

Subalterns and the State in the *Longue Durée*: Notes from “The Rebellious Century” in the Bhil Heartland

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ABSTRACT *Focusing on recent debates over the ways in which subaltern groups engage with the state in India, the article proposes that it is imperative to historicise our conceptions of subaltern politics in India. More specifically, the argument is made that it is imperative to recognise that subaltern appropriations of the institutions and discourses of the state have a longer historical lineage than what is often proposed in critical work on popular resistance in rural India. The article presents a detailed analysis of Adivasi rebellions in colonial western India and argues that these took the form of a contentious negotiation of the incorporation of tribal communities into an emergent “colonial state space.” The conclusion presents a sketch of a Gramscian approach to the study of how subaltern politics proceeds in and through determinate state–society relations.*

KEY WORDS: India, resistance, subaltern studies, Bhil, state–society relations, Gramsci

“Everybody would say and think that the *sarkar* [“state” in Hindi] is the biggest among us,” said Govindbhai, an activist with the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan (AMS) as he tried to explain how the Bhil Adivasi communities of Barwani district in the western part of Madhya Pradesh had experienced the local state.¹ He continued, “They thought that the hands of the *sarkar* were very big. Whatever the authorities say, that must be done. The village had no status at all.”

The situation that Govindbhai described can be referred to as the “everyday tyranny” of the local state (see Nilsen 2010). In western Madhya Pradesh, Bhil communities would experience the state in the form of low-ranking officials – forest guards, police and revenue officers (*patwaris*) in particular – who would demand bribes in cash and in kind from villagers on various pretexts. The threat and actual use of force would always accompany and underpin these demands. Commanding fear and deference among the Bhils, the everyday tyranny of the local state in effect denied Adivasi communities in the region even the most basic rights and entitlements, and thus entrenched the “adverse

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incorporation” (Hickey and du Toit 2007) of Bhil communities into the regional political economy (see Nilsen 2012).

However, subordination and deprivation has not gone unchallenged in western Madhya Pradesh. Govindbhai is one of many in his community who, during the 1990s, joined the AMS to challenge the predations and violence of the local state (Nilsen 2012). Talking about his experience of mobilisation, Govindbhai explained how people’s understanding of the state had changed through their involvement with the AMS: “People would say that the *sarkar*’s arm is big and long. It was later on that we realised that, in reality, the *sarkar*’s arm is long because we are the ones who have voted and made the *sarkar* – then we should also know what the law is, right? Later on, we realised that they are making fools of us, so how is the *sarkar*’s arm long?”

This statement is significant, because it testifies to a fundamental transformation in the way that the state is perceived by subaltern groups: from being viewed as an external agency that could impose its power upon the village community at will, the state came to be understood as an institution that derived its powers and its legitimacy from an active, rights-bearing citizenry. This impact was driven by the awareness of rights and the familiarity with bureaucratic procedures that the movement fostered among its activists (Nilsen 2012). Indeed, the story of the AMS and its struggle against the everyday tyranny of the state is one that can also be told about grassroots mobilisation throughout most of the region that will be referred to in this article as the Bhil heartland – meaning south-eastern Gujarat, southern Rajasthan, northeastern Maharashtra and western Madhya Pradesh (see Nilsen 2012).

This article sets out to historicise these contemporary forms of claims-making through an investigation of how Bhil communities have engaged state-making projects since the end of the Anglo-Maratha wars in 1818. The point of doing so is to problematise a particular aspect of the revised conception of subalternity that has emerged from Chatterjee’s (2004, 2008) recent work. In the original Subaltern studies project, the state tended to be posited as alien and irrelevant to the lifeworlds and oppositional projects of poor rural Indians.² One of the chief architects of the conceptual framework that undergirded the Subaltern Studies project, Chatterjee (2008, 54) seems in his most recent writings to have moved away from this perspective:

... the spread of governmental technologies in India in the last three decades, as a result of the deepening reach of the developmental state under conditions of electoral democracy, has meant that the state is no longer an external entity to the peasant community.... Not only are peasants dependent on state agencies for these services, they have also acquired considerable skill, albeit to a different degree in different regions, in manipulating and pressurising these agencies to deliver these benefits. Institutions of the state, or at least governmental agencies ... have become internal aspects of the peasant community.

Albeit wedded to Chatterjee’s problematic distinction between civil and political society, this argument constitutes a significant departure from his earlier analysis of peasant politics, in which the subaltern peasantry was seen as being pitted against a distant state “which is not organic or integral to the familiar sphere of everyday social activity” (Chatterjee 1982, 32).³

However, the analysis presented in this article suggests that it is historically and analytically unsatisfactory and inaccurate to argue for such a simple distinction to be made between “old” and “new” forms of peasant politics, where the former is characterised by how “the concept of the community as a whole ... shapes and directs peasant politics vis-à-vis the state” (Chatterjee 1982, 35), while the latter proceeds through negotiations with the governmental agencies of the state (see Chatterjee 2004). Presenting an analysis of uprisings in the Bhil heartland from 1818 onwards, the article argues that it is necessary to historicise in a much more thoroughgoing manner the ways in which subaltern groups appropriate and manipulate the institutions and discourses of the state. The investigation of these uprisings demonstrates that subversive appropriations of state institutions and discourses were quite pervasive in the struggles that emerged to defend extant dimensions of state–society relations that accommodated certain subaltern needs and interests, and to challenge the adverse impacts that might flow from a restructuring of a particular set of state–society relations in the Bhil heartland in the colonial era.

This should not be equated with an argument that there exists an unbroken culture of resistance in the Bhil heartland; to propose this would indeed amount to succumbing to some of the most problematic tropes of the Subaltern Studies project (see O’Hanlon 1986; Sivaramakrishnan 1995). What is being argued, though, is that at those moments when opposition erupted in the region, it was rarely in the form of an all-out rejection of the state or through a quest for the formation of what Scott (2010) has called a “non-state space.” Rather, Bhil resistance tended to proceed through *contentious negotiations* of the terms of incorporation into state–society relations. Two features typically characterised these negotiations. One, the rebels would insist on the rightfulness of their resistance through an appropriation of discourses and idioms that defined what was and what was not a legitimate relationship between state and populace. Two, the insurgent Bhils pursued their opposition to adverse incorporation in politico-administrative structures in a way which suggests that they conceived of the state not as an entirely alien and external Leviathan, but rather, in disaggregated terms, as an institution consisting of hierarchically ordered echelons. These different echelons could be pitted against each other by turning to one with an appeal for re-dressal of the wrongs perpetrated by another.⁴

This in turn signals the necessity of rethinking the dynamics of state–society relations in the context of subaltern politics. This article will seek to contribute to this rethinking in the following way. The next section presents a thumbnail sketch of how sovereignty was structured in the Bhil heartland in the pre-colonial era and how this structuration was altered by and through the coming of colonial rule in the nineteenth century. The article then moves on to discuss the characteristics of Bhil rebellions from 1818 to the early 1920s, looking in particular at how insurgent Adivasis justified the act of rebellion through critiques of the workings of the state. Drawing on this analysis, the final section outlines a Gramscian perspective that can underpin the study of state–society relations and subaltern politics across the macro-structural terrain of the *longue durée* as well as in the contemporary dynamics of quotidian engagements with state power.

From Shared Sovereignty to Colonial State Space

Constraints of space rule out an in-depth examination of the relationships that existed between Bhils, Rajputs and Marathas in western India during the pre-colonial era.

However, a narrative in which the Bhils are represented as subaltern autochthons living beyond the reach of the tributary states of the Rajputs and Marathas would be a deeply flawed one. Rather, Bhil chiefdoms were in fact “deeply integrated into the political economy of medieval India” (Guha 1999, 121). The terms of Bhil integration into the tributary states in the region were expressed in the fact that Bhil chieftains would make claims to dues – known as *haks* or *giras haks* – from peasant villages in the plains (Skaria 1999). These claims were recognised as legitimate by Rajput and Maratha rulers, and in those cases when Bhils descended upon the plains to raid, this was interpreted by these rulers as a sign that it would be necessary to renegotiate Bhil claims on the villages within their realm. Skaria (1998: 208) thus suggests that the relationship between Bhil forest polities and Hindu tributary states were structured as a form of “shared sovereignty.”

Shared sovereignty, in turn, should be understood as a foundational principle of the structuring of political power in tributary states. Tributary states were based on forms of surplus appropriation in which monarchical rulers were fundamentally dependent on a network of aristocratic fief-holders and landlords. Consequently, they were also faced with what Haldon (1993, 156) has referred to as “the tributary constraint” – that is, the centripetal dynamics animated by the ruling elites that actually appropriated surplus from the peasantry. Governing a tributary state therefore came to revolve around attempts to “manage the ebb and flow of this internal tension that was part and parcel of historical dynamics of all traditional agrarian, subject-peasant ... societies” (Berktaf 1991, 260). The relevance of this in terms of understanding state–society relations and subaltern politics in the Bhil heartland is the following: the coming of the Raj did not entail the emergence of a relationship between tribal autochthons and a state-making project where earlier there had been no such relationship. Rather, colonial rule introduced a new form of state-making that changed the terms of Bhil integration into the regional political economy of western India.

The making of what Goswami (2004) has called “colonial state space” in the Bhil heartland restructured the workings of sovereignty through strategies designed to bring about a transformation of the region’s economic geography and through the introduction of new modalities of state power. In terms of economic geography, two intertwined processes transformed the region: the promotion of settled agriculture from the 1820s to the 1860s, and the steady advance of forest enclosures from the 1860s until the end of the century (see Guha 1999; Whitehead 2012). Sedentarisation was a failure: instead of transforming the Bhils into a prosperous, tax-paying peasantry, the policy yielded extreme dependency on usurious moneylenders and, in some cases, widespread land alienation (see Hardiman 1996). Forest enclosures compounded the impacts of this process by restricting access to a pivotal resource base, and the combined effect of these processes were to give rise to the marginal subsistence peasantry that today scrambles for survival in western India’s informal economy (see Breman 1996; Guha 1999).

The extension of political authority in the Bhil heartland started in the early 1820s in Khandesh, when military force was used to “pacify” rebellious tribal communities that mobilised to protest the curtailment of their *giras haks*. In the wake of military pacification, the former insurgents were settled as peasant cultivators. The colonial rulers offered a pardon on the condition that the chieftains would not challenge British supremacy in the future. The claims to *haks* were investigated, settled and paid to the Bhil chiefs as “colonial pensions” (Guha 1999, 141). Pacification and settlement was gradually extended

from Khandesh (northeastern Maharashtra) to the Anglo-Sisodia regime in Mewar (southern Rajasthan), to the Dangs (southeastern Gujarat), and ultimately also to the princely states of Nimad (western Madhya Pradesh). Concerted efforts were then made to develop the governmental capacities of the state in relation to Bhil subjects – especially in terms of its fiscal and coercive powers. And through this process, the ensemble of institutions through which everyday tyranny would be enacted in the post-colonial era came into being. In sum, from 1818 onwards, a new state–society relation was crafted in which Bhil communities were incorporated as the subordinates of a state apparatus whose sovereignty was constructed in singular terms, whose governmental capacities were vastly augmented compared to its tributary predecessors, and whose machinations – embodied in the daily interactions between its personnel and subaltern communities – were coercive and predatory. However, this process of change did not proceed without challenge.

Mapping “the Rebellious Century” in the Bhil Heartland

Bhil resistance in Khandesh

The British finally vanquished Maratha opposition to the expansion of their rule in 1818. At this point, the Bhil communities in the region were engaged in widespread raiding of the caste Hindu villages in the plains. According to the new colonial overlords, this was a result of the fact that persistent warfare and famine had disrupted the regular payment of tribute to the Bhil chieftains.

Previously the Bhils “had ... lived with the other inhabitants, and had, as village watchmen, been the great instruments of police ...” (Khandesh Gazetteer 1880, 254). With the disruption that unfolded in the two first decades of the nineteenth century, such co-existence was rendered impossible, and the erstwhile watchmen took to raiding to sustain themselves (see, for example, Simcox 1912). According to Graham (1856, 210) the raids were so extensive that:

villages in every direction were plundered and murders daily committed; cattle and hostages were driven off from the very centre of the province; and the excesses rose to such a height that the Ryuts [farmers] refused to receive Tukavee [loans given to peasants] whilst their property was thus utterly insecure.

In this context, the British effort was very much centred on pacification as a pre-condition for establishing the undisputed authority of Company Raj throughout Khandesh. Mountstuart Elphinstone – at this point in time Deccan Commissioner – ordered John Briggs, the first Political Agent in Khandesh to make “overtures ... to the chiefs about well-founded claims ... and to satisfy those claims as soon as possible ...” Whereas Elphinstone was clear that “it will be necessary to make examples of some of [the Bhil chiefs]” if they failed to collaborate with the British initiative, he was clear that military action should be a last resort and that “no pain should be spared to keep the Bheels quiet and prevent their annoying us, or aiding our enemies” (cited in Prasad 1991, 122).

Under Briggs’ leadership, troops were divided into small detachments and sent into the hills to obstruct the Bhils’ supply lines (see Briggs 1885, 77). “These measures,” wrote Elphinstone, “soon reduced the Bheels to accept the very favourable terms held out to them, the chiefs receiving pensions and allowances for a certain number of men,

and binding themselves to restrain the depredations of their people.” (cited in Briggs 1885, 77). However, it was also in the context of this process of pacification that the first rounds of contentious negotiations between the Bhils and the nascent colonial regime took place.

Gumani Naik of Sendhwa *ghat* (mountain pass) was the first chieftain that Briggs reached a settlement with, and his interactions with the colonial authorities in Khandesh provide us with an example of the dynamics of these negotiations. On March 5, 1818, an agreement was reached in which Gumani agreed to refrain from raids and attacks on villages in Thalner district. He also agreed to help the colonial authorities in the further settlement of the region. Gumani controlled the area around the Sendhwa pass – a crucial gateway for trade between Malwa and Khandesh – and before the coming of the British he had collected taxes for the Holkars. A portion of the money derived from this had accrued to him. Upon entering into an agreement with the British, he vowed to not attack or otherwise harass those who travelled through the pass. Customs duties were to be collected by the Government Customs House, which was established in Sendhwa *ghat*. The customs master would then pay Gumani’s share to him. The chieftain’s duties were restricted to ensuring safe passage and informing colonial authorities of disquiet and unrest among other Bhil groups. The British on their part agreed to pay Gumani “all those Huks which are proved by the records of the Mahal to have been customary ...,” which all in all amounted to an annual sum of 2,000 rupees (Briggs cited in Deshpande 1987, 86).

This agreement, however, did not pacify Gumani. On four separate occasions between October 1818 and January 1819 he violated the terms of the settlement by engaging in raiding, collecting tolls from travellers and finally lifting cattle from the village of Chopda. When questioned about these actions, Gumani argued that the Bhils had resorted to stealing cattle as the Scindia’s officials at Chopda had refused to pay his *haks*. The *mamlatdar* (village official) at Chopda was instructed by Briggs to pay Gumani what he was owed, and his status was also upgraded, as he was allowed to maintain troops. His pension, however, was reduced to 1,200 rupees annually (Deshpande 1987: 86–88).

It may be tempting to see Gumani’s infractions of the agreement he had reached with Briggs as rejections of the British attempt to reorganise sovereignty in the area. This, however, is not a tenable proposition. According to Gumani, he did not violate the terms of the agreement with the British in order to protest the terms of his settlement as such, or to protest his subordination to colonial authority as such. Rather, he engaged in raiding and stole cattle because the minions of the Scindias had not honoured the terms of that settlement. That his discontent should take the form of raiding and cattle-theft is only logical given that this was an established way of claiming dues that had not been paid in the pre-colonial era. As Skaria (1999, 131, 135) puts it, raids were not “ends in themselves” geared towards securing subsistence, but rather a way in which to sustain “claims to giras and through it political power and sovereignty.” And Gumani Naik was not the only Khandesh chieftain to resort to such measures when the terms of the new agreements with the British were violated.

For example, in May 1818, the British sought to settle the claims of the Satmala, Satkunda and Kaldwary Bhils. Their *haks* were settled at 648 rupees per annum, and the raiding ceased for some time. However, in late January 1819, Cheel Naik, one of their leaders, rebelled and attacked and plundered the village of Dharangaon. In an exchange with British authorities, he pointed out that out of the 648 rupees that had been promised

to him and his followers, only 175 rupees had been received. He proceeded to justify his revolt as follows:

It is necessary to let you know that you have not performed your engagement, on which account we attacked the village. If you will now provide for us, we will refrain from plundering. Is it right for you to desire us not to plunder and yet make no provisions for us? First cause to be paid to us our just claims and then call us to account for any robberies committed by us. Do as you please, but to give us nothing to eat and leave us to feed on leaves and grass is an admirable plan – we are Sirdars [military officers]. What occasion is there for us to write more? (Prasad 1991, 148–149)

Briggs did not acknowledge these claims, and ordered the military to hunt down and capture Cheel Naik. Eventually he surrendered, and was executed in early June 1819 (Deshpande 1987: 104).

Yet another example can be found in the trajectory of Kaniya Naik, a chieftain in the easternmost part of the Satpura range. Kaniya was a chief of some substance, who in 1818 had some 650 men – both Bhils and Sibandis⁵ – under his command. Like many of the other Satpura chieftains, he settled with the British after being subjected to a military campaign, and was paid *haks* in exchange for police services. However, when the payments of his *haks* stopped, Kaniya took to raiding. When questioned by Briggs as to the reasons for his actions, he responded as follows:

My situation is thus: There are 5000 men under me and their ancestors for generations have subsisted by plunder. You are now the Masters of the Country and thousands look to you for protection and support. If by your means I and my followers are provided with subsistence, we will abstain from plundering (cited in Deshpande 1987, 91).

Briggs instructed his officers in the area to settle Kaniya's claims. Kaniya, however, refused to take the offers from the British seriously, and instead joined forces with other chieftains in the region and carried on raiding. At this point, Briggs was convinced that negotiations were no longer adequate in relation to the Bhils: "It is towards their extirpation," he wrote to one of his officers in late January 1819, "that we should direct our first attention" (cited in Prasad 1991, 137). Further military campaigns were pursued against the Bhils of the Satpuras, and eventually, in March 1819, Kaniya surrendered to the British. In order to secure his allegiance to colonial authorities, he was given a personal grant of 600 rupees per year, as well as 620 *bighas* of land (Prasad 1991, 137).

When Briggs left Khandesh in 1823, the province was still "harassed and unsafe" (Khandesh Gazetteer 1880, 253) and the Bhils rose frequently against the colonial authorities.⁶ However, what is interesting in this process from the point of view of understanding the dynamic of state–society relations in subaltern politics is the way in which Bhil chieftains such as Gumani Naik, Cheel Naik and Kaniya Naik justify their rebellions: in their exchanges with the British, the theme is not so much that of rejecting the colonial state and vindicating an autochthonous existence, but rather a claim for certain rights and prerogatives to be respected *within* a determinate constellation of state power and sovereignty. And in these contentious negotiations, the notion that acquiescence was dependent on rightful subsistence seems to have been particularly significant: "It is better to eat and

die,” claimed a group of Bhils who rebelled against the non-payment of *haks*, “than die without food” (cited in Deshpande 1987, 105). This, as we shall see, was also a foundational theme when the Bhils of Mewar and Nimad rose in rebellion.

Bhil resistance in Mewar

In pre-colonial Mewar, the politics of the Bhils had been integrated in the political economy of Rajput kingdoms in such a way that the latter were compelled to recognise, to some extent, the power and sovereignty of the former (see Kapur 2002). This, however, came to change quite profoundly from 1818 onwards, with the coming of British paramountcy (see Rudolph and Rudolph 1966).

In the 1830s, the British increased their military presence in Mewar in order to be better able to quell unrest among the Bhils. Efforts were also made to fortify the policing capacities of the Sisodia regime that ruled the state. The Maharana in Udaipur considered this as an opportunity to increase the amount of revenue extracted from the Bhils (Sen 2003). This move provoked a wave of raiding and rebellion from 1835 to 1841. Commenting on the outbreak of raiding and a series of attacks on police outposts in 1839, a British colonel observed that the disquiet in the region was “solely attributable to injudicious taxation” (Brookes 1859, 85). What is interesting about this conflict is the way in which its character gradually changed following military operations in 1841: “By the middle of the century, Bhil villages were *petitioning* British officers against oppression at the hands of the *darbar’s* officials” (Sen 2003, 281; emphasis added).

Thus, in 1856 the Bhil villages of Peepli and Paduna submitted a petition to the political agent in Mewar, complaining about unjust levies being charged by the Maharana’s *darbar* (royal court). In the case of Paduna village, they argued that they had, in the 1840s, been assessed for an annual plough tax of 80 rupees per year. However, after the village had been resumed into *khalsa* (state land), the Mewar court levied an annual plough tax of 50 rupees and a *koot* levy (a share of the grain collected from the threshing floors after harvest). The attempt by the Sisodia regime to tighten its fiscal grip around the Bhil communities has to be understood in terms of the impact of the British presence: from the Maharana’s point of view, the increased military presence made it possible to levy taxes more easily. Indeed, in 1850, Paduna was attacked by the Maharana’s troops as a result of the village not having paid its taxes; all the cattle were seized and a heavy fine imposed on the village. The petition from the village of Peepli told a very similar story: during the 1820s, the petition stated, they paid 52 rupees as an annual plough tax. However, in the 1840s, the tax burden increased with the imposition of a *fauj barar* (a tax towards the funding of military troops) that was levied twice under the name of Tirsala. According to the villagers of Peepli, they could not afford to pay the 200 rupees every second year in addition to the annual plough tax (Sen 2003, 281–282). In this context, a colonial official wrote: “A constant struggle has been going on between the native authorities seeking to oppress the Bhils and the British superintendent to protect them” (Brookes 1859, 88).

These events are best understood as manifestations of a general tendency in the Bhil heartland, in which British support for princely rulers and the insistence upon singular sovereignty with sharply defined territorial boundaries pushed towards a consolidation of monarchical power in the princely states: “By the late nineteenth century, the Bhil chiefs had been almost completely subordinated, their political power had been marginalised,

and each little king possessed a far more uncontested authority over his ‘kingdom’ than had been the case previously” (Skaria 1999, 174).

What is so compelling is that the forms of Adivasi resistance and assertion that developed in this era took the form of a contentious negotiation over the terms of integration in the polity, rather than the outright rejection of colonial state space. In contesting the increasingly adverse terms upon which they were incorporated in the Mewar polity, the Bhils sought to defend past arrangements and the compromises that had been reached between forest polities and tributary rulers. Moreover, they did this on the basis of a moral economy that attached to this relation, within which there was a degree of mutual recognition of power and sovereignty, as well as of the legitimate prerogatives of the different parties. When this moral economy was sundered by a monarchical order bolstered by augmented military powers, resistance erupted. Initially, this resistance took the form of the raid – the customary way in which Bhils would enforce their *haks* – but, in the aftermath of armed reprisals and the further extension of military and political power, petitioning comes to the forefront as a strategy for assertion. This is significant as it suggests a readiness to engage the emergent new state apparatus in a way that is acknowledged as legitimate and, furthermore, an expectation that the upper echelons of this apparatus may find subaltern grievances to be reasonable.

This does not mean, however, that the era of insurrection was over. When the British first arrived in Mewar, one of their key objectives was to put an end to Bhils claiming taxes and levies from merchant travellers on the Udaipur–Ahmedabad road. This right to collect such taxes had been one of the most important prerogatives of the Bhils in pre-colonial Mewar, and attempts to abolish it had provoked a series of revolts during the 1820s (Sen 2003). These taxes and levies remained a contentious issue throughout the following decades, and in 1881, the erosion of the material and symbolic significance of this prerogative combined with anger over the introduction of new levies and taxes, harassment of Bhil communities by local officials, the extraction of *begar* (forced labour), and the rapaciousness of moneylenders to ignite a major rebellion (Mathur 1988; Sen 2000).

After a clash between Bhils from the village of Paduna and representatives of the Udaipur court in March 1881, a large group of Bhils gathered together, marched to the nearest *thana* (police outpost) and attacked it. The *thanedars* (police officers), five *sowars* (soldiers), and 16 others were killed and their bodies mutilated. The *thana* was burned along with all the baniya shops in Bara village. Bhils from the nearby area joined the revolt and a series of armed encounters took place between them and the troops of the Maharana, as well as British troops, leaving more than 70 Bhils dead (Mathur 1988; Sen 2000).

Interestingly, during the 1881 rebellion, the Bhils made several demands for concessions from the Maharana, but at the same time, they changed the tenor of their critique of the state. Previously, they had appealed to the British to relieve them of the unfair taxes imposed upon them by the princely rulers. Now, however, their ire had turned from the Sisodia rulers towards the British. Thus, a British military commander was told to his face: “... you are from Delhi, go away. The Maharana is our sovereign; the officers sent by him have come and we will talk only with them” (cited in Sen 2000, 89). Still, the statement reflects a recognition rather than a rejection of royal authority and the Udaipur court – and a key objective still seems to be to negotiate a reclaiming of the prerogatives and privileges that had been undermined by the confluence of princely and colonial strategies. To a certain extent, the Bhils were successful in this, as some concessions

were granted by the Udaipur court (Sen 2000, 92–93). A British colonial official complained bitterly that “[t]he Bhils have succeeded in extorting by fire and murder unreasonable concessions and this is sure to have the most mischievous effect, although it may ensure a temporary truce” (cited in Singh 1995, 49).

Bhil resistance in Nimad

The Bhil chieftains of Alirajpur and Badwani went through a similar process of establishing settlements that would underpin pacification in the princely states from as early as 1818. In the early stages of this process, the British were more than happy to use military force against those chieftains who failed to honour these agreements. Local Rajput rulers were keen to use this to their advantage as they sought to squash Bhil claims to dues and stipends from the courts (Kela 2012, 105–120).

In Badwani state, on the southern side of the Narmada, military pacification and settlement picked up momentum from 1833 onwards. Here, resident colonial officials were keenly aware that it was necessary to guarantee “the Bheel Naicks of this district the regular payment of their acknowledged dues from the Burwanee Rajah and by holding an even balance between them to prevent oppression on the one hand and to secure obedience on the other” (cited in Kela 2012, 130). Such sentiments, however, had little impact: in the late 1830s, the payment of *haks* to the Bhils was still in arrears, and raiding continued. Until the early 1840s, the colonial strategy centred on military reprisals against raiders. A more conciliatory approach was adopted from the middle of the 1840s. Leading British officials toured the Badwani hills on an annual basis, and an investigation into the claims of the chieftains was carried out. However, as long as Bhil raiding was subject to military reprisals, there was very little incentive for Rajput rulers to comply with the settlements that had been reached (Kela 2012, 130–136). The grievances that were thus generated would give rise to two major rebellions in Nimad during the second half of the nineteenth century – first in Badwani and then in Alirajpur.

The first rebellion was headed by Bhima Naik. Deemed by the British to be “one of the most respectable and civilised” chieftains that they had dealings with, a series of circumstances and events had coalesced to push him towards insurgency from 1853 onwards, and in 1857 itself, Nimad became restive as the Great Uprising erupted in North India (Kela 2012, 143–144). In August 1857 Bhima and another chieftain, Mavasiya, gathered between 800 and 900 Bhils, and was joined by Khajia Naik, the *rakhwaldar* (road watchman) of the Sendhwa road. By August and September it was reported that “Bhima Naik of Burwani Ilaqa” had attacked and plundered villages and caused “great depredations” across Nimad (cited in Singh 1998, 83).

Bhima’s raiding would expand over the coming months. The moral economy that animated the raiding becomes evident in statements such as the following:

I do not go to plunder Mauza Datware of my own accord, as you suspect. I was ordered by Maharaja Jaswant Singh, the Raja of Barwani, Bhoodhgeer Bawa and Dowlatsingh Mama that I should go and plunder the country within my reach, except Barwani, and was further directed that I should take possession of and plunder Mauza Datware because he said the village belonged to Barwani. Fifty rupees and a dress of honour were then given to me with instructions to perform the required services. But the Raja did not afterwards support me in the undertaking, and

therefore, I have now determined to make aggressions upon his own territories (cited in Singh 1998, 83).

What emerges from these statements is not so much a declaration of distance from the state; rather, Bhima is highlighting his closeness to the princely ruler – he has been the servant of the Raja of Badwani and has acted on his orders – as well as his dismay that this ruler has betrayed him. In a letter in which Bhima addressed an attack on the village of Datwada, the failure to honour his rightful claims to *haks* is emphasised as the reason for actions: “... we plundered the village of Dutwada because we have not received our Huks due from the Sirkar [state government] Holkar since the arrival of the British here. But we will not be satisfied until we plunder some other villages in other elakas” (cited in Kela 2012, 150).

These statements express a theme that would run throughout Bhima’s communications with the British during his uprising: it was not so much an encroaching state that he objected to as a state that had failed to honour the terms of an agreement. For example, in a letter to the Raja of Barwani, he wrote:

Baboo Hunner Lall has not yet made any arrangements for our pay and very likely he will go away after realizing the money without making arrangements for us. We therefore advise you to detain him until he does something for us. If the Baboo has a mind to fight with us let him come, but don’t you join with him as you are our master.... We will do for the Europeans and their servants as Holkar and the King of Delhi will direct us and see how does the Baboo go safe (cited in Kela 2012, 148).

According to Shashank Kela (2012, 148) Babu Hunner Lall is most probably a merchant or tax farmer who has been mandated by then Raja to negotiate with the naiks. The terms of whatever agreement might have been reached between him and the chieftains have been breached, Bhil insurgents have been captured, and their supplies have been intercepted or blocked. In this missive, the intent is to overthrow the British, but the overlordship of the princely ruler, to whom the rebels appeal for support, is equally clearly stated – “you are our master.”

The next communiqué from Bhima and his followers, however, was less indulgent toward the Rajput ruler:

We have written to you before about the capture of our sepoy and provisions. You capture the men who bring us Rasud. Very well, we will take prisoners all the sepoy [soldiers] of Burwani and other thanas in Sirkar elaka. Take care, we have received orders from the King of Delhi to cut off the heads of Europeans and those in their employ, with assurances that success will reach us after Dushera (cited in Kela 2012, 149).

As Kela points out, the stipends of the Bhil chiefs had been held back for a long period of time; the Raja of Barwani had promised to pay, but then reneged. He pleaded with the colonial authorities to “arrange that some forces might be sent against these Bheels from Candeish.” The rebellion, however, was hard to kill and the conflict rolled on for several years. Bhima carried out his last raid during the monsoon of 1861, and remained on the run until 1868 (cited in Kela 2012: 150, 155–166).

During Bhima's trial, the narrative of princely betrayal as a justification for revolt re-emerged. His brother Sewa argued that their rebellion was triggered by deprivation: "We began to be in want and could get nothing to eat so we went and plundered Kantool ... we went again for grain, being in a state of starvation ... after some 20 days we plundered Datwada and returned to Dhaba Bowree" (cited in Kela 2012, 168). Bhima confirmed much of his brother's testimony, but also stressed the loss of rightful claims by pointing out how he had rebelled because his village had been taken from him:

When the Mutiny broke out I heard nothing of it. The Rana of Burwanee summoned me and told me to bring Mowassia with me and one or two hundred men. I collected [them] ... [but] went alone to the Rana and said to him that I would assist the sirkar if my inamee [revenue] villages which had been taken for granted were restored. The Rana said this could not be done at present and I went into rebellion and plundered all the grain in the village of Bulkoa and went into the hills. All our supplies were stopped and I sent a message to the Rana that our men must have something to eat or else they would plunder. The Rana said that he could do nothing, so we began to plunder but only took the necessaries – food, clothes, cooking utensils and such like things (cited in Kela 2012, 169).

He added: "Of course we plundered wayfarers, but we were obliged to do that for our subsistence" (cited in Kela 2012, 170).

Between 1820 and the 1880s, the princely state of Alirajpur, located north of the Narmada river, had been considerably transformed by colonial reform efforts geared towards consolidating state finance and fiscal capacities: collective village assessment were replaced by plough taxes, which were more onerous; *patwaris* were employed to fix individual assessments; forest use was heavily taxed; distillation of Mahua (liquour) was regulated. In 1883, 12 *patels* (village headmen) from the *parganas* (local administrative units) of Rath and Takarbara submitted a list of complaints to the Political Agent in Alirajpur: "The late Maharana ... treated us very kindly. The land revenue was assessed in lump for each village according to the means of cultivation. Each cultivator had to pay rupees 3 or 4 per plough, and consequently the patels as well as the cultivators were satisfied" (Kela 2012, 208). In addition to complaining about the new system of taxation, the Bhils also pointed out that the traders had started using a weighing system that was disadvantageous to the cultivators, that *pateli haks* (dues of the village headman) had not been paid, that the new *abkari* (excise) system and the taxes on sale of timber and minor forest produce was inimical to them, and that the moneylenders in the area harassed and exploited them. These complaints were not new; according to Kela (2012: 209–210) a formal petition against the new land assessment system had been forwarded to the Political Agent as early as 1869. Several other petitions were submitted in the following years, and, subsequent to a series of raids in the early 1870s, a handful of chieftains won some minor concessions.

Bad agricultural years followed one upon the other from 1877 onwards, but the Alirajpur court granted no remissions to its peasant cultivators. Again rebellion erupted, and again Chitu Patel was at the forefront; this time he was joined by *Makranis* (Baluchi mercenaries). On 7 January 1883, a crowd of Bhils and *Makranis* with Chitu at the helm looted the town of Nanpur. Chaktala was the next village to fall prey to the rebellion,

followed by Bhabra, a market village between Alirajpur and Jhabua. Crucially, the rebellion was first and foremost aimed at traders and state functionaries (Kela 2012, 214). Some three to five thousand Bhils and *makranis* encircled Alirajpur a few days after the attack on Bhabra. The rebels laid siege to the treasury and presented their key demand, namely that British superintendence should be abolished and the king's rule restored: "Events had coalesced popular feeling around the king's person" (cited in Kela 2012, 214). He had thus come to represent the pre-1869 revenue system, which was marked to a far greater extent by the prerogatives of shared sovereignty.

The siege developed into a stalemate. The former king's mother approached the Bhils to hear their grievances. Whereas her account may well reflect the bias of the class of princely rulers, it confirms the theme of restoration of past arrangements and prerogatives as being at the heart of the Bhil rebellion. Chitu Patel complained that his haks had been withdrawn, and asked for the restoration of the king, whom, he said "ought to live in Rajpur, so that his subjects may always pay their respects ... and get consolation at his hands" (cited in Kela 2012, 216). The rebels also complained that the *patwaris* carried out assessments "at full rates, without considering that the cultivators have suffered by the death of their bullocks, and that the number of their ploughs have been reduced to half what they were in former years" (cited in Kela 2012, 216). Moreover, the avaricious Dewan (chief minister) was a key target of Bhil grievances: "Let another Dewan be appointed," the Bhils argued, "and then our grievances will be heard by him, but we don't want these dewans and patwaris" (cited in Kela 2012, 216). This demand was reiterated throughout the course of the rebellion, until Chitu ultimately surrendered under pressure from the Malwa Bhil Corps. During his trial he claimed that he and his men had been "driven to desperation by ... maladministration" and were forced to rebel in order to call attention to their plight (cited in Kela 2012, 219). Ultimately, the rebellion yielded fewer dividends than the Mewar uprising of 1881, and colonial state space would only become more entrenched and consolidated over the course of the next six decades.

Between 1818 and 1880 the Bhil heartland underwent a substantial transformation as the economic geography of the region was moulded according to colonial imperatives and the modalities of state power were reconfigured in ways that entrenched a singular form of sovereignty. If one were to deploy the analytical optic of the Subaltern Studies project, one would expect that tribal resistance in this context would gravitate around a vindication of "the peasant-communal mode of power" in opposition to the coming of the colonial behemoth (Chatterjee 1983). This, however, is not what the historical record reveals. Rather, what seems to be the case is that the chieftains of the Bhil forest polities spear-headed forms of collective action in which the principal impulse was not so much a wholesale repudiation of the new modalities of state power as an attempt to carve put as advantageous as possible a position with the emergent colonial state space.

Significantly, Bhil chieftains seemed quite ready to accept the initial terms of settlement in the wake of military pacification. When rebellions erupted they were not so much centred on or articulated as a rejection of these settlements *tout court* as a protest against *violations* of the terms of the settlement. In this sense, one could argue that the Bhils sought to negotiate the terms of their incorporation into colonial state space on the basis of a moral economy that accepted the presence of the state, but protested against some of its workings. Moreover, in pursuing their protests, the Bhils actively appealed to different strata of the state, very often in the hope that echelons perceived to be located at a higher scale in the hierarchy of political power might intervene on their behalf against the

wrongdoings of lower echelons. In this sense, Skaria's argument that Bhil resistance in nineteenth century Dangs was not a form of anti-state insurgency, but rather a form of conflictual encounter in which "power was being negotiated, even if this took place in contexts where the forest chiefs were aware of the balance being skewed against them" can be generalised to apply to the Bhil heartland as a region. He proceeds: "In later decades, the power of the sarkar [state] could be invoked ... In this, it was to be appropriated as an ally ... Thus the shared fear of the sarkar did not necessarily translate into shared hostility" (Skaria 1999, 273). However, Skaria overstates his case when he goes on to argue that the early twentieth century witnessed a change in which wholesale insurgency against the state "in the name of Bhil Raj became possible, and even desirable" (Skaria 1999, 274). As I will show in the following discussion of Bhil resistance in the Rajputana Agency from 1910 to the early 1920s, the notion of Bhil Raj (Bhil rule) emerged as a key idiom of resistance, but this did not entail a renunciation of negotiation with state-making projects.

Bhil resistance in the Rajputana Agency

Dungarpur state was to be the site of the next major upheaval in the Bhil heartland. Here, from 1911 onwards, the Bhils rallied under the leadership of Govind Giri, a *Banjara* (nomadic caste) who in the wake of having lost his family and his livelihood to the famine of 1899–1900, dedicated his life to preaching social reform among the tribals.⁷

Govind Giri called upon the Bhils to behave like *sahukars* (moneylenders) – that is, to adopt the ways and mores of the upper castes – and, drawing on the ritual practices of the Shaivite sect Dasnami Panth, encouraged his followers to tend the *dhuni* (fire pits) and hoist the *nishan* (flags) outside their houses: "In this way," Govind Giri declared, "I preached them the path of truth" (cited in Hardiman 2003, 261–262). The injunctions were drawn from Bhagat movements that had been active throughout the area: "Moral self-reform along such lines provided a potent means for a legitimate and effective form of assertion within the new political order" (cited in Hardiman 2003, 264).

However, Govind Giri's preaching soon took a radical turn as he developed a strong critique of hierarchy and exploitation. In his sermons he would tell the Bhils that they were in no way inferior to any other community, and that their destitution was caused by the exactions of the Rajas (princely rulers) and the Thakurs (landlords). The Bhils, Govind Giri explained, were the rightful owners of the land, and therefore they also had the right to rule over it. He propagated the coming of a Bhil Raj in the hills of Sunth and Banswara states, in which the Bhil kingdom that existed eight hundred years back would be restored.

Colonial authorities were quick to label Govind Giri and his followers as a "disloyal and anarchical movement" as they continued to make headway in the princely states (cited in Singh 1995, 95). In October 1913, the political agent of southern Rajputana sent word to his counterpart in Rewakantha, ordering the arrest of Govind Giri. A search began, provoking a series of clashes between the Bhils and police forces. As the persecution of his movement continued, Govind Giri assembled his followers on Mangarh hill, which is situated between the states of Sunth and Banswara. A large police force was assembled within a few days, and was soon joined by military reinforcements. The messages that were sent from Govind Giri to the police and the representatives of the colonial authorities during the standoff allow us a glimpse into the movement's rationale. First of all, Govind Giri expressed a strong critique of the dominant social groups in the region:

The Hindus and Muhammadans have forsaken their religions. Hindus have become atheists. Rajputs have destroyed our worship, and forced us to eat flesh and drink. Muhammadans force us to eat beef and destroy our religion. For all these reasons we have gone to the hills as we are helpless. Rajputs are so cruel that they kill their girls so that they may not give in marriage to others. In the same way they have been so cruel towards the Bhils that they beat them without enquiry whether they are right or wrong. The Rajputs do not allow their young widows to re-marry and if these girls become widows in young age the sin of infant widowhood is on their head because they remain unhappy in that life and are miserable. The *Sarkar* is also to blame for this shortcoming. No true Brahmin is seen.... These three castes dare not come to us. The Muhammadans are infidels and take interest on money and eat boar's flesh which is prohibited in their religion. These people who are infidels destroy our worship. They do not like a religion which preaches good morality (cited in Hardiman 2003, 266).

As Hardiman points out, Govind's attack on the Rajputs was expressive of widespread disgust in the region at the workings of Rajput hierarchy, and in this way Govind "combined his attack on Rajput political power with a critique of the treatment of Rajput women" (cited in Hardiman 2003, 267). His admonishment of "the Muhammadans" reflected a popular dislike of the fact that Muslims – commonly known as "Sindhis" – staffed the state police and Thakur militias; some were also known to be particularly predatory moneylenders. Similarly, the Brahmins are taken to task for failing their role as righteous servants of the state. Overall, his is an argument that portrays the moral corruption of the princely regime, and contrasts this to the moral rectitude of his movement – a moral rectitude which, he asserts, is feared among the ruling groups in the state: "They do not like a religion which preaches good morality."

Interestingly, as Hardiman (2003, 267) notes, Govind Giri "was far less critical of the British than he was of the Rajputs and their henchmen," something which is also brought out in the following passage: "We take you to be just and fair.... You are the monarch of the country.... Do not use force. Have some regard for our feelings. God will bless you.... You are the guardian saint of our people. You are sensible people."

In many ways, this echoes the appeals made by insurgent Bhil chieftains in the nineteenth century, who would ask that the British intervened against the venality of Rajput rulers. In other words, despite his references to the restoration of Bhil *raj*, Govind Giri does not reject the entire edifice of the state. Rather, as Hardiman argues, he recognises that "much of what he stood for was in line with the transformation that the British were trying to bring about in India, and he seems to have been trying to argue that they should act as his allies and back him and his followers against the local rulers" (cited in Hardiman 2003, 267). This was made even more clear in another appeal, in which he implored the British authorities to appoint their own chief minister in Sunth state and recruit a military force from the ranks of his followers; in this way, he argued, him and his disciples would be ensured of fair treatment (cited in Hardiman 2003, 267).

In other words, even when Bhil resistance turned more adamantly against the *sarkar* in the name of Bhil *raj*, the state was nevertheless seen as a disaggregated entity with which it was possible to negotiate. And in these negotiations it would be possible to pit higher echelons against lower echelons by pointing out how the latter, in the way that they abuse their power and authority, betray the principles of the former. However, in the case of

Govind Giri's movement, their expectation that the British would refrain from using force was belied by the events that unfolded two days after Govind had appealed to "the guardian saint of the people": at about eight o'clock in the evening of 16 November, following orders from the Political Department in Bombay, the troops opened fire at the Bhils who had gathered on the hill. The firing went on for about two hours; the Bhils suffered substantial losses, and at the end of the attack some 900 Bhils, along with Govind Giri himself, were arrested. Govind was subsequently prosecuted and imprisoned.⁸

In the first half of the 1920s, yet another charismatic leader appeared at the helm of a Bhil movement that unsettled both Rajput rulers and colonial authorities.⁹ Motilal Tejawat was an Oswal Baniya who worked as a *munshi* (representative) for a firm based in Udaipur. As part of his job, he used to travel far and wide across Mewar state, and through his travels he came to know the abuses that the Bhils were subject to at the hands of Thakurs. After he himself fell foul of the Thakur of Jharol estate and was thrown in jail, he decided to devote his life to social reform work among the Bhils.

Motilal's most immediate source of inspiration was the Bijolia movement – a peasant mobilisation against Thakur dominance that originated in the late nineteenth century and made significant headway under nationalist leadership from 1915 to the early 1920s. Motilal came into contact with the movement and its insurgent message through pamphlets that were being circulated throughout Mewar at the time. The pamphlets denounced Thakur oppression and called "on villagers to refuse to pay their dues" (Vidal 1997, 122). Motilal made copies of these pamphlets and set about distributing them in Jharol – a Bhil majority district where the local Thakur was a source of terror and exploitation. Following this, he called a series of meetings in Bhil villages in the area, which eventually led to the formation of a committee that sought to articulate the grievances and demands of the Bhil peasantry.

In May 1921, Motilal and his followers used the annual peasant fair Matri Mundiya, which was held near Chittaur, to spread their message. Among the key complaints were *begar* and unfair taxation. During the fair, the group was able to mobilise a large group of Bhils, and together they set out for Udaipur; they were going to petition the Maharana and convince him to address their grievances. Jain's description of the scenario that unfolded at Picholia lake is worth quoting at length:

In three or four days, about seven or eight thousand peasants assembled on the site. Tejawat requested the village representatives to hold [a] small meeting and prepare accounts of the injustices and atrocities done by the Thikanedars on the peasants. This was done to prepare a complete catalogue of the grievances of the people at the grassroot level. At the end of the meeting of each day, in the general meeting, the peasants expressed their views on the grievances. Tejawat himself sat down to write a book on the situation of the peasantry of Mewar. Later the book was titled: *Mewar Pukar* – the voice of Mewar. The book contained about 100 items. On the strength of these items the assembly of the peasants prepared a charter of 21 demands to be presented to the Maharana of Mewar (Jain 1991, 130).

Ultimately, Maharana Fateh Singh agreed to meet the representatives of the gathered Bhils, who at the peak of the agitation were said to number some 10,000 people. Among the demands that they put before the regent – 21 in all – the withdrawal of excessive taxes and fees, the cancellation of *begar*, and a removal of all restrictions on the use of forest resources were particularly important to the tribals. Eventually, the

Maharana conceded 18 demands, but left out the three most important issues from the point of view of the Bhils: namely the use of forests, *begar*, and the rounding up of Bhils for the royal *shikhar* (hunt). Motilal and his followers withdrew in disappointment, but swore to uphold and pursue the movement.

In the following months, the movement's idiom of resistance expanded. Motilal declared himself to be a follower of Gandhi, whom at this point in time was at the helm of a nation-wide mobilisation that aimed for "*swaraj* [self-rule] within a year." Drawing inspiration and legitimacy from the Non-Cooperation Movement, Motilal and his followers began to circulate letters during the summer of 1921, in which they called upon the peasants to stop paying taxes. Over the next three months, the movement escalated:

... Tejawat told the Bhils that once Gandhi *Raj* was established they would only have to pay one *anna* in the *rupee* to the state, and that if they refused to follow him they would be cursed. The boycott of the courts, the refusal to pay the unjustly high rates of revenue and the denial of *rasad* (the extraction of provisions) and *begar* to functionaries of the state followed (Sen 2007, 160).

In August, the movement signalled its considerable strength when the Thakur of Jharol had Motilal arrested: as soon as the news spread, between six and seven thousand Bhils gathered outside the jail and forced the police to release their leader. By September 1921 the movement had spread throughout Mewar as well as many of the other, smaller princely states in the Rajputana Agency and in British Gujarat in the Bombay Presidency. At this point, the movement was known as the *Eki* (Unity) League: its followers were made to swear an oath whilst holding one hand on an unsheathed sword, in which they pledged "to respect all the decisions and actions of Motilal, and never by their actions break the unity of the movement" (Vidal 1997, 127).

The impact of the movement was manifest in a series of complaints brought against the dominant groups in the region. For example, in December 1921, some 4,000 *Gametis* (village headmen) presented a petition to the British authorities on behalf of the Bhils of the Bhumat and the Magra, in which they claimed "that traditionally they had not performed *begar*, but had been forced to do so over the preceding half century, while simultaneously old taxes had been enhanced and new fines and levies imposed.... The Bhils fixed the revenue of crops and proposed to pay directly to the British or the *darbar*" (Sen 2007, 160–161). In a letter to the Rana of the state of Panarwa, a group of Bhils made it clear that "we intend never to pay new taxes, and what we propose to give is more than the old rates; if ... you will not accept it ... and if the [Udaipur] *darbar* will not accept it, we shall pay to the British government" (Sen 2007, 161). When, in the same month, a Bhil *Gameti* was arrested on the orders of the Umrao of Madri, a small district in the southern part of Mewar, and later killed in custody, the movement again showed its strength by assembling at Jharol and forcing the Maharana's official to refund revenue that had been taken from the Bhils. At this point, the British started making overtures to the *Eki* movement: in one case, they sent a petition prepared by Motilal to the Thakurs and pressured them into announcing that they would reduce the number of days of *begar* demanded from the villagers; in another case, they asked Motilal to meet with the Political Superintendent to discuss the grievances of the Bhils. These overtures, however, were flatly rejected.

The *Eki* movement surged ahead in the first months of 1922. At this point, Tejawat had been denounced by Gandhi but proceeded unabated in his work. For several months he

and his partisans criss-crossed the area that is now the border between Rajasthan and Gujarat, and which in the 1920s contained the princely states of Mewar, Sirohi, Danta and Palanpur: “Wherever the impromptu army halted, Motilal’s camp was visited by tribal people offering him the traditional homage normally reserved for local chieftains or for deities: the gift of a coconut and a rupee” (Vidal 1997, 126).

At this point, the initial British strategy of appeasing the *Eki* movement by encouraging the princely rulers to grant certain selective concessions had clearly failed. In large part, this was due to the fact that rulers and notables were generally unwilling to cede any substantial ground to the assertive Bhils. The *Eki* movement kept moving between Mewar, Sirohi, Idar, Danta and Palanpur. While avoiding any direct confrontation with large military troops, they would attack officials, police outposts and isolated patrols. At this point, as Hardiman (2007, 51) points out, the colonial authorities “had a choice: either to force the local princes and thakurs to change their ways profoundly and remedy the grievances of the people, or to suppress a largely peaceful and morally justified protest by the use of force.”

Under increasing pressure from both local notables and the British to call off their agitation, the *Eki* movement decided to return to Udaipur to negotiate with the Maharana. As Motilal and 2,000 of his followers were making their way to the Sisodia court, orders were sent from Bombay to the British authorities in the Rajputana Agency “to demand the unconditional surrender of Moti Lal” and to keep troops ready “to act in support of the demand when called on by local authorities” (cited in Hardiman 2007, 42). The Mewar Bhil Corps was thus promptly dispatched to intercept the insurgents before they reached Udaipur, and on 7 March, near the border between Idar and Mewar, the troops attacked Motilal and his followers. According to colonial authorities, the attack left 22 Bhils dead, but there is due reason to doubt this number: “... there were a hundred casualties; dead and wounded were lying all around,” wrote a local missionary. “Our little hospital was filled, and we were bringing in stretcher cases until 10 p.m.” (cited in Hardiman 2007, 46). Local Bhils claim the number of dead to have been between 1,200 and 1,500.

The massacre in Sirohi did not put an end to the movement. In the coming months, the Bhils of several villages in Sirohi state refused to pay their taxes, and the British had to resort to what they called “the moral effect of the 12 pounder gun” (Vidal 1997, 139) to break the resolve of the insurrectionary tribals. Eventually, the princely states offered some concessions in order to restore peace in their realms, and these were accepted by the Bhils: “They were significant gains, but acceptance also signalled a retreat from the utopia of an autonomous peasant Raj” (Sen 2007, 166).

The *Eki* movement shared some of the features of the Bhil uprisings of the nineteenth century – chief among them, perhaps, “the belief that it was still possible to appeal for justice to the British, the *maharana*, and the *thikanedars*” (Sen 2007, 161). Within the parameters of this belief, the excesses and predations “of the local authorities were denounced less as the result of an old order that was naturally oppressive, than as the outcome of a modern perversion of the system” (Vidal 1997, 126).

What was novel, though, was the mediation of this uprising through Gandhian idioms: the new kingdom that Motilal would establish was one in which the Bhils would cast off the yoke of oppression; it was dubbed Gandhi *Raj* and clearly derived a significant part of its legitimacy and rationale from a subaltern appropriation of Gandhi’s message of non-co-operation. Thus, the *Eki* movement can be said to share some of the qualities that Singh (1985) found to be typical of the tribal movements that emerged after 1920: these were movements that saw in the Freedom Movement an opportunity to

reclaim the rights and prerogatives of a bygone era: “Swaraj to them meant not only freedom from British rule.... Freedom to them mean restoration of agrarian and forest rights” (Singh 1985, 161). And this illustrates an important aspect of the contentious negotiations that the Bhils of western India were involved in during their rebellious century: rather than the Bhils mobilising a timeless and unchanging culture of resistance in the face of an ever more entrenched colonial state space, their “repertoire of contention” evolves over time through the appropriation of idioms from a range of different state-making projects (see Tilly 2006). Indeed, the *Eki* movement can be understood as articulating elements from three state-making projects: pre-colonial forms of shared sovereignty, the mediation of colonial state space in the princely states, and finally the nationalist project for an independent Indian state. This again testifies to the necessity of acknowledging the profoundly relational nature of subaltern politics, not only in the context of contemporary India, but also across historical time. In the following concluding remarks, I shall outline how we might make some initial conceptual steps in this direction.

Concluding Remarks

The point of departure for this article was a critique of Chatterjee’s recent contributions to the study of subaltern politics in contemporary India. My basic contention was that his argument that the “new subaltern” – to borrow a term from Spivak (2000) – displays an ability to engage competently and assertively with the state, although correct in and of itself, is fundamentally inadequate: the unfolding of subaltern politics in and through state–society relations must be historicised. I then sought to substantiate this claim through a discussion of Bhil resistance as a form of *contentious negotiation* of state-making projects across the century-long period stretching from 1818 to the early 1920s. In these concluding remarks, I want to move from critique to proposition by sketching an alternative conceptual approach to the study of the dynamics of state–society relations in subaltern politics.

First of all, it is necessary to conceive of subalternity itself as a determinate positionality within a sociohistorical “field-of-force” (Thompson 1978, 151). The socio-historical field-of-force should in turn be understood as having been moulded through the unfolding of “hegemonic processes” (Mallon 1995) in which dominant social groups seek to gain the consent of subaltern social groups through “a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria ... between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups ...” (Gramsci 1998, 182). The fact that subaltern groups thus come to be embedded in socioeconomic relations, political institutions and cultural idioms that – in spite of concessions and compromises – underpin the reproduction of hegemony, has ramifications for the oppositional projects they articulate. Subaltern resistance will tend to proceed *through* contentious appropriations of “the social condensations of hegemony” (Morton 2007, 92) – that is, through hegemonic political institutions, discourses and processes – rather than at a distance from these.

One of Gramsci’s (1998, 260) great insights was of course that state formation is integral to the ways in which dominant groups seek “to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own” (see also Whitehead 2015). This is significant in relation to the dynamics of subaltern politics for two reasons. Firstly, it is precisely through the construction of “organic passages” between dominant and subaltern groups that state formation as a “master change process” comes to articulate with the “local rationalities”

that animate subaltern politics (Nilsen and Cox 2013). And therefore, the institutions, idioms and technologies of rule out of which these passages are constructed also become “sites of protracted struggle as to what they mean and for whom” (Corrigan and Sayer 1985, 6). Secondly, owing to the fact that the state is congealed from social relations characterised by “compromise equilibrium” (Gramsci 1998, 161) there will be “conjunctural opportunities” (Jessop 1982, 225) for such struggles to advance the empowerment and emancipation of subaltern groups. But the compromises that have been struck in and through the unfolding of hegemonic processes are ones “in which the interests of dominant groups prevail” (Gramsci 1998, 182) and therefore, such conjunctural opportunities will exist in a dialectical tension with “structural constraints” (Jessop 1982, 225) that circumscribe the scope for subaltern advances in and through the state and its institutions, discourses and technologies of rule.

Admittedly, these are only the bare bones of a possible conceptual orientation, and much work lies ahead if we are to develop a more comprehensive theoretical perspective. However, within the parameters of this orientation, we are pushed towards a study of subaltern politics that seeks to grasp the convergence of the contemporary micro-dynamics of everyday state–society relations and the macro-structural *longue durée* of state formation.

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Notes

- ¹ The Bhils are one of the major Adivasi groups of western and central India. Consisting of multiple sub-groups such as Bhilalas, Barelas, and Naiks, the Bhils inhabit the largely hilly regions of northeastern Maharashtra, eastern Gujarat, southern Rajasthan and western Madhya Pradesh. For the sake of simplicity, I shall use the term Bhil to refer to Bhils, Bhilalas and Barelas in this paper. I shall refer to the region they inhabit as the Bhil heartland. The term Adivasi, in turn, literally means “first inhabitant,” and was coined by tribal rights activists early in the twentieth century to express their claim to being the indigenous people of India. The Indian government does not recognise Adivasis as being indigenous people, but defines Adivasi communities as belonging to the category of Scheduled Tribes as per the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian constitution. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules (schedules are basically lists in the Constitution that categorise and tabulate bureaucratic activity and policy of the Government) provide an array of protective legislation, special entitlements and reservations for Adivasis.
- ² This theme was particularly important in the work of Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Sudipta Kaviraj. See Nilsen (2012) for an extended discussion. In formulating this argument, I also seek to contribute to the emergence of a new direction in the study of subaltern politics in India (for examples of such work, see, inter alia, Madhok 2013, Subramanian 2009, Sharma 2009, Chandra 2013, Nielsen 2010 and Agarwala 2013).
- ³ See Chatterjee (2004) for the original formulation of the civil society/political society distinction and Gudavarthy (2012) for a comprehensive selection of commentaries on Chatterjee’s proposition. See also Whitehead (2015) for a substantial criticism of Chatterjee’s distinction between political and civil society.
- ⁴ See Chandra (2015) for a useful discussion of the dynamics of negotiation in subaltern resistance.
- ⁵ *Sibandis* were Arab mercenaries who were frequently found in the employ of various rulers throughout western India in the eighteenth century.
- ⁶ In the wake of Briggs’ departure, the British opted for an alternative strategy in Khandesh centred on the formation of the Khandesh Bhil Corps as a military outfit of Bhil recruits headed by a British officer and the implementation of more comprehensive efforts to promote sedentary agriculture.

- ⁷ The following account of Govind Giri's movement draws on Hardiman (2003), Jain (1991) and Singh (1995). Only direct quotes will be referenced in what follows.
- ⁸ There were subsequent attempts to revive the movement and to bring Motilal back into the activist fold, some of which were carried out by Gandhian nationalists. These efforts, however, failed to come to fruition (see Hardiman 2003).
- ⁹ The following account of Motilal Tejwat's movement draws on Hardiman (2007), Jain (1991), Sen, (2007), Singh (1995), and Vidal (1997). Only direct quotes will be referenced in what follows.

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