leadership, the Mahasabha drew upon the signs and resources of the language of the law of colonial administration and situated them alongside the symbols and forms of authority within Satnampanth to fashion new religious legalities under the wider rubric of the "true law of Ghasidas," and the project of the reform of the Satnamis came to be cast in an idiom of order and command. The community in turn worked within the interstices of these relations of power, of intervention and appropriation, to fashion its vision and practice. Thus, the Satnami leaders of the Mahasabha acquired those figures of speech that enabled them to engage with the political institutions and processes defined by colonial administration, the reworked categories of colonial law and administrative organization became enduring features of these leaders' drive to discipline and control the community, and the group itself came to recognize the centrality of the new idioms of legality, authority, and governance within the community.

Clearly, the community here was not a homeostatic centerpiece of timeless tradition—or a terribly impoverished part of the "there and then" of a corrupt modernity—locked in mortal combat with an essentially alien colonial state. It follows that colonial modernity too had a chequered career, configured by the joint energies of the colonizers and the colonized. Indeed, the symbols and practices of imperial rule offered a pool of resources that were deployed in selective, diverse, and even conflicting ways by the Satnamis to redefine identities, construct traditions, fashion legali-

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ties, and define pathologies within the community, and to thus participate in the construction of a colonial modernity.

This pattern of appropriations and ambiguities extended to the cultural encounter between the Satnamis and evangelical missionaries. The evangelical encounter was located at a critical intersection of meaning and power: the engagement of the mission project with colonial cultures of rule; and the interface of Protestant theology, evangelical beliefs, and the practices of missionaries with the principles of caste and sect and the institutions and dynamics of village life.[36] The missionaries and the members of indigenous congregations were protagonists and players in dramas of differential perceptions and contradictory practices.

In 1868 the missionaries began a bid to transform the Satnamis that was to last a hundred years. The community did not see its destiny in Christ and proved elusive. The project of conversions among the group grew sluggishly, principally through ties of kinship. The Satnami converts carved out strategies of subsistence and fashioned their understanding of Christianity within the paternalist structure of the missionary enterprise. The missionaries in turn participated—as active agents and hapless victims—in the creation of an indigenous Christianity. The combined efforts of the missionaries and the leaders of the converts' communities led to the setting up of regulations that retained and modified the rules of Satnampanth and institutions of village life. The communities of Satnami converts to Christianity received these regulations through the filters of local cultures, persisted with earlier kinship practices, and reworked the Satnami oral traditions. The mission project's initiation of a set of key practices revolving around buildings, writing and the printed word, and clothing to civilize the converts also had unintended consequences: these signs and arts of civilization were imbricated in the reinforcement of the power of missionaries; and the converts fashioned their own uses for these cultural artifacts, including as instruments to question missionary authority. Once again, the project of modernity ushered in by the missionaries was shaped by the shared past of the evangelical entanglement.

Differentiating Community: Autonomy, Authority, Gender

It is a truism that the Satnamis functioned within relationships of domination, subordination, and resistance. Now the *Subaltern Studies* endeavor has made a powerful case for the recognition of the autonomy and agency of subordinate groups in the making of history, mainly through the substantive contributions made by the series to South Asian historiography, contributions that have developed an already well-established trend in the wider

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writing of histories from below.[37] This emphasis has provided a valuable corrective to the tendency to appropriate the pasts of subordinate groups to overarching teleological schemes, although not all renderings of autonomy in the accounts constructed within *Subaltern Studies* have always entirely escaped the seductive charms of other teleologies.[38] At the same time, a preoccupation with autonomy tends to obscure the complex interdependence and interpenetration of agency, contestations, and domination and veers toward conceiving of subordinate groups and communities as homogeneous entities.[39] The Satnamis, at each step, functioned with schemes of symbolic representation that were charged with meanings grounded in hierarchy, authority, and power. These symbolic schemes circumscribed and limited Satnami practice, *and* the group followed evocative paths that drew upon the symbols of authority to cope with, negotiate, and challenge its subordination. This also meant that there was a reproduction of forms of domination within the internally differentiated community.

The differentials of property, office, and gender structured patterns of authority among the Satnamis. The power conferred by property was, in fact, intertwined with the propriety of office: Satnami *malguzars,* bound to the gurus' family through ties of kinship, occupied important positions within the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth. The members of the gurus' family and the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth sought out and settled disputes, established and enforced norms, and defined and punished transgressions to discipline and regulate the community. The mechanisms that questioned the subordination of Satnamis by dominant castes were also implicated in the exercise of control within the community. This became particularly clear—for instance, in the activities of the Satnami Mahasabha—when the authoritarian impulse of upper-caste interventions found a niche in the structures of authority within Satnampanth.

Gender played a critical role in the ordering and interplay of meaning and power among the Satnamis. Here some of the vast and impressive body of writing on gender in South Asia (and beyond) provides important insights for an implicit integration of questions of gender with other significant analytical issues and domains in history and anthropology.[40] The ideology and practice of kinship among the Satnamis valued the labor of women—even as they were denied entitlements to inheritance and firm rights in their natal and affinal homes—and afforded them a degree of flexibility in forming relationships of secondary marriages. This meant that Satnami women could strike bargains in gendered fields governed by patrilineal and patrivirilocal principles. At the same time, the high incidence of secondary marriages in the community combined with its low ritual status led upper-caste men with land and authority to turn their perceptions of the promiscuity and marginality of Satnami women into powerful instruments

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of sexual exploitation. The upper-caste construction of the sexual laxity of Satnami women also had other roots. The ambiguities and tensions of gender extended to the rituals and myths of the group. This is particularly true of *jhanjeri chauka*, a ritual centering on fertility and the reproduction of the group, which was conducted after a Satnami woman did not bear a child even after long years of marriage and cohabitation with one or several men. In the ritual, enacted during the night in circumstances consistently described as dark and dangerous, all too resonant with liminality, the Satnami woman, in the aspect of a primal goddess, would choose the men of the community with whom she would have intercourse one after the other. Now, if *jhanjeri chauka* poses extremely difficult problems of interpretation, foregrounding issues of voyeurism that may well be inherent in ethnography, there are nonetheless at least two of its emphases that stand out, emphases that simultaneously elaborate two sides of wider cultural perceptions of women's double-edged sexuality. The ritual implicitly underscored men's responsibility for woman's "barrenness" to provide an important twist to the dominant conception of the respective roles of women and men in biological reproduction in patrilineal South Asia, but it also turned the Satnami woman's body into a site for the reinforcement of the solidarity of the men within the community and rendered her sexuality into an instrument for the reproduction of the group and its boundaries. Moreover, although the evidence on this issue is thin, Satnami women were sexually exploited by members of the organizational hierarchy of Satnampanth, which suggests that within the community ritual power was tied to sexual access to women's bodies. Finally, the principles of feminine sexuality governed the construction of women in Satnami myths, and the unbridled and untamed desire of wives of the gurus evoked disruption and disorder within Satnampanth.

It is hardly surprising that the evangelical missionaries in Chhattisgarh saw Satnami practices as an instance of the moral murk and sloth of the heathen world and sought to stamp out adultery and impose marriage as a sacred contract between individuals. If the Satnami converts flouted missionary authority and continued to form the "adulterous" relationships of secondary marriages legitimated by the principles of Satnampanth, they also drew upon missionary injunctions against adultery and reworked the rules of caste and sect to turn the honor of women into an evocative metaphor for order within the community and a symbol that constituted its boundary. The converts defied missionary logic in fashioning their understanding of marriage and sexual transgression. Similarly, an important initiative within the Satnami Mahasabha's effort to reform the community and redefine its identity also centered on a reordering of family, conjugal relations, and gender within the Satnami household. The play upon monogamy and the creed of woman's fidelity to the husband was a part of the larger

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