

**Alice Tilche**

## Migration, bachelorhood and discontent among the Patidars

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Tilche, Alice (2016) *Migration, bachelorhood and discontent among the Patidars*. [Economic & Political Weekly](#), 51 (26-27). pp. 17-24. ISSN 2349-8846

© 2016 [Economic & Political Weekly](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65860/>

Available in LSE Research Online: July 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## *Migration, bachelorhood and discontent among the Patidars<sup>i</sup>*

### **Abstract**

Juxtaposing data collected in the 1950s with data from 2013, this article describes some of the consequences of a crisis of agriculture in India, as a crisis of values and aspirations. Among a relatively prosperous Patidar community in western India, agriculture continues to be economically remunerative while farmers are considered poor. Instead, the ability to secure a job away from the land, to move out of the village and possibly overseas have come to constitute new markers of status in a traditionally competitive society. The article departs from common representations of the caste as an upwardly mobile and successful group, and focuses instead on the discontent and on those who try to achieve the new values of the caste but fail. As a consequence of failure it shows how Patidars recur to what from an outsider's point of view may seem paradoxical: in order to 'move up' and participate in the culture and economy of the caste, they have to 'move down'. In this respect, the article also contributes to understanding the unevenness of India's growth and the contrary trends that both work to strengthen and weaken caste identity.

### **Keywords**

Agriculture, migration, bachelorhood, discontent

### **About the author**

Dr Tilche is currently a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences. She is also research associate with the School of Oriental and African Studies. Her email is [A.Tilche@lse.ac.uk](mailto:A.Tilche@lse.ac.uk).

## **1. Introduction**

In 2013-Sundarana, a village of central Gujarat, most young men and women from the Patidar caste aspired to migrate abroad. Manish Patel, among them, after gaining a university education had fulfilled the social expectations of his parents and community, by trying to migrate overseas. However, Manish had failed to migrate and when I met him in 2013 he supervised the cultivation of his family's land. He also spent his days riding around on his motorbike, hanging about the village square, playing with his smart phone, and doing 'time pass' with his friends. Manish was twenty-seven and, like many of his friends, single. At an age when you are considered old by local standards, he was haunted by the constant social pressure to get married but struggled to find a suitable match. Manish and his friends complained that girls had become 'too cool' and no longer wanted to marry farmers.

As it is now well documented, agriculture in India is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy (Gupta 2010; Himanshu and Stern 2011). The agricultural sector continues to experience a negative growth including a decline in landholdings (more than seventy per cent are below one hectare of land), yields and in the proportion of workers that list farming as their main occupation (Lerche 2011; Breman 2010; Himanshu and Stern 2011; Shah and Harris-White 2011). Agriculture has also declined in importance for the non-agricultural economy, where growth has been largely based on sectors catering for the urban middle classes and export markets (Lerche 2011). At the same time, labour absorption in the formal economy is slow, leading to what some have described as a missed transformation. Rural Non Farm Employment is instead growing (Binswanger-Mkhize 2013; Himanshu et al 2013). Besides agriculture, income generation in rural areas now involves casual labour, sales of milk, petty commodity production and remittances from national and international migration (Ballard 2003; Dekkers and Rutten 2012).

The decline of agriculture has not been even, with some areas acting as reservoirs for labour and others attracting labour instead (Harris-White 2014). Sundarana is located in a fertile plain area locally known as ‘the garden of India’ that attracts poorer often Adivasi labourer from further away places in the country. It is a village that, from the perspective of other rural areas, would be considered prosperous and within which Patidars hold a position of economic power and political influence. With less than 20 per cent of the village population, Patidars own more than eighty per cent of its land.

However, the crisis of agriculture is also a crisis of values and aspirations (Bourdieu 2008; Jhodka 2010; Carswell and DeNeve 2014; Jefferey 1996; Gidwani 2000; Gupta 2010). For the Patidars, while agriculture continues in theory to be economically remunerative, it is no longer seen as a dignified and valued occupation and in general terms farmers are considered poor. Instead, the ability to secure a job away from the land and to move out of the village and possibly overseas have come to constitute new markers of status. In relation to these new values, people experience the necessity to migrate as if the village was ridden by starvation.

In the 1950s anthropologist David Pocock conducted fieldwork in and around the village of Sundarana. He described the Patidars as an intensely hierarchical and competitive society and concluded that hypergamy (the drive to marry one’s daughter ‘up’) was the structuring principle within the caste at large (1972). Pocock described a historical transition from Kanbi or ordinary farmers, to Patidar. In his view, the name Patidar denoted new relationships to land and ownership, and the move downwards new sanskritised practices away from meat eating and the belief in modern goddesses and towards ‘absolute vegetarianism’ (1973). It was also an ideal to be achieved against which actions were continuously weighed (1972: 1).

Since Pocock’s, studies of the Patidars have been numerous. The caste has become well known for their involvement in nationalist politics during the colonial era, and as the main beneficiaries of post-colonial land and agrarian reforms in the region (Sud 2007; Hardiman 1981; Chaturvedi 2007; Gidwani 2008). Studies of the Patidars have focussed on their entrepreneurial spirit and success, and depicted the caste’s historical transition from agricultural labourers to agrarian capitalists, business people and international migrants (Tambs-Lyche 1980; Patel and Rutten 1999; Gidwani 2008;

Dekkers and Rutten 2011). The Patidar emerge as a global success story, making good with motels, shops, engineering and pharmacy degrees in North America and western Europe (Dhingra 2012; Poros 2010), and at the forefront of Gujarat's development and India's story of growth.

In this paper I draw from Pocock's work, and from fieldwork that I conducted in the same village fifty years later. I reflect on some of the consequences of a transformation away from agriculture, towards a culture of migration. Echoing studies in the same area and in other parts of South Asia, I show that migration has become a necessity to be a socially recognised individual within the village. I demonstrate this point by focussing on marriage. While the drive towards marrying 'up' remains important, migration has become the new marker of status and the requirement to be a desirable marriage candidate.

However, unlike the literature suggests, not every Patidar is a successful migrant. While migration has become the new culture of the caste, it remains for many a reality ridden with disappointment. As documented across the global south and in the newly impoverished economies of southern Europe, the expectations given by education, growth and the emigration of previous generations are meeting declining economies, a quasi-absence of possibilities and the tightening of international frontiers (Jhoshi 2010; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; James 2014). The village as other have described it (Parry 2003) becomes a waiting room where bachelors roam around bored, overqualified and underemployed.

## **2. From agriculture to a culture of migration.**

Patidars descend from a group of agriculturalists known as Kanbi. Their name derives from a system of land tenure that became privileged during British colonialism (Hardiman 1981). Surnames such as Patel, Amin and Desai were once attributed to village headmen and to those who collected revenue. They are today popular among the caste and especially among its diaspora and elite (Dhingra 2012).

In the 1950s, Pocock identified a structuring tension at the heart of being Patidar between the values of caste endogamy, descent and family unity and the aspiration of

every Patidar to be better than his or her own neighbour. He concluded that ‘the unity of the Patidars lies in their disunity’ (1972: 67). On the one hand, Pocock analysed this tension through the practice of hypergamy. This is the practice of marrying one’s daughter ‘up’ the social ladder, to a superior family (Dumont 1966: 89; Pocock 1972: 3; Parry 1979: 196; Van Der Veen 1972). Following Dumont, Pocock described a hypergamous marriage as one which introduced status difference between spouses, with the bride believed to be inferior to the groom (Dumont 1966: 89). These unions were as such also traditionally accompanied by high dowries.

On the other hand, Pocock also described a strong equalising tendency within Patidar society as evident in the social institution of endogamous marriage circles also known as *gol* or *samaj*. *Gols* are horizontal inter-village networks of kin and affines that associate villages of similar status and that were initially set up with the idea of ‘keeping good blood in the family’ and status competition and hypergamy at bay. However, *gols* too have become arenas for status competition and are de facto organisations of villages hierarchically positioned vis a vis one another, both internally and externally.

In the 1950s Sundarana was part of an organization of seven villages that rank middle-low in the hierarchy of the area. At the top was the village of the six or *chh gaam*. Today *gols* have become important transnational bodies, mediating marriage, status and remittances. Sundarana was part of ‘the circle of the twenty two’ (*bavis gaam*) that in fact includes a total of forty villages. The ‘six villages’ continue to be, arguably, the most powerful. It must also be said that, although as Pocock noted, the calculation of status continues to be pervasive in the daily life of the community (the ways in which people dress, walk, talk, prepare food all subject to evaluation), hierarchies of people and villages are also always a matter of contestation and debate.

In the 1950s agriculture was the main occupation of the Patidars of Charotar district. The main food crops were millet and pulses, alongside extensive cash cultivations of tobacco. Agriculture was also a value and old people remembered and referred to each other’s worth also by virtue of being skilled agriculturalists. Manish’s family used to have a high reputation in the village for belonging to one of its oldest division, and because Manish’s grandfather was a known as a knowledgeable man and very

skilled agriculturalist. Although Charotar has always been a fertile tract, elders in Sundarana also remembered how, fifty years ago even in Patidar's households people went to bed hungry. Pocock himself describes how poorer Kanbis at times struggled for their livelihoods.

By the 1950s, some Patidar families had begun migrating and trading to other urban centre and to East Africa (Manghat 1969; Oonk 2013). Migration was a consequence of economic factors such as the famine and plague that hit the region during this period and of status seeking practices, especially related to marriage (Pocock 1972; Tambs-Lyche 1980). In East Africa Patidars followed the route and experience of Gujarati communities such as the Bhatia and the Lohanas, who had been migrating to this region since the 13th century as bankers, moneylenders and traders. In India too, they began supplementing agricultural practices with commerce. These activities were however the domain of the relatively wealthier, and those who belonged to 'superior' village organisations (Rutten 1995). By the end of the 1950s in Sundarana only one person had managed to leave to East Africa.

Over time especially wealthier Patidars, having some capital at hand, were able to take advantage from the shifts brought about by the green revolution, water irrigation projects, incentives for cash crop cultivation as well as the white revolution in dairy production (Gidwani 2008; Rutten 1995). In Sundarana, Patidars invested the surplus accumulated from agriculture in small tobacco processing industries, fertilizer plants and irrigation businesses. They also introduced new cash crops and in particular chilli cultivation, while leaving subsistence crops aside. In 2013, although some Patidars still lived in one bedroom mud houses and struggled to make ends meet nobody went to bed hungry. Despite yearly fluctuations, Patidar farmers were generally happy about the good revenue that chilli cultivation was bringing. However, despite improvements in agriculture and the productivity of land, farming was no longer regarded as a dignified occupation. Patidars aspired to gain jobs away from the land and, above all, to move out of the village possibly overseas. This shift created new hierarchies of work and of place that I will describe below.

As others documented, the process of upward mobility and class differentiation within the community involved a distancing away from manual work in favour of the 'work

of the mind' (Gidwani 2000: 151). Since the 1950s Patidars increasingly replaced farm work with supervisory cultivation, as well as practices of 'leisure' and 'free time'. While all elders in Sundarana remembered past days of hard work, in 2013 only a few continued working as manual labourers in their own fields. Most Patidars employed other agricultural castes such as the Bareyias, Thakors and Vankars and only performed tasks that they reputed their labourer to be unable to do. This shift had gone together with the complete withdrawal and internalization of women's farm labour to the private domain of the household and of animal husbandry (Rutten 1995: 227, Gidwani 2000: 154)<sup>ii</sup>. It had also involved an growing investment in education, in the English medium for those who could afford it.

Most Patidars between 20 and 30 years of age received a university education from the proliferating schools and colleges that filled nearby towns. In richer and neighbouring villages young Patidars had studied in more prestigious universities in India's cities or overseas where they now continued to live. As Manish lamented, however, gaining an education was only seen as a mean to an end: gaining employment away from the land. Nobody understood that degrees could have a value of their own and to people an educated farmer was as useless as an uneducated one.

According to new values, manual and agricultural labour constituted the lowest occupation that no Patidar was ready to consider. Among those that still worked in relation to the land, there were differences: there were 'small farmers' that owned one to five *bhiga* of land, middle farmers that, like Manish, owned around ten, and large farmers that owned between ten and fifty *bhiga* often alongside processing businesses related to agriculture. If small farmers were considered poor, the latter still maintained a certain prestige that was however relative to the one granted by having a 'job' (the English word being commonly used). The category of 'job' applied to any kind of non-manual work under an employer: governmental, in private companies, small shops or businesses. At the lowest level, jobs often implied a good amount of manual labour that Patidars were keen to conceal. At the top of the ladder was 'business': a category that indicated self-employed work, with business related to agriculture being less valued than business unrelated to it.

These hierarchies of occupation interlinked with hierarchies of location, and it was the aspiration of most Patidars to move out of the village possibly overseas. Since the 1950s rates of migration dramatically increased and did its scope, as migration became a crucial rite of passage to belong to the village. Following the expulsion of ‘Asians’ from Africa during the period of high nationalism in the 1960s many Patidars moved to the United Kingdom (Mangat 1969; Tambs-Lyche 1980). Since then, the USA has become the most desirable destination, followed by Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As the political situation stabilised in East Africa, old migration routes have re-opened. Patidars from less well-off families or villages like Sundarana, often try their migratory luck there as it is easier to get entry and employment, with the hope of later moving to more desirable destinations.

Wealthier villages part of the circle of the six, have embraced migration and count significantly more Patidar members overseas than in the village. The most successful have moved to highly prestigious positions as engineers and doctors in the USA. These are however only a handful and Patidars are not well represented in prestigious Silicon Valley jobs. The upper-middle level is well represented in service sectors, as owners and workers in post offices, motels and newsagents stores. The lower-middle, in which Sundarana mostly fits, has remained back in Gujarat aspiring to leave. With a few exceptions, the youth of Sundarana only make it abroad temporarily as students, illegally or semi-legally as low-skilled migrants for short periods or, like Manish, they fail altogether.

### **3. The craze to migrate: bachelorhood and girls power**

Migration was a requirement to being Patidar. Paradoxically, it was also the requirement to belong and being a recognised social person in the village and for social reproduction. As well documented in other regions of South Asia (Ballard 2003; Osella and Osella 2000; Gardner 2008), migration had caused a rapid inflation in prices of houses, land and consumer commodities – an inflation that went alongside the rise of prices in the home economy.

In the 1950s, secession from the joint family was part the tension between unity and disunity at the heart of being Patidar and key to the assertion of individual status. In

2013 it was the aspiration and expectation of every young man to build a house of their own. However, such aspiration proved almost impossible without the money from remittances or from a job away from the land. As Pocock documented, status was historically asserted visually, through construction style (Pocock 1972: 76), and lavish competition in buildings continued to be a striking characteristic of villages of this area. Bold structures made of concrete, in vibrant colours and with dozens of rooms had substituted and dwarfed old mansions made of carved wood and painted in dim pastel shades. These houses were now home to a single rather than extended family and came with their individual plots of land.

The acquisition of more ephemeral consumer commodities was also a lure, especially for an increasingly fashion-conscious youth. It was also of growing importance to the calculation of worth in marriage arrangements as ‘good dowries’ now included flat TV screens and air conditioning units (see also Srinivasan and Bedi 2007). As one young girl explained: ‘migrants come back from London wearing golden watches, expensive clothes and cameras. So of course we think money must be better there and aspire to leave as well’.

The re-orientation of values towards migration can be best expressed through the example of marriage. As migration had become the measure of status a good marriage had been redefined as a marriage to somebody with a foreign passport. No woman aspired to marry a farmer and even landowners with MA degrees like Manish were considered unsavoury.

### **3.1. Looking for a bride**

Manish was under the constant social pressure to get married: ‘Did you find someone?’ he would be asked on an almost daily basis. When with Manish people would often ask me: ‘When are you going abroad? Find him a bride in London’. When I met him, Manish had been looking for a suitable marriage match for over three years. In Sundarana, according to tradition, a bride is first sought through networks of kin and acquaintances within the marriage circle of which the village is from. Although each young Patidar owns a smartphone and is skilled with social media, these are not avenues that people in the village use: ‘marriage ads are for the

city'. Young men will circulate their 'bio-data', which will include a photograph and details such as height, weight, education and job. If a match looks possible, representatives of the bride's family will then visit the groom's family, with or without the girl, depending on how interested they are. If the family is satisfied, then the potential bride and groom meet. Differently from the 1950s, the final decision rests with the couple rather than the family (see also Fuller 2008; Yan 2003).

During the year I spent with him, Manish only found four potential marriage candidates despite the fact that friends and family had been on the chase. The first girl was the only one willing to marry Manish, but he thought she was too 'dark, fat and ugly'. The parents and relatives of the other candidates met Manish and his family, without the girl suggesting a lack of interest. All asked similar questions about Manish's household, work and education, and about plans he might have for long-term migration. Manish was honest with the first two, explaining that although he had been well educated he had no plans to leave the village. It was on these these grounds that both families refused. The friend who had arranged the match with the last girl, however, lied to get the family's attention, by telling them that Manish had applied for a Canadian visa. Manish did not like the trick but, frustrated about the repeated rejections, kept silent. During the interview he was more uncomfortable than usual and when the question of migration came he remained vague, saying he was waiting for the consulate's response. The family phoned a few days later asking for evidence of Manish's move to Canada and eventually refused him as Manish could not provide.

In Sundarana, young men complained that one reason for the shortage of brides was the numerical shortage of women in Patidar society due to the cumulative effects of infanticide, sex selective abortions and son preference (Billing 1991; Jeffery 2014; Vishwanath 2001; Patel 2007). During the colonial period the Patidars became well known together with castes such as the Jats and Rajputs in North-West India, for the widespread practice of infanticide. This was a practice that, scholars have suggested, directly related to hypergamy, status competition and dowry avoidance (Vishwanath 1998: 1104). According to Vishwanath, infanticide was a way for landowning groups to maintain their dominance and avoid the financial drain of high dowries that often also caused land alienation through mortgages and sales.

Since the 1970s, and at an accelerating pace since the 1980s, child sex ratios in India at large have increasingly been weighted towards males (Jeffery 2014; Attané and Gulimoto 2007; Patel 2007).<sup>iii</sup> As new technologies have made possible sex-selective abortion clinics, which although illegal continue to exist in many regional towns, infanticide has been substituted by foeticide (Vishwanath 2001). Although there is no disaggregate data for the Patidar, there is a clear shortfall in the number of anticipated female births. The 2011 Census of India shows the ratio at birth for Anand district of which Sundarana is part to be 877: 1,000, against an anticipated 950: 1,000.

In a society that practices hypergamy and sex selection in favour of men, the shortage of women at the lower end of the ladder should be surprise, as women marry ‘up’ towards higher sections of the caste. The story is however more complicated than numbers illustrate. Men, in fact, also complained that young women had become crazy about migrating and ‘too cool’ for them. ‘Women are getting an education nowadays, they watch TV series and they are smart. They think - we do not want to be here doing the work of animal husbandry we want expensive clothes, we want to live abroad’, a friend of Manish commented. In this respect it became clear that an old and continuing problem of numbers intersected with newly defined laws of status: women did not want to marry farmers (see also Bourdieu 2008).

### **3.2 Expanding marriage markets**

The combined situation of fewer girls and the new values of migration, was leading to a shift backwards in marriage practices. During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ordinary cultivators or Kanbi had sought to become Patidar by reforming customs such as bride-price and widow remarriage towards the tradition of dowry. These are customs generally attributed to more egalitarian (often Adivasi) societies, but also societies that in North India at least, have been historically marginalised. However, for young men the situation had seemingly become so dire that they were ready to pay bride-price rather than receiving a dowry in order to find a partner. Manish’s mother had already made calculations for that. Men were also ready to marry widows and divorcees (women that were generally stigmatised in the society) but even then, women refused them if men had no prospects of jobs or migration. While expanding outwards and upwards, towards new international values and destination, marriage

markets were also expanding inward and, from Patidars' perspective, downwards towards lesser parts of the region and of society. As one solution to bachelorhood, Patidars were in fact recurring to exogamous marriages with women from communities they considered 'lower' - a consideration that had shifted with time following changing caste relations.

In the past poorer Patidar men unable to find a bride would occasionally marry with women from neighbouring Kholi (Baraya, Solanki or Thakor) communities. Since the 1950s, these groups benefited from affirmative action policies relating to college places and employment quotas and to some extent managed to liberate themselves from oppressive relations of dependence with higher caste groups (Shah 2010: 198). As Kholis have become more powerful, they also stopped marrying girls into Patidar families. The marriage market has therefore shifted further away, towards so-called 'Tribal' areas of Gujarat and its neighbouring states (South Gujarat in particular).

Marriages with Adivasi girls were arranged on both sides by *dalaals* (usually men that themselves married into the respective communities) that took cuts on the bride price that Patidars paid to the woman's family. Following repeated rejections, Manish had considered the possibility. After accompanying a friend on a trip to arrange such a marriage, he had however concluded that the cultural difference and social pressure to conform would have been too much for him to sustain. The identity of an Adivasi bride in Sundarana was in fact kept as a public secret – something that everybody knew but nobody openly talked about. It also had to be refashioned as Patidar. After marriage girls had to undergo a radical transformation: learning 'proper' Gujarati and the taste and comportment of a Patidar woman. While the pressure on women to adapt to the habitus of the marital village and home is common to patri-local societies, for Adivasi girls this was much greater. Other women made fun of their speech and of their 'free' and 'loose' habits. 'Their speech is rude, they are also used to working hard in the fields so they just wonder off alone and can't be kept at home, that's the biggest problem', Manish's mother lamented. Adivasi girls also found it much harder to maintain regular relations with their natal families due to the geographical distance involved and the lack of money to undertake such journeys, a factor that exacerbated their feeling of isolation.<sup>iv</sup> While some managed to adapt, many found the pressures

too great and run away and, in the most tragic incidences, committed suicide following quarrels with the family.

### **3.4 Looking for a groom**

If young men complained of a shortage of brides, young women, lamented that ‘there are too many men in Sundarana’, but also that that too many of them ‘spend their time doing nothing’. Young women in Patidar society were undergoing a dramatic transformation. They were often the first in their family to have gained an education, and often outperformed men. They were the ones that most aspired to leave behind peasant life. In this respect, although men were numerically more, women experienced a shortage of desirable marriage candidates (see also Jeffery 2014; Billing 1991).

At the other end of the spectrum from Manish, those who had managed to leave the village were in great demand. You will see Manish told me – from February to March when NRIs come back they will have queues of girls wanting to marry them and handing out their ‘bio-data’. Suresh, a schoolmate of Manish returned in November from Australia, where he was studying computer engineering and working in a supermarket. During his three week visit, he received around twenty-five proposals. Suresh met with a few of them and eventually settled on one, for him it was easy. Before his return to Australia, his family arranged for a lavish engagement ceremony and for two days, there was free food for all the Patidars of the village. Sam, another friend of Manish, had recently returned from London where he studied business in a little known college while working in a night shop. He returned after his three year student visa expired and was making new plans to move to Canada. While without a visa in hand, his migratory credentials also made him a desirable marriage candidate. Sam did not want to marry yet, but aspired to be ‘free’ for as long as he could. He still received numerous requests on the part of girls, which he would avoid and delay to his family’s disappointment.

In order to leave the village women and their families were ready to pay high dowries and, while marrying within their *gol* remained the preference, marriage out of the

circle had become widely acceptable when valued against migration. When a good match seemed possible, women often married in haste and, like Manish had done, men were not too scrupulous to lie to secure a bride. In this respect, while women had definitely gained a new negotiating power in marriage decisions, they often ended up entering into other relations of exploitation, relations that overall they considered better than the rules of their tradition.

Sangeetaben came from a modest family that owned a one-room mud house and two *vigas* of land. Sangeeta's father supplemented income from agriculture by working as a shopkeeper in a fertilizer shop of a richer caste fellow. Despite her modest origins Sangeeta had gained an education and university degree. Like many women of her age, she dreamed of moving abroad. Her parents too were eager to marry her to somebody with connections overseas.

In 2010 Sangeetaben got married with an NRI. Through family connections, her father had found what seemed like a good match: a good looking young man that owned 20 *bhiga* of land, five cinema parlors and had a business in Uganda. The man came from outside of the village circle Sundarana was part of, but the match seemed promising and Sangeeta's father worked hard to secure her a good dowry. Sangeeta was also happy and looked forward to move out of the village and more so, away from India.

Sangeeta's husband turned out to be a fraud. Soon after they moved to Uganda he started drinking heavily and abusing her. He had no work, no land and no cinema parlors. It took Sangeeta two years to convince her parents to help her divorce and eventually returned to Sundarana in 2012. Back in the village Sangeeta now knew that 'there is nothing so good about going abroad'. She wanted to find a job in a nearby small town and her family was looking for a new marriage match. But as people gossiped about her divorce and about her misplaced aspirations for independence, she continued to dream about moving to better lands.

#### **4. Failure, discontent and downward mobility**

In Sundarana, while migration had become the culture of the caste many failed to achieve it. In a society that praised marriage so high, the failure to marry was the most dramatic manifestation of the failure to migrate and more broadly, to achieve culturally sanctioned norms of success. For young men in particular, this meant remaining in a perpetual state of limbo between adolescence and publicly accepted adulthood.

Manish and his bachelor friends spent much of their time doing timepass, roaming around on their scooter, speaking on their mobile phones and sitting around. In the evenings they ritually gathered to watch movies on a laptop in the farm of a friend, and at times indulged in illicit drinks and ‘chicken parties’.

Waiting and ‘timepass’ among educated and unemployed young men are common in rural and urban India. In central Gujarat, Gidwani (2000) analyses these practices as a mark of distinction and class differentiation. He shows how ‘idleness’ is both used by young Patidars to culturally differentiate themselves from their labourers, and by poorer communities in order to take distance from the bossy behaviour of Patidar employers. This analysis proved true in Sundarana. However, idleness was also an instance of failure and as others have explained, a common feature of societies that have been incited to believe in a particular future but have no means to realise it (Jeffrey 2010: 3; Jhoshi 2010; Jeffrey et al 2008).

In Sundarana Patidars that remained had also developed an all-round narrative of victimisation. They complained about their own people. In their view, the rich and neighbouring village that belonged to the prestigious circle of ‘the six’, had achieved its wealth and status through dirty moneylending practices directed at poorer Patidars. Through moneylending, wealthier Patidars had come to own much of Sundarana’s land an asset that had provided them with the security for successful migratory practices. According to a discourse that is today widespread in the region, Muslims were also constructed as setback for the development of the community. This was for not having their collective interests at heart and for violating the supposed moral economy of the village through meat eating and by threatening ‘our’ women. It was not entirely clear how Muslims could pose a threat to Patidar mobility in particular, given the fact that after the anti-Muslim violence of 2002 there were only six families

left in the village. Most of them owned less than a *bhiga* of land and struggled to make ends meet. Finally as Manish's friend Suresh explained, Patidars' set-back was also due to the growing power of the 'lower castes' and 'India's vicious reservation system' that excluded upper castes from accessing good education and jobs. Manish too complained that reservations had prevented him from pursuing an MPhil and securing a job away from the land.

These narratives partly reinforced the ideal of migration as a necessity for the survival of the caste. In this respect, waiting for young Patidars was an activity structured around getting visas, green cards and IELTS certificates. Samir, who had returned from London and was adamantly waiting to leave, spent much of his days planning for his next departure. This involved mobilising networks of kinship, illegal economies of brokers as well as seeking good fortune through religious activities. The Swaminarayan sect had become known as the sect of the migrants for its large international following and increasingly attracted devotees among the youth. In Sundarana, a young Patidar guru had become popular as the 'guru that gives visas'. Manish, and his friends (willingly or under the pressure of their own kin) had all consulted him in marital and migration affairs.

Patidar's failure to participate in the economy of the caste was also behind recent political agitations aimed at gaining OBC status. Since July 2015, as heated demonstrations spread across the region, Patidars from Sundarana too gathered in the district capital to voice their discontent. The demonstrations asked for Patidars to be included as Other Backward Classes in the quota system, so as to guarantee them access to reservations in education and employment (Gavaskar 2015; Jaffrelot 2015). Following portrayals of the Patidars as a successful entrepreneurial community, these requests have been quickly labelled as absurd and 'laughable' (Shashank 2015). The agitations have also looked paradoxical when set against the state-wide campaign that Patidars led in the 1970/80s for the very abolition of quotas in favour of a system based on socio-economic advantage. In Sundarana itself young Patidars explained that the community was firstly campaigning against the reservation system; secondly, given the impossibility to dismantle it, they were now asking for a share of the cake (see also Jaffrelot 2015). The material I presented here also shows how such demands directly speak to the experience of downward mobility of Patidar's youth in middle-

ranking villages like Sundarana, caught between the social expectations of previous generations and their failure to achieve them.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article contributed to understanding a crisis of agriculture in India as a crisis of values and aspirations, by bringing attention to the cultural framings of what constitutes economic need and opportunity. It showed how, among a relatively prosperous Patidar community farming continues to be in strictly monetary terms remunerative, while farmers are considered poor.

By juxtaposing data collected in 2013 with data from the 1950s, the article emphasised a shift in the ways in which people calculate status and position themselves vis a vis one another. In the 1950s Patidars were an agricultural community. Although some had begun migrating and moving towards new values of entrepreneurship, land, agricultural-know-how as well as descent were important to the ways people imagined themselves and others. In 2013 the ability to free oneself from agriculture, through education, employment and most importantly emigration was instead essential to status calculations. As the example of marriage illustrated, young and educated farmers with no prospects to gain white collar jobs and to emigrate were considered unmarriageable. Young women preferred to marry men whose origins and occupations may have been uncertain or even dubious, so as to be able to migrate away from the village. This de-evaluation of farming in marriage negotiations, was exacerbating a long lasting problem of number in Patidar society, leaving young farmers bachelors.

Contrary to current representations of the Patidars as an upwardly mobile and successful group, the article also focused on the discontent and on those who tried to achieve the new values of the caste but failed. In doing so, it sought to bring attention to the large numbers of Patidars from middle-ranking villages like Sundarana who struggle to translate provincial education into green cards and jobs away from the land. As a consequence to failure I showed how Patidars recur to what from an outsiders' point of view, may seem paradoxical. In order to 'move up' and to be able

to participate in the culture and economy of their caste, they have to 'move down'. As a solution to the problem of bachelorhood, Patidars are marrying women from Adivasi groups that they consider 'lower' and 'other', whose identity becomes publicly refashioned as Patidar. They have also waged a public campaign to be reclassified as an OBC and disadvantaged community, in order to access educational and employment opportunities from the state. Such practices both ensure the continuity of the group, and their social and economic reproduction, while putting their very caste identity in jeopardy. These seemingly contradictory trends reinstate the point made by Pocock fifty years ago that the unity of the Patidars can only be understood through their disunity. They also point to something more specific to the contemporary period, that is the unevenness of India's growth and incorporation and the simultaneous forces that work to both strengthen and dissolve caste identity.

## Bibliography

- Attané, Isabelle, and Christophe Z Gulimoto (2007): "Introduction." In *Watering the Neighbour's Garden : The Growing Demographic Female Deficit in Asia*, edited by Isabelle Attané and Christophe Z Gulimoto, pp 1–22. Paris: Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography.
- Ballard, Roger (2003): "A Case of Capital-Rich under- Development: The Paradoxical Consequences of Successful Transnational Entrepreneurship from Mirpur," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol 37 No 1-2, pp 25–57.
- Billig, Michael S (1991): "The Marriage Squeeze on High-Caste Rajasthani Women," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 50 No 2, pp 341–60.
- Binswanger-Mkhize, Hans P (2013): "The Stunted Structural Transformation of the Indian Economy," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 48, No 26-27, pp 5-13
- Bourdieu, Pierre (2008): *The Bachelors' Ball: The Crisis of Peasant Society in Béarn* Trans by Richard Nice. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Breman, Jan (2010): "The Political Economy of Agrarian Change in India." In *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, edited by Paul Brass, pp 322–36. New York: Routledge.
- Carswell, Grace, and Geert De Neve (2011): "'Keeping It in the Family' : Work, Education, and Gender Hierarchies among Tiruppur's Industrial Capitalists." In *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life*, edited by Henrike Donner. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Chaturvedi, Vinayak (2007): "Peasant Past History and Memory in Western India." Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff (2000): "Réflexions Sur La Jeunesse: Du Passé à La Postcolonie," *Politique Africaine* Vol 80, No 4, pp 90–110.

- Dekkers, Natasha, and Mario Rutten (2011): “Diaspora Philanthropy from a Homeland Perspective: Reciprocity and Contestation over Donations in Central Gujarat, India.” *Povincial Globalisation Working Paper*, No. 2.
- Dhingra, Pawan (2012): *Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream*. Stanford University Press.
- Dumont, Louis (1966): *Homo Hierarchicus, Essai Sur Le Système Des Castes*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Fuller, Christopher J., and Haripriya Narasimhan (2008): “Companionate Marriage in India: The Changing Marriage System in a Middle-Class Brahman Subcaste,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol 14, No 4, pp 736–54.
- Gardner, Katy (2008): “Keeping Connected: Security, Place, and Social Capital in a ‘Londoni’ Village in Sylhet,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol 14 No 3, pp 477–95.
- Gavaskar, Mahesh (2015): “Patidar Anamat Andolan: Reinventing a Social Identity,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 50, No 4, October 3d.
- Gidwani, Vinay (2000): “The Quest for Distinction: A Reappraisal of the Rural Labor Process in Kheda District (Gujarat), India,” *Economic Geography*, Vol 76, No 2, pp 145–68.
- (2008): *Capital Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gupta, Dipankar (2010): *The Caged Phoenix : Can India Fly?* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hardiman, David (1981): *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District, 1917-1934*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Harriss-White, Barbara (2014): *Dalit and Adivasi in India’s Business Economy: Three Essays and an Atlas*. Three Essa. Gurgaon.

- Himanshu, Peter Lanjouw, Rinku Murgaib, and Nicholas Stern (2013): “Non-Farm Diversification, Poverty, Economic Mobility and Income Inequality: A Case Study in Village India,” *Agricultural Economics*, Vol 44, No 4-5, pp 461-473.
- Himanshu, and Nicholas Stern (2011): “India and an Indian Village : 50 Years of Economic Development in Palanpur,” *Asia Research Centre Working Paper*, Vol 43, pp 1–31.
- James, Deborah (2014): *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe (2015): “Patels and the neo middle class syndrome,” *The Indian Express*, August 27<sup>th</sup>, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/patels-and-the-neo-middle-class-syndrome/>, accessed on 12/10/2015.
- Jeffery, Patricia (2014): “Supply-and-Demand Demographics: Dowry, Daughter Aversion and Marriage Markets in Contemporary North India,” *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol 22, No 2, pp 171–88.
- Jeffery, Patricia, and Roger Jeffery (1996): *Don't Marry Me To A Plowman!: Women's Everyday Lives In Rural North India*. Westview Press.
- Jeffrey, Craig (2010): *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jeffrey, Craig, Patricia Jeffery, and Roger Jeffery (2008): *Degrees without Freedom?: Education, Masculinities, and Unemployment in North India*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jhoshi, Vijay (2010): “Economic Resurgence, Lopsided Reform and Jobless Growth.” In *Diversity and Change in Modern India : Economic, Social and Political Approaches*, edited by Anthony F Heath and Roger Jeffery, pp 73–106. Oxford: British Academy.
- Jodhka, Surinder S. (2010): “Dalits in Business: Self-Employed Scheduled Castes in North-West India,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 45, No 11, pp 41-48.

- Lerche, Jens (2011): “Agrarian Crisis and Agrarian Questions in India,” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol 11, No1, pp 104–18
- Mangat, J S (1969): *A History of the Asians in East Africa, C. 1886-1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Oonk, Gijsbert (2013): *Settled Strangers: Asian Business Elites in East Africa (1800-2000)*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Osella, Filippo, and Caroline Osella (2000): “Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol 6, No 1, pp 117–33.
- Parry, Jonathan (1979): *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- \_\_\_\_ (2003): “Nehru’s Dream and the Village ‘Waiting Room’: Long-Distance Labour Migrants to a Central Indian Steel Town,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol 37, No 1-2, pp 217–49.
- Patel, Tulsi, ed. (2007): *Sex-Selective Abortion in India: Gender, Society and New Reproductive Technologies*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Pocock, David (1972): *Kanbi and Patidar: A Study of the Patidar Community of Gujarat*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- \_\_\_\_ (1973): *Mind, Body and Wealth: A Study of Belief and Morality in an Indian Village*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Poros, Maritsa (2010): *Modern Migrations: Gujarati Indian Networks in New York and London*. Stanford University Press.
- Rutten, Mario (1995): *Farms and Factories: Social Profile of Large Farmers and Rural Industrialists in West India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rutten, Mario, and Parvin J Patel (1999): “Patels of Central Gujarat in Greater London,” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 34, No 16-17, pp 952–54.

- Shah, Alpa, and Barbara Harriss-White (2011): “Resurrecting Scholarship on Agrarian Transformations,” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 46, No 39, pp 13–18.
- Shah, Arvind M (2010): *The Structure of Indian Society: Then and Now*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Shashank, Bengali (2015): “Patels are a success story from India to the U.S. Why do they want affirmative action?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-india-patels-angry-20150824-story.html>, accessed 12/10/2015.
- Srinivasan, Sharada, and Arjun S. Bedi (2007): “Domestic Violence and Dowry: Evidence from a South Indian Village,” *World Development* Vol 35, No 5, pp, 857–80.
- Sud, Nikita (2007): “From Land to the Tiller to Land Liberalisation: The Political Economy of Gujarat’s Shifting Land Policy,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 41, No 3, pp 603–38.
- Tambs-Lyche, Harald (1980): *London Patidars: A Case Study in Urban Ethnicity*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Van der Veen, Klaas (1972): *I Give Thee My Daughter: A Study of Marriage and Hierarchy among the Anavil Brahmans of South Gujarat*. Van Gorcum & Comp.
- Vishwanath, L S. (1998): “Efforts of Colonial State to Suppress Female Infanticide: Use of Sacred Texts, Generation of Knowledge,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 33, No 19, pp 1104–12.
- (2001): “Female Foeticide and Infanticide,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 36, No 35, pp 3411–12.

---

<sup>i</sup> The research for this article was undertaken as part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council UK (RES-062-23-3052) and based at SOAS, University of London, in which Edward Simpson was Principal Investigator. Some of the material for this article particularly developed in conversation with Prof. Simpson and will form the basis of a longer co-authored paper. I also acknowledge the contribution to ideas expressed here by all those who took part in seminars and workshops associated to the project, in particular Patricia Jeffery, Tina Otten, Tommaso Sbriccoli and Adrian Mayer. I am grateful to Jonathan Parry for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and to all of those in Sundarana who generously shared parts of their lives.

<sup>ii</sup> This was a shift that paradoxically went alongside a general femininisation of labour in agriculture. As agricultural labourers from Dalit or Kholi communities increasingly tried to separate themselves from relations of patronage and exploitation by finding work away from agriculture, women and the elders were left working in the fields.

<sup>iii</sup> As Patel reports(2007: 28), in 1960 the figure for females between 0-6 was 976 per 1000 boys. In 2001, this sharply declined to 927.

<sup>iv</sup> As Jeffery notes (2014) if bride price has been seen as emancipatory for women's family, it often precludes women the leverage to ask for money from men that dowry would give.