



**Give me the space to live: trauma, casted land and the search for restitution among the Meghwal survivors of the Dangawas massacre**

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## **‘Give me the Space to Live’: Trauma, Caste Lands and the Search for Restitution among the Meghwal Survivors of the Dangawas Massacre**

### **1. Introduction**

As I ducked out of the blazing sunlight and entered the cool interior of the small cement house located by an inconspicuous dusty road in Dangawas village in Rajasthan’s Nagaur district, the house seemed strangely silent and chilly. A group of women were sitting on the kitchen floor, *ghunghats* (veils) covering their faces, peeling peas. I felt uncomfortable, suddenly aware of the space I found myself in. Over two years ago, in May 2015, the family of the now deceased Ratna Ram Meghwal, that continues to inhabit these narrow quarters, fell victim to one of the most brutal and deadly attacks on Dalits (former ‘untouchables’) in recent Indian history. In an escalated land dispute that ultimately resulted in a mob attack on Ratna Ram’s family by members of the locally powerful Jat caste, five Meghwal Dalits lost<sup>1</sup> their lives and many more were injured; Ratna Ram’s family lost its main agricultural livelihood, along with any semblance of security or belonging they might have had. Even now, years after the attack, a police officer still sometimes stands guard at their door. The family’s court case, which has become Rajasthan’s banner case for the 1989 Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA), is still ongoing.

The events of Dangawas took place long before I set out on my fieldwork journey in Rajasthan in the summer of 2016 to study the social life of the 1989 Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act, one of the world’s most stringent anti-discrimination laws, which aims to protect Dalits and Adivasis (tribals) against violence from

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<sup>1</sup> Official sources cite different death toll numbers for Dangawas. Some claim that 4 Meghwals lost their lives in the attack, while others mention five or even six deaths. The number I cite here is based on my own conversations with Meghwal survivors in Dangawas. I was told that three Meghwals died during the attack, while two others later passed away in the hospital.

those at the top of the caste hierarchy (P.S. Krishnan 2018 Personal Correspondence; Rao 2009). Dangawas, which is located in Nagaur district, was relatively far away from my fieldwork site of Jhunjhunu. And yet, whenever I mentioned my research to Dalit families and activists, I was not directed to recent, local incidents, but to the ‘Dangawas massacre’, as it had become known. In Rajasthan, I learned, the meaning of the Prevention of Atrocities Act was Dangawas! Due to extensive media coverage, the involvement of activists and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Dangawas had grown synonymous with the continuing realities of caste-based violence and had emerged as that one incident that allowed Dalits across Rajasthan to defend the existence of the PoA in the face of repeated political and legal challenges. And yet, during my own visit to the village, I realized that out of all the Dalit atrocity survivors I had encountered during my fieldwork, Ratna Ram Meghwals’s remaining family was perhaps the least focused on the law. While they laboured for their PoA case to succeed, they also seemed sceptical of the sense of restitution or justice it could ultimately bring and had concerns about the ability of the PoA to help Meghwal Dalits in Dangawas to resume and continue life without fear and provide them the ‘space’ they consider their due. ‘A world (...) where people give me space to live in peace (*shanti mein jeene ke lyie jagah denge*), to work and live on my land (*apni zameen*), and no one attacks me for it. That’s what justice means to me,’ Anu, one of Ratna Ram’s close, surviving female relatives imagined.<sup>2</sup> She hoped to win the PoA case and wanted the state to fulfil its promises of punishing those who hurt her family. Still, those possibilities did not seem to capture a holistic sense of restitution for her and many other survivors. ‘The SC/ST act is good and important and of course I want to win but at the end of the day these legal things (*kanooni cheez*) are far away. I have to live here in my village’, another Meghwal woman told me.

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<sup>2</sup> All names, apart from that of the deceased Ratna Ram Meghwal, have been changed for purposes of anonymity. Moreover, in an attempt to prevent easy identification of individuals, I have left out specific kinship or relationship designators. I want to ensure that statements made in confidence will remain protected.

Such at first glance, restrained appeals to being *given* space and peace together with the scepticism regarding the PoA, are perplexing considering the sheer brutality that has marked the life of Dangawas' Meghwal survivors. It even seems to run counter to the open and assertive claim to rightful land ownership, belonging and equality before law made by the deceased Ratna Ram Meghwal. Though, as we will see, the dispute over the plot of land that would cost Ratna Ram his life had been simmering for decades, it had been his overt decision to mark the plot as rightfully his by building a house on the land and moving his family there, that had caused the explosive eruption of Jat anger. Meghwal men in Dangawas told me that Ratna Ram no longer wanted to simply negotiate and argue with the Jats (as historical superiors) over something he knew was his and had been registered in this name for generations.

By demanding his due in such an open and forceful manner, Ratna Ram crossed an invisible and unarticulated red line within a social structure still conceptualised in terms of traditional caste hierarchies. This is particularly relevant within the context of Dalit assertion in contemporary Rajasthan, which has historically been splintered and moderate compared to states like Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh (Bhatia 2006; Vyas et al. 2007; Meghwanshi 2017). In his discussion of the 2002 Dalit rebellion in the village of Chakwada in Rajasthan's Jaipur district, Bela Bhatia argues that Dalits in Rajasthan are still deeply affected by practices of untouchability and remain particularly emmeshed in complex, hierarchical networks of caste division (2005, 32). He further proposes that even though particular communities and regional pockets of Dalits within Rajasthan are becoming more conscious of their rights and vocal in their demands, this has neither resulted in large scale political mobilisation (ibid, 54), nor broken down traditional, hierarchical caste structures, in which the claims of some are privileged, while the demands of others are considered an affront to rightful social order (ibid, 57).

The account Dangawas' Meghwal survivors gave of Ratnta Ram's state of mind prior to the attacks, echoes Anand Teltumbde's analysis of the 2006 Khairlanji massacre in Maharashtra, in which four members of a Mahar Dalit family were brutally murdered by a mob of the Kunabi-Maratha caste. Teltumbe argues that the Khairlanji murders encapsulated the sentiments at the heart of caste-based atrocities, namely a deep-seated fear of Dalit defiance on the part of higher caste communities, who see their own status waning in a changing world (2008, 2011).

In his own analysis of the 2006 Khairlanji murders, Nicholas Jaoul (2008) proposed that the excessive brutality was motivated by the fact that 'the murderers not only wanted to teach assertive Dalits a lesson, but also to flaunt how openly they could afford to do it'. The violence was, thus, 'a public statement by dominant castes that their caste rule was above and beyond the law' (2008:1). While, according to Jaoul, the Khairlanji massacre, caused Dalit outrage, he also highlights that this public, emotional 'outburst' was 'manufactured through a multiplicity of individual initiatives by activists and ordinary people' (47). He mentions human rights and progressive activists belonging to the peasant NGO movement on the one hand, and those involved in a local Dalit anti-caste movement on the other.

In this article I steer away from the public representations, debates and media coverage of the Dangawas incident. Instead, I focus on the family members and immediate survivors, who – after the massacre – still have to come to terms with a deeply disrupted life in the village. I offer an analysis after the fact, which tries to unearth how people can conceptualise desires for restoration in an ongoing post-traumatic moment when threats of further violence still loom. I begin by exploring ideas of justice and restitution voiced by Dangawas' Meghwal survivors in the aftermath of the massacre. A sense of restitution, many imply, can only partially be fulfilled by winning the PoA case, as 'the law is out there but we have to live here.' Meghwal survivors also frequently expressed anger at the state and particularly the police, which had

ignored Meghwal pleas for support mere days before the attack (TOI, November 2, 2018).

Instead, many said, a true sense of restitution could only come from within the village. Hence, many of my Meghwal interlocutors expressed the idea that land (*zameen*) acts as a wider symbol for a just life in which Dalits are allowed physical and social space (*jagah*) - the space to claim ownership and navigate village life freely and peacefully without fear of violence.

Secondly, I will unpack the desire for peace articulated by those who saw the violence of Dangawas first hand. Many of Ratna Ram's surviving family members tended to emphasise the continuing threat of a divided village and the fear that still permeates their daily lives. They, once more, lamented the distant nature of law, which lives in courts and cannot not truly reach into their lives. The PoA cannot heal them (*theek kar dena*) and grant them real space to live.

Finally, taking Anu's desire to be *given* space as a point of departure, I discuss the shift from the assertiveness displayed by Ratna Ram Meghwal to the (temporary) restraint shown by many of my interlocutors in terms of fighting back and demanding radical justice and equality. Both, Meghwal men and women, often concluded that what truly needed as a change in the Jat mindset (*sooch*), as only such a transformation would allow Meghwals to be given what they were *due*.

However, I hope to convey that the shift from Ratna Ram's emphasis on claiming equal rights to the desire for peace, space and being *given* one's due, articulated by many Meghwal survivors of Dangawas should not be read as a resignation to caste inequalities after the massacre. Instead this shift reveals how post-traumatic moments, defined by the severe rupture of ordinary life (Das 2006), feelings of abandonment by the state and looming threats of repeated violence can foreground people's desire for healing, reconnection (Satterlee 2006) and restitution through a life free from threat and suffering. The moment of traumatic

paralysis can temporarily affect people's ability to practice and imagine immediate forms of political assertion.

What may seem like tempered demands for justice, is rooted in the brutal realization that the violence they encountered was intended as an act of communication (Abrahams, 1998; Goldstein 2003) to remind them what types of claims they as Dalits and Meghwals are allowed to make within the village and society at large. And so, the Meghwal survivors of Dangawas understand that the framework of the village space they inhabit is still set by the people who hurt them, and that those very people consider it their privilege to grant degrees of caste equality. What Suryakhant Waghmore (2018) has referred to as Hindu *politesse* - a concept that captures how upper castes have regarded themselves as gracefully ceding a certain amount of space to Dalits in the context of legal and constitutional modernity - is reflected in Meghwal invocations of *jagah* in Dangawas. The violence of May 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 has made many Meghwals aware that though Ratna Ram thought he could actively claim his rights as an equal legal citizen, the Jat violence that brutality that ensued was meant to show Meghwals that they could not demand more than Jats were willing to graciously give up.

I, ultimately, use these insights to speak to critical debates on justice and recognition: Even though, the justice- as-recognition paradigm has been criticised as a mechanism whereby marginalised groups are produced as subjects who participate in their own domination through an illusion of accommodation (Coulthard 2014), I propose that the aftermath of Dangawas reveals that it is the *experience of violence* itself that can push people to temporarily accept such subjecthood. The post-traumatic moment, when the memory of suffering is fresh and a once familiar world seems foreign and threatening, can make visions of claiming radical justice and agency, seem dangerous. In Dangawas this disillusionment runs even deeper as Meghwal victims come to understand that the 'ordinary' social life (Das 2006) they have left behind was simply a veil, covering a social landscape defined by a

hierarchy that sowed the seeds for violence. In this context immediate assertion can seem impossible. However, such temporary stillness, nonetheless, coexists with continuing desires for more radical change and resistance. 'One day, we can fight again!', Anu told me, 'But [...] we must heal first (*pehle hame andar se theek hona hai*).

## 2. The Dangawas Massacre

'It was like a hoard of angry beasts storming our land,' one of the Meghwal woman told me when I visited Dangawas in July 2017, 'I saw them coming and I knew we were going to die. When Jats get like this there is no saving us!' Her words hung in the air as the other women in the room nodded silently in approval. Some of them had been present at the attack and had come out alive, but seriously injured. Following the altercation, Meghwal survivors not only had to deal with the physical pain, the loss of community, the destruction of their land and the stress of an ongoing court case, but also with practical household issues since so many of the women had been injured in the attack. May 14th, 2015 brought about a complete rupture in the lives and livelihoods of Dangawas' Meghwals caused by a brutality that made them feel like hunted prey.

The Dangawas massacre represented the culmination of a long-standing land dispute between Ratna Ram Meghwal and the family of Chinma Ram Jat. The attack transpired at the exact moment when the chips of state law seemed to fall in favour of Ratna Ram Meghwal, marking it as a moment of violence intended to send the kind of 'immediate message' to those daring to challenge long-standing hierarchies: an intention, which- as Claudia Card (2004) proposes - lies at the conceptual heart of caste atrocities. According to Bhanwar Meghwanshi (2015), who wrote the first widely circulated report on the Dangawas massacre, the controversy had been festering for over two decades. For Meghwanshi what happened in 2015 represented the boiling point of a long-simmering Jat anger that highlights Jat anxieties over a



waning status monopoly. In his comprehensive report Meghwanshi paints a distinctive demographic picture of Dangawas and its home district of Nagaur as a site of historical Jat dominance.

Historical accounts of the Nagaur region confirm Meghwanshi's claim. When I visited Dangawas in 2017 I was told that out of the 2500 families in the village approximately 350 were Meghwals while the remainder belonged to the Jat caste. The influence of the Jat landowners, which dates back decades (Bharadwaj, 2012; Shamuragatnam, 1996; Sisson 1969), is not only unparalleled in the district but has also long determined political outcomes<sup>3</sup> and shaped economic formations. Following the events of May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, some newspapers stressed that in the aftermath even Dalit MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) from Nagaur were hesitant to openly express their support for Ratna Ram's family for fear of losing the Jat vote. Meghwanshi emphasized that while over 50% of the land that belongs to Dalits in Nagaur is correctly registered in their names, most of these plots have effectively been occupied by Jats and other non-Dalit groups. As section 42 (b) of the Rajasthan Tenancy Act of 1955, which applies till this day, states that anyone who is not a member of the Scheduled Castes (or Tribes) is not permitted to buy or mortgage land from a member of the Scheduled Castes (or Tribes), this state of affairs is particularly concerning. Dangawas and its home district of Nagaur, hence materialize as a historical nestle of barely questioned, and scarcely circumventable, Jat power that has put local Dalit groups on the defensive in all areas of life, despite the explicit protection of the state legislature.

The 23 bigha (approx. 3.5 ha) plot at the root of the Dangawas bloodshed had originally been acquired by Ratna Ram Meghwal's ancestor Basta Ram. However, in 1998 a man named Chinma Ram Jat claimed title to the plot, stating that the property had been sold to him in

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Indian Express 'Nagaur is one of the two seats in north India that was won by the Congress even in its abysmal performance in 1977 thanks to its Jat sympathizers.' (<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/where-one-community-lives-in-fear-and-the-other-is-too-dominant-for-parties-to-offend/>)

1964. It is at this point that the Meghwals accounts begin to diverge from the Jat narrative. Back in 1964, the Ratna Ram's ancestors had briefly mortgaged the land to Chinma Ram's father in exchange for loan in the amount of 1500 rupees. However, according to Ratna Ram Meghwal's family, the debt was short-lived. 'This is the biggest lie the Jats tell, that we sold the land, when really we only took out a loan that we repaid with interest very quickly. But they wanted to keep the land and since then we have been fighting'. With both parties insisting on their version of events, the conflict came to hinge on a single piece of paper: the sales deed.

The Indian newspaper Frontline reported that in 1998 'Chinma Ram Jat claimed title to the property (...) on the grounds that he and his ancestors had held possession of the land for the past 35 years.' However, Chinma Ram did not submit any documentary evidence to the Merta district court to prove his ownership (Frontline, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015) and his claim was rejected shortly before his death in 2007. Soon after, Chinma Ram's sons, Kana Ram Jat and Oma Ram Jat, who would later be named as two of the main accused in the attack, produced the sales deed claiming that the land had been sold to their father by Ratna Ram's predecessor Ghisa Ram (ibid) and filed a complaint with the Revenue Court. The timing and sequence of these events has caused the Meghwal family's current legal representative in the PoA case to hypothesize that the sales deed submitted by the Jats was a forgery. If the paper were real, many argue, Chinma Ram would have produced it in the first court case. Ratna Ram Meghwal's sons, Munna Ram and Krishna Ram, quickly filed a counter-claim at the Merta Revenue Court questioning a) the authenticity of the sales deed and b) proposing that any sale of the land to Chinma Ram Jat would have been void per the 1955 Rajasthan Tenancy Act. Unfortunately, the situation remained in limbo as the Revenue Court stayed proceedings over the sales deed.

In early 2015 Ratna Ram Meghwal decided to make his claim explicit. He took possession of the contested plot and started construction of a proper cement house (pakka makaan) on the premises. This assertive move was perceived as an unforgivable expression of defiance of established caste hierarchies (Gorringe, 2005; Pandian, 2000) and many Jats felt they had to respond. Combined with the degrading experience of losing the official court case in 2007, Chinma Ram Jat's family had experienced a moment of deep social humiliation. 'They felt left behind by the law', the Meghwal family's lawyer reflected, 'and Ratna Ram goes and just starts building that house. They felt that the world as they knew it was ending.'

In April 2015 Chinma Ram Jat's sons aggressively forged ahead onto the contested plot with a JCB tractor, dug up the valuable *Prosopis cineraria* (khejri) trees and began excavating a pond. Even though Ratna Ram Meghwal reported these events at the police station in Merta, the authorities remained unresponsive. After a village panchayat meeting on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2015, which was scheduled in Ratna Ram's absence, a delegation of Jats submitted a memorandum to the Sub-division Officer, the Deputy Superintendent of the Police (DSP) and the District Collector. The document stated that the Jat community of Dangawas demanded Ratna Ram vacate the contested plot. Should the police fail to comply with the request, the Jats would take justice 'into their own hands' (Meghwanshi 2015, 7). Although the Jat delegation gave the police a week to respond, mere days later on May 14<sup>th</sup>, a mob of approximately 250 Jats pushed onto the disputed plot with motorcycles, weapons and tractors. In one of the perhaps most outright cruel acts conceivable, the mob surrounded Ratna Ram's house, set it on fire together with the surrounding field, mutilated Meghwal women, and then proceeded to crush two Meghwals underneath their tractors (Meghwanshi 2015; Hindustan Times, May 17, 2015). Ratna Ram Meghwal was one of two Meghwal men to lose their life to the tractor attack. Three more Dalits died in the hospital and during medical treatments, while 13 others were admitted to the hospital with severe injuries.

Even though the Merta police station is located a mere five kilometres from Dangawas, the police arrived on the site far too late. In his widely circulated report on the attack Meghwanshi recalls the words of one Govind Ram Meghwal, who had managed to escape without any physical harm: 'If the police had arrived on time, my family members would be alive today'. This statement betrays unspoken skepticism of the police's neutrality and support in moments of inter-caste tension. As the representatives of the state most deeply embedded in local negotiations and interactions (Jauregui, 2016), police punctuality or tardiness are read as signposts for the true social sentiments of the state.

The brutality of Dangawas quickly drew attention from media, NGOs and Dalit interest groups across the state and across the country. Dangawas' survivors, as well as Meghwal communities and activists from across Rajasthan staged a protest (dharna) outside the Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital and submitted a letter with 18 demands to the state, such as adequate compensation, arrest of all culprits and an inquiry by the Criminal Bureau of Investigation (Hindustan Times, May 31, 2015). While some of these demands have been met, Dangawas' Meghwals say that many have not. The Government of Rajasthan handed over the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in June 2015. The CBI filed a charge sheet against 34 more Jats under sections 3(1) (5), (10), and 2 (5) of the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act and sections 307, 436, 147, 149, 447, 323 and 325 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), accusing them of murder, illegal land-grabbing and the use of humiliating casteist language. The CBI also issued arrest warrants (TOI, October 18, 2016). During my visit to Dangawas in 2017, I was told that 16 of the accused Jats have already been arrested. In December 2019 Times of India reported that the CBI had offered rewards of up to 50000 Rupees for each of the remaining 10 accused who had still not been arrested (TOI, December 2, 2019). The trial for the case is still ongoing.

Despite these legally encouraging developments, I learned during my brief stint in Dangawas that on an intimate level what concerned many survivors most were the actions and

circumstances that made the violence of Dangawas possible and the continued sense of threat that hung over them. ‘Ratna Ram never thought something like this would happen,’ a Meghwal neighbour of the family told me. ‘He figured the Tenancy Act clearly stated that the land could not belong to the Jats and in the end everyone had to respect that. So, he went ahead and claimed his land.’ However, in the aftermath of the massacre Ratna Ram’s remaining relatives feel that he miscalculated. Hence, the survivors grapple with a difficult question: How can their experience of violence, their trauma and the justice they desire be reconciled with the only life they have access to and can imagine?

‘How can we make sure that this kind of thing doesn’t happen again,’ one of the Meghwal women in the village asked me. ‘That’s what we are most concerned about. Getting to live in our village without more violence (hinsa),’ Another Meghwal man told me. ‘The law is good but it is far away. It may help to prevent these Jats from doing something like this again, but cases get forgotten. The law cannot make us into a peaceful community or bring us Meghwals a feeling of justice from the inside (*andar se*). We still live in a divided village; we don’t talk to the Jats. We fear them and, if we are lucky, they ignore us.’

These statements suggest that the Meghwal survivors of Dangawas are acutely aware of the constitutional rights and mechanisms awarded to Dalits in contemporary India, and recognize, both, the possibilities inherent in law, and its limitations. The PoA, they seemed to say, is a protective and hopefully preventative measure as Jats too have felt the consequences of their actions. However, it ultimately hovers above the lives of the Dangawas victims and can neither bring a true feeling of restitution, nor a real promise that village dynamics will change for the better. These insights resonate with Bhatia’s findings in Chakwada. He reports that many of his Bairwa informants reported significant emotional and social costs when engaging with the law more broadly and the Prevention of Atrocities Act in particular (Bhatia 2006, 43).

### 3 Land as a Casted Canvas

#### 3.1 Carving out a Space for Meghwals

When I accompanied some Mehgval men from Dangawas to the Merta district court to consult with their case lawyer, a man named Babu Lal Meghwal, who had been injured during the attack, gave a deeply emotional speech. ‘It is when we demand our rights and our land, then the Jats chase us away from it and kill us. *They* won’t budge from their place. They want to own the village!’<sup>4</sup> he proclaimed tightly clutching a copy of CBI charge sheet, ‘and now here we have to fight through the law.’ His legal counsel agreed. ‘He is right,’ he told me as we discussed the details of the charge sheet later on, ‘they don’t think the Meghwals have right to that land or any other. And because of that they can be dangerous.’

Babu Lal’s words underline the retributive tendencies inherent in the attack on Ratna Ram on May 14<sup>th</sup> that are reminiscent of the Khairlanji case (Jaoul 2008; see also Teltumbde 2008). However, they also hint at deeper disagreements between Meghwals and Jats about the meaning of social order, hierarchy and space that lie at the heart of the massacre and hold serious implications for understandings of active ownership. Babu Lal’s words reveal an interpretation of events that pins the roots of the violence on the unwillingness of Dangawas’ Jat community to give up land, which marks a physical space they consider theirs, but also symbolizes a social space they have long occupied alone. The Jat attack, initiated by an economically secure family, unearths deep anxieties about ceding a space and status of privilege by allowing Meghwals entry into a socio-economic arena they consider exclusively their own. Jat violence marks a refusal to move aside and accept the historical and lawful positioning of a previously inferior group next to them.

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<sup>4</sup> *Hum apna haq jab mangte hain, tabhi apni zameen se woh bhagadete hai, tabhi mar dete hain. Jagah se hatdte nahi woh’*

Both Anu and Babu Lal emphasise the idea of space (*jagah*), a term that in Hindi can demarcate a physical area, as well as a metaphorical sphere of being. The lengths to which Ratna Ram and his family were ready to claim their land, suggests that land is not only economically crucial for Meghwals but that Meghwal conceptions of being and belonging are rooted in the idea that owning land is a step to equal social participation. As Dalit ownership of fertile land is still highly limited in Rajasthan today (Singh and Gupta 2014), the conflation of land with ideas of justice and sentiments of belonging is especially significant. Land represents economic security, as well as a more intangible sense of status, belonging and voice in the community. ‘In Jhunjhunu at least Dalits have a little land’, a Meghwal woman from my own fieldwork region once told me, ‘this means that the earth this village is built on is ours as well. If we had no land like many Dalits in other areas, we wouldn’t be seen as real part of the village.’

Anu’s expression of justice and restitution is mirrored in the land itself, as well as in the felt autonomy of owning, cultivating and using it, and passing it on to the next generation without threat. Meanwhile, Babu Lal’s appraisal of the dynamics behind the Dangawas massacre highlight the danger of Meghwals, insisting on their legal and economic rights to land, as such a stance may be perceived as provocative by those who have historically been disproportionately entitled to its economic value and symbolic meaning.

Chris Hann has pointed to land as a unique type of property (Hann, 1998). He argues that land as property that cannot be circulated, becomes the arena on which a variety of cultural and social norms become enshrined. Therefore, land comes to mirror societal power structures and can easily become a battleground on which demands for political and economic change play out in an effort to reconfigure class, caste and gender lines (see Whitehead 1984; Mondal PhD Thesis forthcoming). Along these lines scholarly work on caste has long put forth arguments in support of Babu Lal’s insight, namely that Dalits not only most often find

themselves threatened and attacked when they start to assert themselves and claim new rights (Thorat & Newman, 2007; Thorat, 2002; Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998; Jaoul, 2008) but that land as a meaningful physical space plays a central role in the Dalit struggle for recognition and socio-political equality (P.S. Krishnan, Interview 2018; Pankaj, 2016; Shah & Lerche, 2018; Mohanty, 2001, Waghmore, 2013).

In the 1990s Henri Lefebvre categorized space in terms of the practices that produce (1991) and highlighted its importance as a canvas for social order and its transitions (see also Christie 2013). While his analysis was primarily concerned with urban planning, his distinction between different types of spaces is nonetheless helpful, especially his conception of 'lived space' as an arena of memory, imagination and 'spaces of representation' that subsumes the physical (perceived) as well as the ideal (conceived) space. The next generation of Marxist thinkers developed these ideas further, by exploring the links between capitalist accumulation and spatial production and change (Harvey, 2006.). Studying in particular the production of community spaces, Harvey concluded that only the reworking of material spaces could bring about meaningful alternatives to the dominant social structure (Harvey 2006). The connection between space and transformation has also been highlighted as early as in Greek philosophy. In 'The saying of Anaximander', German philosopher Martin Heidegger analyses the only surviving text fragment authored by the Greek thinker Anaximander, which states that all things must eventually give way if the world is to be in balance. Anaximander deems an unwillingness to cede space when one's time has come an unjust action (Heidegger [1946/1950] 1977; Thornsteinsson 2015). People must recognise that they share the world with others and must accept the gradual transformation of one's physical space and the relationships that inhabit it.

In an analysis of political strategies adopted by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, Nicolas Jaoul proposes that BSP politicians harvested the unifying power of



symbolic politics by installing Ambedkar statues in villages across the state. He argues that the installation of these statues instilled in young Dalit men a belief in their own constitutional rights and the legitimacy of their demands for representation, equality and visibility (2006,195). However, Jaoul also points out that higher caste groups interpreted this process as an attempt by Dalit communities to gain ‘symbolic control’ (ibid) of public spaces, as a moment ‘of daring assertion’ that had to be stopped and counter-acted. The installation of Ambedkar statues, thus, unveiled the ways in which village spaces, though nominally public, were differentially owned by different communities, ultimately creating a caste public.

Similarly, the contested plot in Dangawas, thus emerges as a highly ‘casted’ space that reflects the transformation of caste hierarchies in the agricultural landscape. By simultaneously asserting his land rights through legal proceedings (land title claim) and through physical action (constructing a house), Ratna Ram acted doubly audacious in the eyes of the local Jat population. For Chinma Ram’s family Ratna Ram’s efforts to openly claim ownership over the land, represented a de facto social revolution, particularly as local Jat sentiments of status and belonging are also often symbolically reflected on the land. The ensuing panic found its outlet in absolute brutality.

### **3.2 Jat Order: Preserving the Status Quo**

In the aftermath of the Dangawas massacre *Scroll India* reported that a noteworthy section of the Jat community in Rajasthan expressed support for the initiators of the attack. Some vocal Jats proposed that Dalits like the Meghwals of Dangawas had in recent years become ‘emboldened by reservations and the 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act’. One went so far to say that Dalits ‘should not forget their place in society’ (*Scroll India*, May 22, 2015) and needed to remember whose charity they relied on. Some of these statements resonate with Carswell and de Neve’s study of Dalit mobilization and PoA cases in Tamil Nadu. The

authors show that the historical Gounder land owners who used to rely on Arunthatyiar (Dalit) labour feel that Dalits are 'pampered by the state' (Carswell and de Neve, 2015, p. 1113). Together these analyses suggest that an event that was a murderous massacre for the Meghwals of Dangawas, was conceptualised as a moment of self-defence for many Jats: a determined decision to combat what they saw as problematic reversals in the social hierarchy. Chinma Ram's sons' declaration that they were determined to take justice 'into their own hands', conjures a picture of Jat notions of justice as equivalent to a known, disintegrating social model of caste hierarchy. It also indicates Jat's conviction that the law is setting a problematic benchmark by granting the Meghwals something they feel is not theirs to claim and something Jats are not ready to give up.

Anthropologists have shown that when a legal system doesn't reflect the desires and values of certain communities, these groups often feel the need to take the law into their 'own hands' (Abrahams, 1998; Goldstein 2003). These performances reflect wider anxieties about social order or state abandonment. Taking the law into one's hand, Goldstein argues, is hence a 'communicative act' (2003, p. 25), a critique of the way society is changing and of the way states react to such change. In Dangawas the violence is enacted by a historically dominant group in an attempt to effectively undercut state measures meant to counteract the effects of historical marginalization or inequality. Chinma Ram's family, accustomed to a level of caste impunity in a context where their own social and agricultural power has long been well established, see Ratna Ram's actions, and court judgments on their land claim, as threatening, disorderly and even unjust.

Hence, both Dalit and Jat understandings of the Dangawas massacre, while radically divergent in their experiential dimensions, are based in the recognition that the plot of land represents much more than its economic value but is a playing field on which competing understandings of correct social order are battled out. However, it symbolises contrasting

social possibilities: For Ratna Ram and his remaining family the plot is a symbol of what needs to be gained if Meghwals are to live in peace and have what their share, while for Jats the small plot represents a novel status precarity that must be combatted. To understand some of the underlying dynamics that shape Jat claims, a brief look at Rajasthan's land reforms is helpful.

In May of 2017 I managed to secure an interview with Mr X (as I will refer to him), a high ranking, upper caste police officer in Jaipur, but had been stationed in Nagaur during the events of Dangawas. When I asked him to share his thoughts on the Dangawas incident Mr. X. seemed annoyed. 'Of course the actual attack was bad. But, in my opinion, it was simply an unfortunate escalation of a land ownership situation that was much more complicated than the Meghwals claim. The family actually tilling the land since the 60s was that of Chinma Ram Jat,' Mr. X insisted during our conversation. 'The land reforms specified that land was to be redistributed to the tillers. So the Jats have claim too.' Similar sentiments were expressed by a Jat high court lawyer in Jaipur, who had relatives in Nagaur. He made it known to me that he was not sympathetic to what he called the 'casteist narrative' (jatibadi wali kahani). The Merta court had obviously not been paying attention to the precedents set by the land reforms, namely promising land to those who tilled it.

The argument put forth by Mr. X and the Jat lawyer is deeply problematic, Hira Singh (2014) has argued that the first phase of the Indian land reforms directed against established systems of intermediary land tenures (like jagirdari and zamindari models in Rajasthan) questionably invoked tilling rights as the main axis of redistribution. She writes:

'The main slogan 'Land to the Tiller,' [...] in effect excluded poor peasants, landless labourers and the entire group of service castes subsumed under the jajmani system, as none of them were considered tillers. (Singh 2014, 179).

Chattopadhyay (1975) has clarified that in the reform policies only those who had been tilling the lands of others as *tenants* and not those who had been cultivating the lands of their employers as *wage workers* had been considered tillers. Tenants were usually members of OBC castes, like Jats, who in turn employed Dalit wage labourers under often exploitative conditions. Meanwhile, a report by ActionAid India entitled ‘Land to the Tiller’ (2016) specified that ‘inferior tenants, for example, sharecroppers, tenants at will, contract farmers and those engaged in cultivating *khudkasht* (personal cultivation)’ effectively lost access to land in the reform policies (ActionAid India, 2016, 2). In relation to Rajasthan, the report stresses the issue of ‘concealed tenancies’. Even though formally large landholdings were significantly reduced due to measures like the Land Ceiling Act, in effect much of the land in the Rajasthan is not being cultivated by those in whose name it is registered. Informal contracts, mortgages or refusals to accept repayment for mortgaged land like in Dangawas are only some of the ways in which former landowners have retained de facto control of the land, ultimately exacerbating economic dependencies.

Given this historical backdrop one cannot escape the thought that by evoking tilling rights in favour of the Jat perpetrators, Mr. X and the Jat high court lawyer are skillfully manipulating the narrative of Dangawas, turning it from a story of caste-based violence into one competing, legally valid land claims, one of which is simply ignored by a state that has stylized itself as the protector of Dalits. In this narrative Ratna Ram infringed on a space that may have rightfully belonged to the Jats. Such sentiments find reflection in the expression of Jat solidarity in the aftermath of the Dangawas clash and the perception that Dalits had come to display unacceptable audacity that was reported by Scroll India.

#### **4 Reconnecting to the world: Peace, Space and Recognition after Trauma**

##### *4.1. Healing?*

During my visit to Dangawas a local Dalit activist arranged for all the Meghwal men who had survived the events of May 14<sup>th</sup> to assemble at the deceased Ratna Ram's house. For hours we sat and listened to their stories, and their fears in the aftermath of the violence. At one point an older Meghwal man who had been sitting silently on the side-lines, spoke up. 'We want to live in peace (*shanti se*) in our village', he said, 'but for that we need people's thoughts (*sooch*) to change, they must allow us to have the space that belongs to us. If the thoughts of the Jats don't change, violence will happen again and again, as soon as we demand our rights. We will never feel justice (*nyaya mehsus karenge*). ... Of course, we want justice under the PoA but the law lives in courts, we need to live here without fear. Another man nodded. 'He is right,' he said, 'our village is divided. What can the law do about that? It cannot give us our room in society (*samaj mein jagah nahi de sakta*).'

The old man (whose name I was never told), powerfully unearthed the sentiments that underlay the demands for restitution made by many of Dangawas' Meghwals. First of all, he illustrated that the law can punish, but not heal and that healing, thus, requires something the PoA cannot deliver. Most importantly, though, his words reveal how moments of deep, irreversible violence and the trauma that follows can temporarily alter how survivors assert themselves or demand their due. Unhealed trauma changes to what extent survivors are able to imagine possibilities of justice, recognition and can temporarily suspend the will to openly fight back.

Veena Das' argues that healing after trauma needs a process of re-anchoring oneself in a world that suddenly seems foreign and dangerous (Das, 2006). Building on a similar insight literary scholar Michelle Satterlee proposes that when a person's or a community's social world and framework is ruptured by a traumatic instance, reconnection must occur before memory, narrative composition or even the ability to address the experience of violence and fight for justice. Moreover, Satterlee argues that trauma 'is rooted within a cultural context

and tie(d) to specific landscapes' (2006, p. 74). As survivors map the fractured memory of their suffering onto the world around them, all possibilities for, and visions of justice, begin to grow out of the inhabited landscape. Das and Satterlee's analyses demonstrate that post-traumatic perspectives on past violence and suffering, along with the vision of possibility and future horizons that emerge from them are produced in dialogical simultaneity with the physical and social environment in which sufferers find themselves. Healing, both authors ultimately contend, can only take place once a new bond to the ordinary world has been created. Only then is memory and narrative formation, as well as the return to attitudes and perspectives that demand personal risk and assertion from survivors, conceivable.

I propose that the necessity of reconnection with the world following trauma, lies at the heart of the particular ways many of Dangawas' survivors formulated ideas of restitution, justice and social recognition by focussing on the notions of *land*, *space* and *peace*: Land, or the physical and metaphorical space that is itself of cardinal economic and social value and signifies, both, ownership and belonging, remains central and desirable in the post-traumatic moment. It functions now as a symbol for justice and restitution in a way that allows Meghwals to refamiliarize themselves with a world that has become exceptionally foreign and threatening. For the Meghwal victims of Dangawas land becomes a canvas that reflects caste-based inequality and a violent rebuttal of the equality they demanded, as well as the only tangible, economic marker of the status they can legally claim as their due under India's constitution.

Meanwhile, the evocation of peace springs from a continuing traumatic experience of constant fear and rootlessness, even after the actual moment of violence has long passed. This and the urgent need to heal personally and socially in order to return to life, can explain the frequently articulated demand of Dangawas Meghwals for a peaceful life in an undivided village. 'There were always tensions but it was still my village' one of the women who had

been left injured during the attack reflected, 'now it's different. Sometimes it feels like nothing can be ok again (*Kabhi kabhi lagta hai ki kuch theek nahi ho sakta*)'

Accentuating peace as condition to reconnect with the world goes hand in hand with an especially disconcerting aspect of Dalit survivor's visions of restitution: the emphasis on being *given* space and Jats to change their way of thinking. It reveals a curious reversal of agency as Meghwal survivors no longer stress their own ability to *claim* equality but wish for Jats to recognise what is due to them and change their way of thinking.

However, I argue that this inversion should not be interpreted as a sudden acceptance of discrimination or inferior status but as a temporary pause in the emotional ability to fight and resist in an environment that is still divided and threatening. It reveals a struggle with agency as Meghwal survivors no longer stress their own ability to *claim* equality but wish for Jats to recognize what is due to them and change their way of thinking. Putting agency on Jats granting what is due to Meghwals, is in many ways an expression of the traumatic disconnect Meghwal survivors, like the injured woman quoted above, feel with their own divided village: a disconnect that currently limits their ability to combat a visceral fear of more death and injury, in the face of increasingly deepening oppositional lines between Dangawas' Jats and themselves.

In his study of caste atrocities in Marathwada (Maharashtra), Suryakhant Waghmore (2018) shows how caste atrocities are usually the direct result of Dalits refusing to accept the parameters of freedom and partial inclusion awarded to them within the framework set up by upper caste Hindus (see also Jodkha on Punjab 2015, 63-64). Drawing on the idea of 'politeness', or 'politesse', Waghmore proposes that superficially caste hierarchies may indeed be waning in India, just as previous scholars have proposed (Kaviraj 2000, Gupta 2004). However, increasing levels of caste-based atrocities reveal that we have simply moved from a model of open and visible hierarchy based on purity and exclusion to a more subtle

one in which upper castes have graciously agreed to allow Dalits a certain measure of space in society. Waghmore argues along with Surinder Jodhka (2006) that Dalit access to new opportunities within the modern state and capitalist market and the increasing levels of ‘caste competition,’ (ibid, 113), which follow have not necessarily resulted in greater caste-based equality. Thus, he proposes that in an effort to perform particular social personae of law-abiding, middle class modernity, historically superior castes have begrudgingly adapted to some of the demands for freedom and equality articulated by Dalits that have now been enshrined in laws like the PoA and the constitution. This feat has been accomplished through carefully curated performances of politely ceding a certain measure of space by allowing Dalits access to sites and rites they had been previously excluded from. Politeness, in this context represents ‘a manufactured public response’ to the claims of Dalits that higher castes are now forced to acknowledge if they are to successfully portray themselves as modern citizen in accordance with liberal, constitutional values (ibid 117).

However, the space Dalits occupy under these circumstances remains one that is ‘given’ to them and must not exceed the parameters set out by higher castes, an analysis that is reminiscent of Ambedkar’s notion of limited accommodation. When Dalits in villages claim more than the rights and space politely ceded to them by higher caste groups, the latter react with violence. Waghmore’s story of a Mahar Dalit sarpanch, who was surprised to find himself subjected to violence after being elected with the help of the locally dominant Vanjari caste (Waghmore 2018, 122) exemplifies that. It was only in the aftermath of the atrocity that he realised that Vanjaris never intended his position to be equal, but merely one that the Vanjaris *allowed* him to occupy, which they politely granted within a village dynamic set up by them.

The increase in equality experienced by Mahar Dalits in Waghmore’s case is, thus, merely temporary (ibid 123) - to be given by the Marathas, and to be taken if and when they feel that



enough is enough. Violence is the boundary marker that tells Dalits 'We have given you this much, don't you take more! And remember that it was us who allowed you to get here in the first place'. Waghmore comes to the conclusion that politesse is, therefore, in itself 'a form of atrocity that violates [Dalit] rights' (135).

Returning to Dangawas, Waghmore's analysis deeply resonates with the stories I encountered there. Before the violence of May 14<sup>th</sup> Ratna Ram openly and systematically expressed his dissatisfaction with a system in which he was still to depend on the land and social space Jats were happy to allow him. Filing a case in the revenue court, taking up his father's battle for the land and confidently building his house on the plot, he was not too concerned with village peace or Jat discontent. He wanted a more radical social transformation in his own and in Meghwal life in general. His assertiveness was brutally countered.

Now, as Dangawas' Meghwals still have to come to terms with the loss and suffering of the massacre, attitudes of taking and claiming seem momentarily suspended for the purpose of healing and, as Waghmore puts it 'village peace' (ibid 114). Ratna Ram's open and assertive claim for equal recognition seems to have given way to a negotiation of Jat politesse and to an awareness that Meghwals cannot take but have to consider what Jats think is their due, if they want to escape further hurt. In order for Meghwals to claim, Jats will first have to recognize them as a rightful claimants, and for that to occur Jat minds will have to be de-casted.

Anthropologists have argued that any understanding that each party in a two-sided interaction is owed something, grows out of a sense of mutual recognition, (Graeber, 2011; Henaff, 2010) that creates material and symbolic space for both exchange partners to occupy the same arena. However, studies of Dalit lives have clearly shown that such sense of shared humanity is missing from inter-caste relations, which are instead characterised by a belief in graded entitlements (Dumont, 1970; Thorat & Newman, 2007, Ambedkar, 1936). While Waghmore speaks of Hindu politesse, Meghwals in Dangawas seem to express their understanding of the

boundaries set to their claims by Jat attitudes of social hegemony, in terms of land and space. Space, or jagah, in particular captures both, the desire for equality, respect, or freedom of confident movement, and the limitations set on these hopes by the existing hegemonic framework. Unlike politesse, which refers to a more intangible Hindu mindset, the invocation of *jagah* maps claims to respect and recognition as well as moments of resistance onto the economic and social landscape that shapes Meghwal lives.

#### 4.2. *'One day, we Will fight again!*

If Ratna Ram's actions captured Nancy Fraser's assertive notion of recognition as parity of participation whereby 'all [adult] members of society interact with one another as peers' and can make heard their independent claims (1998:19), the post-traumatic moment in Dangawas where the boundaries of Jat power have come into sharp focus, showcases more problematic dynamics that also lie behind ideas of justice or equality that hinge on recognition: namely how an emphasis on being recognized ultimately relocates agency back in the arena of those in power.,

In 'Red Skin, White Masks' Glen Sean Coulthard argues, drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, that states have historically used the discourse of recognition to hide earlier colonial dynamics of exclusion behind a thin veil of accommodation. He proposes that 'Fanon's analysis suggest that in contexts where colonial rule is not reproduced through force alone, the maintenance of [...] hegemony requires the production of [...] colonized subjects (2009, 16).' Coulthard, thus argues, that recognition is ultimately a process through which dominating class produce subjects that think, feel and desire in ways that, ultimately perpetuate their own marginalisation. In short, by performing degrees of empathy, colonizers could make colonial subjects to consent to, and participate in, their own domination. At first sight, the voices of Dangawas after the massacre seem to mirror this process as survivors

temper their own demands in a manner that ultimately appears to leave intact exploitative relationships. However, the picture is more complex.

The chronology of Dangawas suggests that it is precisely the violent moment that produces submission to Jat hegemony and tempered demands for justice. However, this submission is temporary. It is trauma and fear that have turned a village, where a Meghwal man like Ratna Ram dared fight his case in court and openly move his family onto the disputed land, into an arena where his surviving family stress the fact that they need to wait for a change in mindset instead of claiming their rights. The un-circumventable reality of trauma, the disconnect from one's environment and the fact that Dangawas is still perceived 'a divided village without community' by the survivors, produce a temporary sense of paralysis for many Meghwals in Dangawas. They want justice. They think they deserve much more than what they have. They want the law to punish the Jats that hurt them and avenge Ratna Ram's death. But after the violence that ripped through their lives, they also want to heal and get back to the ordinary. They need some peace, even if -for the time being- that implies living in the limited space given to them and hoping for others (the Jats) to change.

But the survivors' voices make clear, that just like the post-traumatic moment, such tempered demands are temporary and passing. 'One day, we can fight again!', Anu said to me, 'Trust me, one day we will take what is ours. But not now. The world is not ready, and we must heal first (pehle hame andar se theek hona hai).'

## **5. Conclusion**

In his review of Paul Brass' iconic study of communal riots in India, Toomas Gross concludes that what we can learn from this book is when trying to understand collective acts of violence things are never what they seem (Gross 1998). An avalanche of newspaper, NGO and activist reports, a CBI investigation and an ongoing court case have turned Dangawas into a spectacle,

an abstracted moment of cruel caste domination and brutality and an exemplar of caste atrocity. The law, and the PoA in particular, have emerged as necessary means to address these injustices and Dalit activists and protesters have taken center stage as legitimate fighters for justice and equality. On the flipside, my own time in Dangawas initially left me perplexed by the tempered demand for restitution and caused me to ruminate on the particular, vernacular nature of the articulations of justice I was encountering.

However, the voices of Meghwals in Dangawas and across Rajasthan, ultimately reveal the pitfalls of both interpretations. The Dangawas I encountered was neither an emblem for Dalit assertion and the legal fight against caste violence, nor a marker of peculiar acceptance of caste inequality. What lies behind the over-determined curtain of the Dangawas massacre is a group of people still trying to come to terms with their own suffering and continued fear in a divided village that is still largely in the grips of their attackers: who live in the shadow of the violence, from which state officials could have protected them and chose not to. As Bhatia's study in particular shows, the caste landscape of contemporary Rajasthan, which is still dominated by traditional hierarchies and where Dalit assertion continues to be more selective, splintered and intermittent than in other areas of India, likely heighten some of these fears and sentiments.

All the while the ongoing PoA case, the arrest of many of the perpetrators, a continuing outpouring of public support and the passage of time have given some of the surviving Meghwals a sense of potentiality: a vision of the day they will fight again.

After the initial attack Frontline reported:

‘Dangawas will never be the same anymore [...] The general feeling is that one had to abide by what the “village” wanted, which is a euphemism for the dominant community. “Had Ratnaram succeeded in his objective of securing titular possession

of the land, he would have opened a Pandora's box," said a lawyer on condition of anonymity (June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

My interlocutors, who would often articulate similar sentiments, were still grappling with the implications of this realization. And so Meghwal survivors in Dangawas still try to reconcile their own desires and claims to social equality, with the trauma inflicted on them by the hard boundaries of casted spaces and minds that deny the legitimacy of these very claims.

Ironically, Dangawas ultimately shows us that even though the PoA was introduced to bring justice in the aftermath of spectacular acts of caste-related brutality, it is oddly distant and powerless to bring restitution in the face of the most horrific of atrocities. Since it can only punish and not truly address the causes and mindsets that underlie caste-based violence it leaves those who have survived massacres trapped within a landscape of fear. The success, or potential success of a PoA case, is not equivalent to a successful engagement with the violence that engendered it and, so the law can ring hollow in the ears of those whom it was designed for.

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