

Biography as History: Social Transformation in Colonial Southeast Punjab

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This paper seeks to uncover colonial Punjab through the life account of an individual who rose from very humble beginnings to wield considerable power as a member of Civil Services of Punjab. He stands as a witness and interpreter of social forces and to the unfolding of history, revealing certain unknown aspects through his own participation in it. Concentration upon an individual's life and career imparts a fresh look into the officially recorded archival material dominated by the British administrators writing from the colonizers' point of view. As such it stands as a corrective to an account that projects a society as somewhat static, frozen in time and at best, ambivalent. The analysis highlights this ambivalence—the uneven and varied response of the colonizers to Indians in their different capacities—and the impact of this interaction. This lived experience of an individual in colonial times underlines the extensive fluidity in societal matters, which tended to become rigid when legally recognized by the British. The analysis reflects a society rapidly experiencing shifts as a result of changes in the legal and political system as well as in the general climate of opinion.

Introduction: Methodology

This paper aims to use the reconstruction of an individual's life—specifically one Hardwari Lal, my father—during the colonial period. The study locates him in his socio-political milieu, drawing on archival and other primary and secondary sources. The account focuses on how he emerged through a special set of circumstances and his own hard work to gain enormous upward mobility. In recapturing a small slice of an individual's life, the varied circumstances that shaped it emerge as the object of interest. An understanding of these circumstances is based upon Hardwari Lal's thoughts on men and matter, found in his personal papers, jottings in his diaries, the remnants of his college debates

and speeches, and the extensive body of writings that he penned.¹ Based on his experiences, these observations are highly subjective. They are supplemented by interviews with family members, village folks, friends and colleagues and the shared memories—my own and those of others. I have used in this reconstruction what people remembered, saw, and talked about. Together these have been used to reconstruct his life and through him the social life of colonial Punjab. I am aware that some information may have been given to me to suit the listener, that is, me; as also the fact that all such information is transformed in that interaction by the narrator as well as the listener through a system of shifting choice and analysis, as also the crucial fact that I was engaging with a part of my own family history.

My personal experience as a member of the family becomes inevitably and inextricably meshed with my writing of this piece. Therefore, I stress here that I am deeply implicated in this account as one of the participants. But I do rely on my training in the method of history and insights of a researcher who has worked close to three decades in this region and have used the tools of oral history extensively to analyze what may hopefully turn out to be fruitful material for historians and sociologists.

Coming from a humble family of peasants in southeast Punjab, Hardwari Lal (1910-1997) came to be widely respected and looked up to. Physically diminutive, just 5'5" as compared to most other tall and well-built agriculturist men, he carved out a space for himself, underlining the importance of education for achieving upward mobility. This was in opposition to the existing military career of the ruralites based upon their strong physicality and hailed as the epitome of "masculinity" which held its dominance and hegemony in colonial Punjab.² In this he was not alone, but rather represented many of his kind who greatly prized education and showed an intense desire for it in order to gain "prestige and honor" for themselves and their caste men.

A Slice of Rural Life: Colonial Punjab

Hardwari Lal's ancestry can be traced back to his grandfather, Het Ram, a Jat landowner who in the mid-nineteenth century held 72 kilas (360 bighas) or 225 acres of land in village Chhara, Rohtak district. Het Ram married twice. His first wife was a Jatni whom he married ritually in *biah* (religious wedding), observing the *homa* and *saptapadi* (ritual sacrifices into the sacred fire offered at the time of marriage, including seven circumambulations of the fire). His second wife, from

whom Hardwari Lal's lineage can be traced, was a Brahmin widow named Saraswati with whom Het Ram observed *Karewa*. This form of marriage, also known as *karao* or *chaddar andazi*, had special features of its own.³ In order to observe *karewa*, the man merely threw a *karewa*, a white sheet with colored corners, over the woman's head, signifying his acceptance of her as his wife. Symbolically, this gesture brought the woman under male protection; her being given "his shelter" or "roof," and with it receiving "color" in her life. This custom represented social consent for cohabitation. There could be certain variations.⁴ For example, it could take the form of placing *churis* (glass bangles) on the woman's wrist in full assembly and sometimes even a gold *nath* (nose ring) in her nose and a red sheet over her head with a rupee tied in one of its corners. The distribution of *gur* (jaggery) or sweets could follow this.

Significantly, this form of remarriage was not accompanied by any kind of religious ceremony, as no woman could customarily be married, i.e. go through the ceremony of *biah*, twice. In fact it was maintained that these ceremonies of *karewa* were performed only when the woman was the widow of a member of the family, and hence of the same caste; in all other cases, no ceremony was performed and a man merely took the woman to his house.⁵ In other cases even cohabitation was considered sufficient to legitimise the relationship, which carried all the rights of a valid marriage. The *rivaj-i-am* (record of customs and rights) of the districts and the records of cases decided judicially are full of instances where mere cohabitation as man and wife for a long period without any accepted matrimonial ceremony had been considered sufficient to validate the marriage.⁶ However, for cohabitation to be accepted as remarriage it had to be cohabitation in the man's house. Mere visits to the woman were considered "adulterous."⁷ Here it may be noted that though cohabitation was taken to be marriage, it could only be with a widow and not with an "unmarried woman."

It is not known whether Het Ram observed any ceremony for *karewa* or merely brought the Brahmin widow to his house to cohabit with. Such appropriation of *karewa* by Brahmins shows a reverse Sanskritisation taking place through gender. Here the dictates of land and labor nullified the demands of high caste purity and status. A settlement officer of Punjab pointed out that "There was scarcely a Brahmin there who had even the slightest knowledge of the Hindu books or was acquainted with their names."⁸ The Brahmins of this province were not a priestly class but were mostly landowners, and consequently followed the dominant social custom of the region, in preference to the Sanskritic mode of other Brahmins who brooked no remarriage at all and upheld *sati* instead.

Inter-caste alliances or marriages in which caste endogamy had not been observed were not uncommon in colonial Punjab.⁹ Although such marriages were considered by the British administrators, ethnographers, and commentators on law and society to have been obsolete by the second half of the nineteenth century,¹⁰ it is clear that they were still taking place. These were usually, as is noticeable in the case of Het Ram, confined to a secondary alliance rather than the primary one, both for men and women. It is not unlikely that such a practice was already under strain in the pre-British period. In the colonial period the courts offered a space to those who were challenging such marriage norms as well as to those who wanted to retain or enforce them. Such challenges show attempts at molding or remolding the existing structure and reflect a society rapidly experiencing shifts as a result of changes in the legal and political system as well as in the general climate of opinion.

By the end of the nineteenth century a serious challenge was noticeably surfacing against such inter-caste marriages. Performed with the participation and consent of the community, such marriages were being denounced by sections of the same community. As I argue elsewhere, the colonial intervention had activated conditions that let loose serious challenges to inter-caste marriages, as seen in several court cases instituted after the death of the husband.¹¹ These cases challenged marriages retrospectively, showed growing resentment against mixed lineage groups and attempted to declare children of such marriages illegitimate. These legal moves contributed immensely in strengthening the dominant norm of caste endogamy. However, all such claims and counter-claims which appropriated and/or invented or re-invented traditions and customs or denied them were still in the making. The social conditions and customs were extremely fluid. In fact, after Het Ram's death there is no evidence that his relatives made any such demands or challenged his *karewa* marriage with a Brahmini.

The colonial attitude towards such "unequal" marriages remained ambivalent at best. The judiciary had taken a stand against *pratiloma* marriages (of a high caste woman and a low caste man) and declared them as invalid throughout India on the basis that a Brahmin woman could not contract a legal marriage with a lower-caste man.¹² Yet, in the Punjab case, the colonial masters legally accepted as valid those marriages which cut across *varna* divisions as well as *pratiloma* marriages; and regarded children born of such unions as legitimate. For example, in the case of *Sahib Ditta vs. Musammat Bela* (1900), relatives challenged a *karewa* marriage between a Jat and a Brahmin woman and sought to deprive her children of their inheritance on the ground of illegitimacy.¹³ The case for invalidating such a

marriage was made from the point of view of the higher status considerations of a woman who could not make a *pratiloma* marriage. The judges rejected the plea on the ground that marriage between Jats and Brahmins was recognized by the Jat *biradari* and the children of such unions were considered legitimate heirs.

Notwithstanding the existing court cases, it is evident that there was still an overwhelming social acceptance of such marriages. This is clearly noticeable in Het Ram's case as Saraswati had also brought along her son, Rori, from her Brahmin husband. This fact could have been especially irksome to the other potential heirs of Het Ram's property. However, in keeping with the custom of the community, Rori was accepted as Het Ram's son, and as his son he was also one of his heirs. Rori inherited the land equally along with Het Ram's other sons. Moreover, although a Brahmin, Rori was also accepted as a Jat. Rori went on to marry a Jatni, confirming his acceptance by others of the Jat community.

Het Ram sired many children out of whom only five sons survived (two from the Jatni and three from the Brahmini). The two sons from the Jatni were Ram Nath and Ram Anand, and the three sons from the Brahmini were Bhoomi Ram, Chhotu Ram, and Nathu Ram. The high rate of mortality had taken its toll on the other children, especially the females. This region is well known for its historic neglect of the female child, including infanticide, leading to a highly skewed sex ratio between males and females.¹⁴ This adverse ratio has grown to monstrous proportions now under the influence of new technologies, leading to yet greater adverse male-female sex ratios.¹⁵

After Het Ram's death, his six sons, which included Rori, inherited equally: 12 Kilas (37.5 acres) each. Hardwari Lal's father, Nathu Ram, was the youngest son of Het Ram from his Brahmin wife. Nathu Ram also married twice. Nathu Ram's first wife, Booji, also known as Gunguni (because she spoke through her nose), was twelve years of age when they married. His second marriage was a levirate one. He observed *karewa* with his eldest brother Bhoomi Ram's (known as Bhoomal) wife. Bhoomal died within a year of his marriage. His wife Surti, from the village of Ashiya in Rewari, had borne him a daughter who died shortly after her birth. Both Nathu Ram and Surti were eighteen years of age at that time and Nathu Ram thereby came to possess 24 kilas (75 acres) of land, which included Bhoomal's 12 kilas of land.

It is not clear why Chhotu Ram, the middle son, did not observe *karewa* with Surti. It may well be because he already had children, especially sons,¹⁶ and Nathu Ram, who had recently married, had no offspring as yet. Nathu Ram was in the

army, but after his second marriage he reportedly resigned to “look after his two wives.” This view is entirely explicable given the harsh reality of the high mortality rate in the army. It may be remembered that there was a very high and escalating level of sickness and death especially between 1880 and 1920 among the Indian soldiers due to poor living, unhygienic conditions and malnutrition.¹⁷ Frequent outbreaks of malaria, cholera, plague and influenza took a heavy toll. It was always European health that was the focus of military and medical concern and Indian recruits, who were cheaper and more readily available, were treated as expendable commodities.

Once permanently home, and fully involved in cultivation, Nathu Ram went on to have many children. Among those born to Nathu Ram and Surti only four survived: one son, Hardwari Lal, and three daughters Sudha, Bhagwati and Chhotu Devi; there being twelve years’ difference between the eldest Hardwari Lal and the youngest Chhotu. Nathu Ram died when Hardwari Lal was thirteen years of age. Surti however, did not remarry a third time, although she could do so as the custom dictated and especially in view of the land in her possession. There was also no dearth of suitors from among her husband’s kinsmen, many of them with single status. Historically, this region of Punjab has been well known for having a very high percentage of bachelors.¹⁸

Nathu Ram’s holding of 75 acres of land was not inconsequential; it was a sizeable holding by any standard, as 12 acres was considered an “economic holding” in this region.¹⁹ However, this region was arid; an overwhelming 70 percent of the cultivated area was *barani* (dependent on rainfall) with its concomitant low-yielding crops and chronic crop failures. Rohtak district was notorious for its limited irrigation, precarious rainfall, devastating floods due to periodic overflow of the river Yamuna, seasonal excesses, and also frequent *akals* (famines). In the twentieth century Rohtak district experienced famines in the following years: 1905-6, 1909-10, 1913-14, 1918-19, 1928-30, and 1938-40. The famines of 1928 and 1938 lasted for three years each.²⁰ Irrigation through wells was extremely limited.²¹ In nearly all parts of the district the water level was generally very low and in most places the sub-soil water was brackish, not useful for agricultural purposes. Labor and cost of sinking an agricultural well and working it was enormous and the income comparatively small, especially as *abiana* (water rates) had to be paid on the *pucca* (masonry) well. Well sinking was considered something of a gamble, as within 3-4 years a well often produced nothing but liquid mud. In the estimate of F.H. Burton, the deputy commissioner of Rohtak in 1906, the working of a well even all day in Rohtak *tehsil* (sub-division

of a district) did not result in the irrigation of more than one *kaccha* (or *bigha*, i.e., 1/5th of an acre).²² The irrigated land in Rohtak was therefore only 28.4 percent in 1921 and 33.1 percent in 1931 of the total cultivated land.²³ This further reduced the economic viability of the numerous holdings in the district.

Consequently, although the amount of land owned by Surti, Hardwari Lal's mother, was considerable, eking a living out of it was a hard task. Hardwari Lal was a mere youngster when his father died. There were not many male family members who could be tapped for cultivation purposes, as they needed to work hard to till their own lands. This need for "farm hands" was to prove decisive in many ways, as we shall see later. The land was consequently given on *sajha* or *batai* (sharing), which hardly realized any return because of the *barani* nature of the land and the lack of irrigation facilities. The one crop that could be grown without much hard work was *jawar*, a staple diet of this region, a much coarser and hardier grain than wheat or even *bajara*. Fodder for the animals grew abundantly and effortlessly, as even light showers brought grass in plenty, and thus animal husbandry was a vital and necessary part of the subsistence level economy of this region.

Nathu Ram's first wife, Gunguni, was of a calm temperament and was no match for the sharp temperament of the older second wife, Surti, who held the reins of domestic and sexual politics firmly in her own hands. She tried her best to block Gunguni's sexual access to Nathu Ram. Most of the time she succeeded, but not always. Gunguni bore one son and one daughter, both of whom died. After Nathu Ram's death, Gunguni moved out of the house and started to live with a *bhajni* (preacher). She also took to agricultural labor for a living. Three years after Nathu Ram's death, she bore a son. It is significant that out of Nathu Ram's two wives, it was not the *bheyata* (ritually married) but the *karewa* wife who called the shots. This clearly suggests that either there was no hierarchy between the primary wife and the secondary wife, or that this hierarchy was extremely fluid. Apart from other factors that operated in Surti's favor in gaining an upper hand vis-à-vis wielding domestic power, an important one related to her having a son and Gunguni being childless or rather son-less.

The one son Gunguni bore was born long after Nathu Ram's death. It was Surti who took the initiative to bring back Gunguni's son, Ram Singh. She had him registered with the *patwari* (village revenue accountant) as Nathu Ram's son. Under the colonial administration the sons (and not daughters), being the inheritors of land and property, were required to be registered with the *patwari*. When asked by the revenue officials about the discrepancy between the death of

Nathu Ram and the birth of the son, Surti replied that Gunguni had been pregnant when Nathu Ram died. She maintained “*jab mera admi mra to baccha pet me tha, pet ghata badta rahe tha, so teen saal lag gai*” (“when my husband died, she was pregnant, her pregnancy was off and on, that is why it took three years”). The *patwari* accepted this contention. The community refrained from making an issue of this. Instead they maintained that “*in ke ghar ka mamla hai*” (“it is their family matter”). Everyone knew the reality, but none raised any objection, as Surti had herself initiated the process towards recognition of the illegitimate son. More realistically, she maintained: “we need manpower to till the land.” The subsistence level economy, the need for manpower, and total dependence on family labor for cultivation clearly made for the “liberal attitudes” displayed by Surti and her kinsmen. Much later Gunguni observed *karewa* with another kinsman, who deserted her. In all, Gunguni had seven children, allegedly from different men. All the children died except the son accepted as legitimate by Surti.

Apart from this, three allied factors determined the nature and extent to which a “liberal sexual climate” was accommodated by rural patriarchy of this period: one, the work-related emigration of men from this arid region; two, the large scale recruitment to the British Indian Army; three, the generally low population growth of this region.²⁴ An overwhelming 53.11 percent of the male population of Haryana during the 1920’s migrated for work to the canal colonies as owners, tenants, or as laborers because the colonies offered better agricultural opportunities,²⁵ while the increase in population during that decade was a mere 6.84 percent. This migration factor was greatly compounded by the vast recruitment into the British Indian army. In World War I this region alone contributed one-fifth of the total recruitment from Punjab.²⁶ Some villages contributed 50 percent of their total adult male population to the army.²⁷ Het Ram’s family, for example, at one time boasted of having seven men in the army. This periodic or semi-permanent migration of primary able-bodied men had profound effects in promoting a “liberal attitude” in this region. Unexplained pregnancies or begetting children from a *devar* (younger brother-in-law) or *jeth* (older brother-in-law) while the husband was away on work or serving in the army were not uncommon and were taken in stride.²⁸ This was particularly so as the region showed an abysmally low sex ratio of women, who played a pivotal role in this region’s subsistence economy, both in agriculture and animal husbandry. The productive or reproductive potential of women could not be allowed to go waste. The colonial masters frowned upon such “lax sexual morals” but acquiesced for reasons of their own.²⁹

Hardwari Lal was sixteen years of age when his alleged brother, named Ram Singh, was born. It is likely that Hardwari Lal was consulted by his mother regarding extending legitimization to Ram Singh, as Hardwari Lal was the only male inheritor of his father's property. His mother, as the widow, had only the right to maintenance. Legally and customarily, daughters and sisters were outside the purview of inheritance rights.³⁰ As the land of the village was seen as belonging to the male descendants of ancestors who originally settled and worked on it, the male agnatic descendants alone, as members of the localized clan, had reversionary rights in the estate. Land was ordinarily not to be alienated outside this group. Women were entitled only to maintenance and to be "suitably betrothed and married."³¹ Being registered as Nathu Ram's son, Ram Singh came to be recognized as the brother of Hardwari Lal and a claimant to the ancestral land. Each inherited 12 *kilas*.

What made Hardwari Lal give his consent? Possibly the same reasons that prompted his mother: the dire need of manpower for cultivation. Moreover, Hardwari Lal was never interested in cultivation. He was keenly and primarily interested in pursuing his studies. His father, Nathu Ram, observing this keenness, had supported him fully and encouraged him to study. Hardwari Lal was in the fourth class when his father died. Nathu Ram left instructions that his son should be allowed to study as much as he wanted. Very early in his life Hardwari Lal was to note perceptively in his diary: "The life of an agriculturist is extremely arduous and once one tastes of the easier life of the college or the school, one does not want to return to agriculture."

Hardwari Lal's unwillingness to take to agricultural work on a full-time basis was to become a bone of contention between him and his mother. There was constant strife between them. His books were frequently hidden or locked up; he was repeatedly chided by his mother to cut fodder for the animals and help in cultivation, instead of "wasting his time with *pothis* (books)." Hardwari Lal's help was especially needed, since a woman was customarily not allowed to undertake full agricultural operations herself; this was, and continues to be, particularly true in relation to the ploughing of land. Hardwari Lal's persistence in his studies, however, would eventually change his mother's attitude regarding the value of education.

Those were very hard times for Hardwari Lal and his family. He often talked about his "childhood and school days spent in poverty." He was to note in his diary, "No one who has not been born in a poor village family can properly understand what poverty is." It was the hard labor of the family females that

sustained the household and allowed Hardwari Lal to study. Although it is true that, being a highly intelligent student, Hardwari Lal studied on fellowships throughout his school and college days, yet it is equally true that the earnings of his mother and sister were crucial for the survival of the family and for Hardwari Lal to pursue his studies.

Hardwari Lal's mother would work in her *khet* (fields) in the daytime and at night grind fifteen *seers* of *bajara* (wheat) for the Jat *shahukar* of the village. Given a rupee for every five *seers* of grinding, she earned three rupees per day. At times she would request to be given *atta* (flour) as payment instead of money. This was, however, only when her son was coming from the hostel in the city to visit her. *Bajra* and wheat for grinding were taken to the house by the *shahukar's* wife. Hardwari Lal's mother, who observed *ghunghat* (veiling), did not have to go out to get it. She also sold the yarn she spun to the Chamars to raise money. The sisters pitched in by bringing *bhrottas* (head-loads of fodder) from their fields and selling them at six paise per *bhrotta*. *Bhrottas* and the flour were collected from the house by the Jat *shahukar*. Hardwari Lal also helped; he was especially responsible for cutting the fodder for the family buffalo, which was looked after by the women. In those days, the general practice was to purchase a *kaldi* (buffalo's calf) for a mere two or three rupees and raise it up to provide the family with milk. A full-grown buffalo would cost from thirty to forty rupees. The *ghee* (clarified butter) prepared at home by women was partly consumed and partly collected in a *tokani* (brass utensil), which could contain eight *seers* of *ghee*. Once the *tokani* was full, it was taken by Hardwari Lal to Rohtak and sold.

The Political Economy of Marriage

Contributions from the family females came in other significant ways as well. Out of Hardwari Lal's three younger sisters, two were given in marriage with a bride price. There was indeed a wide acceptance of the custom of sale and purchase of brides among the economically distressed peasantry. In the nineteenth century, except among a few better-off families, this custom was observed to have been universal not only among the Jats but also among the agricultural and the lower castes.³² This practice was also said to be gaining ground everywhere in the first decade of the twentieth century.³³ There is also evidence to suggest that in individual cases "fancy prices" were paid by the groom's family, especially if the boy was handicapped in some way or if he was considerably older.³⁴ Hardwari Lal's two sisters were married to such men. Sudha, the older of his three sisters,

was married at a very young age (between 9 and 12) to Himmat Singh, who was then twenty years old and serving in the army; his first wife was dead and there were no children. Three hundred rupees was charged as bride price. Within three years of this marriage, Bhagwati, the younger sister, was married to Sudhan Langra, a lame man who gave eight hundred rupees as bride price. In the three years between these marriages there was a clear escalation of bride price which, according to Malcolm Lyall Darling (a distinguished Punjab official who made a thorough and comparative study of varied aspects of social life in different regions of Punjab) rose steadily with other rising prices as well as during serious epidemics.³⁵ A large part of the money so procured went into financing the educational activities of Hardwari Lal.

It was only in the marriage of the third and the youngest sister, Chhotu Devi, that no bride price was taken and a much higher status alliance procured. By this time (1936) there was a marked improvement in Hardwari Lal's financial and social status. Apart from military service, upward mobility in the colonial period lay only through education. Hardwari Lal had achieved this. He graduated in 1933 from St. Stephen's, one of the most prestigious colleges in Delhi, and joined the Punjab revenue service as a *naib tehsildar* (junior revenue officer). A *tehsildar* was considered in the British bureaucracy "a man of considerable importance in his tehsil," in fact, the "virtual ruler of his domain."³⁶ These two factors, along with his landed status, enabled him to get married in 1933, for which he was given a substantial dowry. Part of this dowry came in handy for the marriage of his last and youngest sister. This shift (in Hardwari Lal's family) from bride price to dowry may be seen in the wider context of a transitional society, with ambitions of certain upwardly mobile sections among landowning groups, especially the Jats. Hailed as a higher system of marriage alliance, this shift meant that certain "objectionable practices" which were perceived to impinge upon their honor, status and property were ideally given up. Bride-price was one of those.

The marriage of his youngest sister was arranged by Hardwari Lal with the younger brother of one of his classmates from college. The growing social circle and prestige of Hardwari Lal enabled him to reach out to a class which would not have been accessible to him earlier. He also circumvented the traditional way of arranging marriage through a middleman, generally a *nai* (barber), as had been done for his other two sisters. The groom, Sitar Singh, belonged to Risaldar Major Raj Singh's family—a well-to-do family in village Dighal who had been gifted 62 kilas of *murrabbas* (lands) in Lyallpur by the British. Fully irrigated, this fertile land grew commercial crops like cotton, sugar cane and wheat. Sitar Singh had

been married earlier (at the age of seven) to a much older woman, as had been his two other brothers. Marrying younger boys to older women was a customary practice, as the labor requirement of the family determined the age of the bride.³⁷ Such boys invariably married a second time. This was Sitar Singh's second marriage after reaching adulthood. He had no offspring from his first marriage. Such second marriages were common and not looked down upon or considered "defective" in any way.³⁸ For Chottu Devi, however, it was the first marriage and as such it was performed with full religious rites. Apart from the clothes for the groom and his family, the groom was also gifted with a gold ring, which Hardwari Lal's wife had brought in her marriage. A substitution of bride price with dowry was in keeping with the changed status of the bride's natal family, made possible due to her brother holding a coveted government job.

In colonial times, education had clearly emerged as a crucial factor in reaching a high social standing. There was therefore a very strong drive towards education in the villages, as witnessed in the generation to which Hardwari Lal belonged. The lives and careers of his contemporaries similarly indicate an intense desire for education. A job, unlike agriculture, meant steady income, prestige and patronage. Already known in his district as someone with a very bright future, Hardwari Lal had been receiving marriage offers for some time. The one accepted by Hardwari Lal was from village Said-ul-jab, in Mehrauli, near Delhi. He personally approved of Vidya Vati, a tall, fair and willowy sixteen-year-old who he had gone to "see" with three of his college friends. One of the reasons for his acceptance may well have been the value that he put on education. Vidya's parents were both schoolteachers, and in the days when women were hardly ever enrolled to study in the schools, Vidya had studied up to class eight.

Vidya was the eldest daughter of Bhagwan Sahaye, a well-to-do Jat from the Tewithia *got* (patrilineal clan). Compared to Hardwari Lal, Bhagwan Sahaye was a virtual *shahukar*. Being one of four brothers, he had inherited from his father eight *bighas* of land in village Said-ul-jab. This was given out on *batai* (sharecropping). This natural subdivision of holdings, as seen in the case of both Het Ram and Bhagwan Sahaye, along with alienation of land in the form of mortgage and sale, was leading to the fragmentation of land in the province. Statistical data of district Rohtak between 1901 and 1931 shows an 85 percent increase in sales of land and a 73 percent rise in mortgages of land which led to the region being dotted with smaller and smaller holdings.³⁹ Hardwari Lal, who was a witness to this fragmentation of land, noted early in his career that "the number of partition applications" was "daily on the increase."⁴⁰ In his understanding, however, it was

“probably because of the growing individualism of the age.” The growing number of smaller economic holdings in this region, as elsewhere in Punjab, was to achieve such alarming proportions by the mid 1930’s that the viceroy held an inquiry into it.⁴¹

Bhagwan Sahaye, despite his small holding, was relatively prosperous. His income came not just from the land, but from his profession; he was the headmaster in a government school and was also the post-master in village Khewara, near Sonipat (drawing a salary of 45 rupees). Additionally, he gave private tuitions. His wife, Manbhari Devi, also taught in a government school. With multiple sources of income, he was able to build a house of five rooms in the village at a time when *kaccha* houses were the norm. One of the rooms had a cloth fan attached to the ceiling and pulled by a string. It also had two kitchens and a big courtyard. He added to his land holding by purchasing 25 *bighas* of fertile land in Alipore. This land, unlike that of Hardwari Lal’s, was fertile; irrigated by a deep well, it gave better, more remunerative crops like sugarcane and wheat, as well as abundant fodder. He also built another two-and-a-half story house in Alipore. A forward-looking man, he was perhaps one of the first few men to get life insurance, which enabled his wife to have a handsome pension for life after his fairly early death in 1939.

As stated earlier, and contrary to what may be a widespread impression, education in this region was greatly prized,⁴² and Bhawan Sahaye and his wife, as teachers, were highly respected. The students were known to make generous offerings of sacks full of wheat, *gur* (jaggery), sugar, rice, fodder and other vegetables to their teachers. Bhagwan Sahaye kept a buffalo and a cow. Milk and its products were consumed at home and not sold off. He was known to enjoy a high standard of living; the home cuisine consisted of *parathas*, *pulao*, *pakoras*, *khir* and *mithai*. Even clothes worn by Bhagwan Sahaye’s household females reflected a different class orientation altogether. His wife and his daughter wore saris, like the higher-class Baniyas and Brahmins, rather than *ghagaras* (long skirts), which were universally worn by the agricultural classes in this region. Vidya Vati started to wear *salwar kamiz*, “the dress of the *Punjabans*” only much later after her marriage. When such a man selected Hardwari Lal for his daughter it was clear that he could see the potential in his future son-in-law because of his education. It was clearly the individual and not the family that mattered. It was also the reversal of a process of marriage in the colonial period in which there was a great reluctance to give girls as brides into this arid region of southeast Punjab, which was considered inferior. The greatest wish of the agriculturist families had always

been to get daughters or sisters married where canal irrigation existed, for which dowry had to be paid.⁴³ Bhagawan Sahaye's daughter was not only married into this arid region but was also given a dowry to get married. The potential of the educated groom had subsumed all other considerations.

Bhagwan Sahaye spent Rs. 800 in turning the *kaccha* house of Hardwari Lal in village Chhara into a two-story *pucca* house, well before the wedding. The ground floor of this house consisted of a large *baithak* (sitting room), a kitchen and a bath space. Over this structure two rooms, one for the newlywed couple and the other as *zenana* (women's quarters), were constructed. A separate room afforded Hardwari Lal and his wife privacy, which was an unheard-of concept in rural areas. In a society where the mother-in-law fiercely controlled the sexual access of a wife to her husband and frowned upon any sign of intimacy,⁴⁴ this privacy must have raised eyebrows at the time. Over these two rooms an open but enclosed space for sleeping, approachable through a staircase, was also constructed.

In constructing this house, labor was provided not only by Hardwari Lal but also by his family members, especially his mother and his youngest (still unmarried) sister, in order to keep costs down. In 1932-33, the daily charges for a skilled mason were 8 annas, and 4 annas for a carpenter. Hardwari Lal was given cash at the time of the wedding (instead of household things, as requested by the groom), as well as a gold ring and clothes for his family. Gifting of money and other things on special life-cycle and ceremonial occasions continued till Bhagwan Sahaye's death in 1939.

As the "worth" of the boy was measured by the amount of dowry the bride brought with her, the wedding firmly established the status of Hardwari Lal and his family. Hardwari Lal's mother came to be referred to as Ashiya *wali* (woman from village Ashiya) instead of *bari rand lugai* (older widow), as she had been dismissively referred to earlier. Hardwari Lal, at such a young age, was able to anchor himself in the village community that had grown to be both proud of him and respectful of his family.

It was around this time that a major "scandal" took place in the family. It concerned both the branches of the family of Het Ram: the one from Jatni and the other from Brahmini. Har Kishan, the eldest son of Ram Nath (the son of Het Ram from his Jat wife) was murdered by Chandagi, the son of Chhotu Ram (son of Het Ram from his Brahmin wife) and Rori (the son of Brahmin wife of Het Ram from her Brahmin husband). Chandagi and his four brothers, all unmarried, as well as Rori, were reputed to "covet" Ram Kaur, Harkishan's wife, hailing from village

Gocchi. Ram Kaur was rumoured to maintain secret liaisons with a lot of her husband's kinsmen. Harkishan was attacked by six of them allegedly with the connivance of his wife; hacked 52 times with a *gandasa* (cleaver) and left to die. However, when discovered he was still breathing. He died when he was being taken to Jhajjar in a bullock cart for treatment. In his dying statement, he accused all six of attacking him and specially named Chandagi and his *tau* (uncle) Rori. A criminal case was instituted against the six. It took a mere six months for a British judge to pronounce them guilty of Harkishan's murder. The main culprits, Rori and Chandagi, were hanged.

Significantly, it was Ram Kaur, rather than the killers, who was blamed for the murder. Consequently, much against customary practice, Ram Kaur was not allowed to remain in her conjugal home. She had to be taken back by her parents to her natal village Gocchi. Having raised a scandal and having been instrumental in the death of three men in the family, no kinsman or anyone in the immediate community was willing to take her as *karewa* wife. This was notwithstanding the fact that there were many bachelors in the extended family itself who could have married her. Defamed and condemned by her own community, she observed *karewa* much later, far away in village Kansala.

Such cases of violence around the custom of sharing women were not uncommon in colonial Punjab. Given the adverse female sex-ratio, the prevalence of bride-price, and the importance of the wife as agricultural-labor-cum-reproductive asset, the concept of the woman being married to a family rather than to an individual had emerged as an acceptable and viable option. In everyday terms, this concept meant that two or three brothers would share a wife.⁴⁵ P.J. Fagan, a district-level British official, had observed in 1904, "It is not uncommon among Jats and lower castes for a woman to be shared in common by several brothers, though she's recognized as the wife of only the eldest of them."⁴⁶ The Muslim scholar-traveler Al-beruni in the 11th century and later historians such as Ghulam Basit and Muhamed Kasim Ferishta had also referred to similar phenomena in existence in Punjab, spurred on perhaps by the repeated invasions of this region and consequent prolonged absence of men serving inescapable military duties.⁴⁷ By the mid-19th century a number of British observers had started to comment on this practice, especially in relation to the Jats, Gujars, Ahirs and Lohars.⁴⁸ Darling, writing about the prevalence of this custom, identified it as "polyandry."⁴⁹ The older generation of Haryanavis remember the "sharing of women among brothers" to be a "common phenomenon" in the 1920's. Several cases were cited from memory regarding different villages where there was only

one married brother, but other brothers had free access to his wife.⁵⁰ In Punjab Joyce Pettigrew, Paul Hershman and K.P. Singh have shown its continued existence especially among some of the Jat Sikhs.⁵¹

At its worst, the murder in Hardwari Lal's family was considered "unfortunate" as it involved the death of one and the hanging of two able-bodied men—leading to a major loss of man power at a time when one could ill afford to lose them. The word "scandal" was perhaps added retrospectively. Most importantly, such happenings were taken in their stride. This case did not have any effect on the marriage of Hardwari Lal or his sisters.

Rural and Urban milieu: Education and Early Career

A highly intelligent student from childhood, Hardwari Lal studied up to class five in his village, Chhara. The village school, catering to students till class five, interestingly taught English from class one onwards. After completing his fifth class in this school Hardwari Lal shifted to Rohtak Jat School, which had English medium from fifth class onwards. Reaching Rohtak from village Chhara was not easy. Hardwari Lal would have had to walk 5-6 *kos* (roughly 10-12 miles) to Sampla and from there he had to take a train to Rohtak, costing 3 annas and 6 paise. In view of the time and expense involved in commuting, he was compelled to stay in Rohtak for his studies. In Rohtak he stayed with a school teacher from village Barahi and only occasionally visited his village. In return for this stay he performed certain services for the teacher, like washing the utensils, doing odd jobs like massaging his legs at night, getting his *hooka* ready etc. Later on he started to give tuitions to earn money. He studied in this school on a scholarship of ten rupees till the eighth class, topping in the entire district.

In 1928 he shifted to a Vedic Sanskrit high school, Khera Garhi, near Badli. Khera Garhi school came under the jurisdiction of Delhi and was affiliated with the board of secondary schools. This school also followed the English medium. Those who did not come from English medium schools were required to do a two-year intensive course in English in order to get promoted to class nine. Hardwari Lal, having studied English since class one, joined the ninth class. In 1929 he passed his matriculation, topping the Board examinations.

After passing his matriculation he joined St. Stephen's college in Delhi on a scholarship. Access to the new structure of education was meant to serve the administrative needs of the colonial government. St Stephen's, a Cambridge Mission college, was set up in Delhi in 1881. As there was no college in the

surrounding rural areas, special efforts were made by the founder members to bring education to the “backward communities.”⁵² As a consequence of this policy, according to F.F. Monk, one of the earliest chroniclers of St. Stephen’s college, “the Jats, Jains and Mohammedans in particular” came to be represented in the college in great numbers.⁵³ The spokesman of the Jats was Rai Sahib Chaudhary Chhotu Ram, a Minister in the Punjab government. Chhotu Ram had been one of the first Jats to be accepted as a student in St. Stephen’s, in keeping with St. Stephen’s mission to promote education among the ruralites. In return, Chhotu Ram encouraged and financially helped as many Jat students as he could to enroll in St. Stephen’s, so much so that in Monk’s opinion, “St. Stephen’s, though a missionary college, was looked upon by Jat students as, in a way, their own.”⁵⁴

Hardwari Lal was among a group of fifteen Jat students who were helped by Chhotu Ram in gaining access to this college. Hardwari Lal was also a recipient of “a handsome financial help from the college funds,” which he received throughout his stay, from 1929-1933.⁵⁵ The overwhelmingly elite and urban studentship of St. Stephen’s, consisting of the wards of the government officials posted in the secretariat at Delhi, tended to look down upon anyone who could be identified as a “rustic.” Many students of this college testified to the “enormous caste prejudice and social cleavages” among students.⁵⁶ This was especially true in relation to the Jat students.

In his four years at the college Hardwari Lal, who survived with eight shirts and five *dhotis* made of coarse *khaddar*, defied all handicaps. A keen debater, he spoke on a variety of subjects. A favored theme was the rural milieu that he came from. These were also the years of worldwide depression, which began in late 1929 and severely affected the Indian economy between 1930 and 1933. There was a steep drop in the prices of agricultural commodities from 1926 onwards, sharply enhancing the burdens of revenue, rent and interest payments, and leading to a major crisis in the lives of peasant proprietors, tenants and small holders, as well as sharecroppers and agricultural laborers. The figures show a decline of 77 percent in the net income of the agriculturists by 1930-31, whereas non-agricultural prices showed a much smaller rate of decline, further diminishing the purchasing power of the agriculturalists.⁵⁷ Regarding the impact of this phenomenon on village life, Hardwari Lal, stated that “being a villager himself” he was in a privileged position to give a firsthand account to his fellow students at St. Stephen’s, “most of whom” according to him were “urbanites” and “the sons of high government officials, with no knowledge of rural India.” Given below is

an extract of a speech he delivered in the third year of his undergraduate days, which makes alive the living conditions of ruralites during depression years:

The poverty of an Indian village has been proverbial for the last hundred years or so, but it is now that it has become most crushing. I have heard from the villagers some of whom are eighty or ninety years old that they never experienced such poverty within their living memories. There used to be financial stringencies even before but the present one is unprecedented. You shall wonder when I tell you that a man who could get his two meals alright some ten or fifteen years ago when the prices of corn were four times as high as now, has been deprived of his meals by the hopeless fall in the prices today. When wheat was four seers a rupee (it is not my imagination, it has been so in the years just following the turn of the present century) one could buy sufficient amount to feed himself and his family but now when it is 23 or 24 seers a rupee one has to go along with his family, without meals.

...Erring on the side of safety, I can tell you that the number of such people is at least 30 percent in every village. You shall imagine the pitiable condition of the people when I tell you that the fall in the prices of other articles than corn has not been corresponding. For example oil which is used in villages for lighting purposes is as dear as before with the result that most of the people cannot light lamps in their houses. There is no appreciable fall in the prices of cloth. Agricultural instruments cannot be brought for less than before.

In some villages, I have seen that the man who used to be the only village moneylender some two years ago, can manage to go on with considerable difficulty. I leave it to you to imagine the condition of the rest of the population of those villages for yourself. I have seen many a whole family having fallen ill and with nothing to eat. Do you not think that the result can be anything but death? ...There are people who can somehow or other manage to get food but cannot get the salt to put therein. The sale of ornaments in villages and of other saleable property is a very common sight but there are no buyers. The value of land has gone down so low that a piece of land which could formerly fetch ten thousand rupees cannot be sold for one thousand, at present. I saw about fifty cases during the period of 30 days which I spent in villages just before our results were out, where marriages are arranged and fixed but had to be cancelled on account of want of money.

I have been speaking up till now of the population actually engaged in agriculture. The plight of those people who are known and treated in villages as untouchables and who have got no landed property is still more hopeless. And then I have been speaking more or less of my personal experience which was limited to my own district and the neighbouring ones. Remember that the rural population of my province i.e., the Punjab is considered to be the most prosperous in India and population of my district the most prosperous in the province. In the Punjab the system of distribution of land is ideal; we have got all peasant proprietors, owners of land. You can well imagine the conditions of farmers in other provinces where there are landlords and tenants and the exactions of the

landlords are very inhuman.

I have given you the briefest possible sketch of what was going on in the villages. The poverty is so acute that the government also could not remain aloof this time, as it was a sacred tradition to do so. The governments of Punjab and U.P. have remitted 5 annas and 3 annas in a rupee of land revenue respectively in spite of their being hedged around with financial embarrassments. But this should not give you the impression that the condition of the people will be bettered by these minor steps. Even the full remission of revenue would have flatly failed to improve the conditions. The Co-operative Department of the government which is still in its infancy in spite of its age of 30 years is proving like a hungry child to its dying mother, a constant source of trouble to the people. The village moneylenders could be persuaded to wait but the so-called government business in the hands of unsympathetic officials cannot be put off. Those of you who are students of economics are taught in class that Co-operation did not make as rapid progress in any other country as in India. But take it from me that except in a very few places Co-operation has done next to nothing in bettering the conditions of the rural population. The government has not yet been able to assure the general public that the department has been instituted for their benefit. The most glaring failure of this movement can be seen in the field of social reforms which is the basic principle of Co-operation.

Ladies and gentlemen, as I have mentioned the social reforms, I might carry the point further to show how the social customs of people will be affected by the economic depression and how their share is making the present depression more acute. All of you know that social customs in India have such a firm grip upon the minds of the people that the latter can forgo some of the necessities of life to provide for social conventions; people are doing so even now. But the present economic depression is such that it could neither be expected nor planned how it can be met. In spite of their best efforts, people are now not able to load their women with ornaments worth 1000 rupees which was quite commonplace, a few years back. Much other useless expenditure has been cut down. Litigation has come to its lowest ebb which has set many a young man to serious thinking as to whether it is at all advisable to join law. I was told two months ago that a lawyer at Rohtak (my district) had sold his only suit of clothes to pay the rent of his house. But it should not lead you to conclude that this depression has not been after all an unmixed curse and that it brought in its train social reforms. Far from it. Social reforms in villages cannot be affected unless the very root of evil customs is touched. People have forsaken some customs only because they could not help it. But they are bound to revive along with the economic revival.⁵⁸

Special attention was paid to students from the rural areas by the tutors who took pains to improve "rustic" students by improving their linguistic skills. Accompanying their tutors on holidays to the hill these students were made to read aloud from newspapers and literary master pieces for an hour every day to improve their understanding of the language and diction. Regarding such

students, Sushil Kumar Rudra, the principal of the college from 1906-1923, well known to have given firm guidance to the direction the college was to take, wrote, "The best material we get in our college is from rural areas and we must never let this be forgotten. Those are the people we have to concentrate upon."⁵⁹ Rudra was looked upon as the "pioneer of higher education among the Jats."⁶⁰

In St. Stephen's college in those years, Christian influence was fairly pervasive. The object of the Cambridge Mission, acknowledged by Monk, was "to prepare young men for university degree and examinations and to instruct them in the doctrines of Christianity."⁶¹ Firmly keeping the "Christian principle" in mind, the college held morning prayers from the Book of Common Prayer of the Church every day. For Christian students there were also separate classes where they were taught the elements of the Christian religion, in pursuance of the aim to make the students imbibe "Christian values."⁶²

The emphasis on Christianity led to the rumors of the college indulging in proselytization activities under the cover of an educational institution. Acknowledging these rumors, Hardwari Lal showed himself alive to this criticism, but dismissed them as "canards" that the detractors of the college were spreading. The college, he maintained never indulged in proselytization. "During its long life," according to him, "not more than a couple of students were converted to Christianity and that too on their own insistent requests and after careful examination of their antecedents."⁶³ He went on to give examples, out of his personal knowledge, of how the college indeed discouraged proselytization instead of encouraging it. For the non-Christians the college offered comparative religion or ethics or anything which the students wanted to discuss.

It may be relevant to recall here that the peasantry of Haryana has never been considered very religious or ritualistically inclined, especially in comparison with the adherents of the high normative Brahmanical religion. The most popular form of worship in the rural areas was and remains *dhok marna* (salutation made by joining hands, palm to palm and raising them to the head). A villager may do this whenever he passes the shrine of a village deity. He may also do obeisance to the earth in the morning and say "*sukhi rakhiyo dharti mata*" (preserve me, O mother earth!). When a cow or a buffalo is first brought after calving, the first five *dhars* (spurts of milk) are allowed to fall on the ground in her honor; at every milking time, the first stream is similarly treated.

"Religious observances," in the general opinion of the ruralites, are best left to women. By and large, rural women were known to be firm believers in local *matas*

(minor female deities), and worshipped them, especially for warding off evil spirits as well as physical ailments. This is not to say that the high caste Brahmanical Hindu ideology had not penetrated the rural areas. This was particularly so in the case of men whose families remained in the villages but who were themselves staying outside the village. Their education and urban experiences had the effect of not only discouraging their adherence to non-Sanskritic religion, but also inculcating in them the dominant urban middle class Brahmanical ideology.⁶⁴ However, the rapid Sanskritisation which is noticeable now, especially among the urban-rural overlapping categories of people, was hardly visible in the 1920's and 30's.

The majority of English tutors also kept strong bonds of friendship with their rural students. Encouraged to have direct contact with the society they lived in they visited Hardwari Lal's village, spending two to three days there. In the village they stayed in a vacant room provided by Hazari Lal, a local *shahukar*, who took keen interest in Hardwari Lal's life and career. On such occasions, Hardwari Lal would bring vegetables and rice from Delhi to be cooked for them. His sister, Chhotu, was given cookery lessons by him to be able to cook according to the taste of the city dwellers. He had learnt to cook in the college hostel in Delhi. Fond of eating, he had criticized and objected to the kind of *pulao* (rice) cooked by his wife in the very first month of his marriage. Vidya, a sprightly lass, well versed in cooking, replied: "If I have to cook in a *ghunghat* what else do you expect? This is all you will get!" This one remark was enough. Reportedly, any compromise over food quality was too much for Hardwari Lal. *Ghunghat* was off for Vidya Vati. In his diary Hardwari Lal, noting his two-fold objections to the observance of *ghunghat*, wrote that it was "detrimental to the health" of the wearer and imposes "serious economic disabilities" on those who observe it.⁶⁵ From then onwards, his wife never observed *ghunghat*. Covering of the head and face was and remains the general practice for married women (excluding the very old) in rural Haryana.

Hardwari Lal passed his Intermediate and Bachelor's degree from St. Stephen's in first class with History and Economics as subjects. He joined the postgraduate classes in Economics but within a year, before taking exams, he left them for a government post in the revenue branch of the administrative service, at a comparatively handsome starting salary of Rs. 240 per month. In fact, according to him the Indian civil service was known as a "heaven born service" because it was the best paid job open to the Indians at the time. The Indian Civil Service, right up to the Montague Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, when it was thrown open to the Indians, had been dominated by British ICS men. However, a lot of British

officers, unwilling to serve under Indian members, had sought retirement from 1924 onwards. The British element in service declined further in anticipation of the passage of the 1935 Act after the advent of Provincial Autonomy. By the time Hardwari Lal joined the service, less than half of the districts in Punjab had young Englishmen as deputy commissioners.

Recruitment to administration was highly restricted. The worldwide financial recession of the early 30's had further restricted it by suspending the recruitment altogether. The recruitment re-opened only in 1934 when eight posts in the provincial civil service were to be filled through competition and the remaining posts were to be filled by nomination. Hardwari Lal lost the post reserved for competition by just two marks. However, in keeping with the prevailing rules he was called for the interview held to fill the "nomination posts." As the posts were earmarked for the scions of either serving or retired army men or of the influential landlords, Hardwari Lal was selected for the *tehsildar's* post and was to be promoted to the Punjab Civil Service after five years of service.

A *tehsildar* recruited directly as such had to undergo three years rigorous training—six months as a *patwari*, another six months as a field *kanungo* in a district under settlement and two years as a *naib tehsildar*. After completing his settlement training in Lyallpur, Hardwari Lal was posted in *tehsil* Hissar for judicial and revenue training as an extra assistant commissioner. The district was administered by an Englishman. For this Hardwari Lal considered himself "fortunate," as he confessed to feeling "perfectly at home" with Englishmen.

This "fortunate" move however could not hide his great disappointment with what he came to describe as a "highly discriminatory civil service" and more particularly with the "different kind of Englishmen" who manned it. Having been at St. Stephen's close to half a decade, he was used to being treated generously and as an equal by his English tutors. He looked forward to an equally pleasant and corresponding relationship with his bosses. But in his steady rise in the administrative hierarchy from the start as a class III magistrate, he was almost always dealt with rudely and brusquely by the British administrators. An attempt at any discussion elicited contemptuous dismissal, an order to "keep quiet," or being told "you Indians are all liars."

In his assessment, Hardwari Lal had apparently made the mistake of linking the attitude and behavior of his tutors to their race and not to their profession. The professions of teaching and administration were, and perhaps remain, essentially different, with different attitudes and norms of behavior. A teacher, especially at

St. Stephen's college, as mentioned earlier, was required to, and did indeed, mix with his pupils and have direct contact with the society they lived in. This was not necessarily true of an administrator under the colonial setup. The British administrators were cut off from "real contact with Indian society."⁶⁶ Their exclusivity and aloofness served well the objectives of maintaining law and order. Maintaining a distance from the common man they behaved like "feudal lords" who were looked upon with awe and reverence based on fear. The bureaucracy was hierarchically arranged. The English superior officer sustained his superiority by maintaining this hierarchy of subordinates down to the level of *tehsildar* and *patwari*. Keeping a distance from the subordinate was a prerequisite of upholding the authority of the superior. Moreover, in the 30's, such officials were blamed for the rise and strength of the nationalist movement.⁶⁷ The haughty attitude of British officials could well have been to show that there was no weakening of the British Raj. Such behavior certainly covered up the official anxieties concerning the role of British officialdom in an increasingly restless society. Hardwari Lal regretted that he was unable to change the Englishman's "extremely low" opinion of the Indian official recruits considering them to be "not up to the mark," "frequently corrupt" and "given to lying."

In 1947, when a few British ICS officers approached Sardar Patel, the home minister, with an offer to stay on in India if needed, the Sardar was rather cold. Having experienced the behavior and attitude of the British ICS first hand, Hardwari Lal did not find the Sardar's attitude and his reservations at retaining the British ICS men, strange at all. The class, educational background and vast range of behavior patterns, norms and values of the British administrative officials have been widely commented upon.⁶⁸ It is also clear that there were many types of British administrators in India. Coming from a highly paternalistic society, according to a leading British historian, their dominant quality remained that of paternalism.⁶⁹ In their district life they were "something of a despot," sprinkled with western ideas of service and welfare. In Hardwari Lal's opinion, the British ICS men were a mixed bag, at least during the last phase of British rule in India, when he came in direct contact with them.

As compared to his relations with British officials, Hardwari Lal was able to build a very healthy rapport with his fellow Indian officers—both subordinate and superior.⁷⁰ N.K. Mukherji, then deputy commissioner of Hissar, under whom Hardwari Lal served as his revenue assistant and also officer-in-charge of work connected with Loharu state and the *panchayats*, spoke of how well Hardwari Lal was able to handle the agrarian problems which were a special feature of this

district.⁷¹ This however may not have been true of all Indian bureaucrats who were well known as “brown sahibs” and followed the British norms of behavior.

In keeping with the bureaucratic practice, Hardwari Lal was shifted from one place to another in his various postings. He was posted in Lyallpur as colony officer-cum-magistrate when the Partition of India became imminent, and made very incisive observations as the man on the spot on the Partition’s immediate aftermath, which led to a massive exodus of population; violence, massacre and rape of women on both sides, as well as large-heartedness witnessed on both sides; refugee influx into Punjab specially in Gurgaon where he was posted then; and shortcomings in the policies adopted for their settlement. His lived experiences in this phase however would need another article.

Hardwari Lal’s steady rise in the bureaucracy led him to become a resident magistrate empowered to give an imprisonment sentence up to seven years. Making a stringent criticism of the British law, he observed:

The worst features of the British administration were its courts and legal system. In the courts everything is possible; one can lose a completely true case and can win a baseless one. The last thing needful for a case is the truth; in fact it is the one thing to avoid.⁷²

It is clear that he was experiencing utter disillusionment with his chosen profession of administration and the way the services were behaving. This sentiment was not exclusive to him. Many shared this viewpoint and assessment.⁷³ Hardwari Lal’s association with the Punjab civil service proved to be short lived. After independence, he resigned from it in October 1951. His career post-resignation would chart out an entirely different course and experience.

Notes

¹ All papers of Hardwari Lal are now available in Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti, New Delhi. Also see his copious notes on the town’s civic life, deposited in the Municipal Committee of Thanesar (Kurukshetra), where he was posted in the early part of his career.

² Prem Chowdhry, “Militarized Masculinities: Shaped and Reshaped In Colonial South-East Punjab,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47:3 (May 2013), 713–750. Eventually in the post-

colonial period this masculinity was to overshadow the coveted militarized masculinity of the colonial period.

³ This custom is traceable to the old Rig-Vedic *niyog*, a practice of levirate marriage that was prevalent in the region of Punjab and associated with the early Vedic Aryan settlements. Later, during the *Mahabharata* times, *niyog* came to signify cohabitation by the wife with men other than her husband under certain specific conditions like impotence of the husband. Eventually, *niyog* was given up as being inconsistent with increasingly Brahmanised standards of marital chastity and devotion. The increasing tendency of the late Dharma Sutras was to proscribe such practices. For details, see Gail Hinich Sutherland, "Bija (seed) and Ksetra (field): Male Surrogacy or Niyog in the Mahabharata," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 24:1 (Jan-June 1990), 71-103.

⁴ For details see C.L. Tupper, *The Punjab Customary Law*, II (Calcutta: Govt. Printing, 1881), 93, 123; see also E. Joseph, *Customary Law of the Rohtak District, 1910* (Lahore: Government Printing, 1911), 45.

⁵ J.M. Douie, *Riwaj-i-Am Tehsil Kaithal of Pargana Indri in the Karnal District* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette, 1892), 6.

⁶ "Chanda Singh vs. Musammat Kuri Asu," case no. 54, *Punjab Records* vol. XXXII (1897), 334-38; "Chet Ram vs. Musammat Asu," case no. 54, vol. XXXV (1900), 197-8; Case no. 65, vol. XLVI (1911), 249-56; "Sohan Singh vs. Kabala," *Indian Law Reports*, Lahore Series, vol. X (N.D.) 372-80; "Joginder Singh vs. Kartara," *India Cases*, vol. 166 (1937), 719-23.

⁷ Joseph, *Customary Law of the Rohtak district*, 46.

⁸ W.M. Rattigan, *A Digest of the Civil Law for the Punjab Chiefly based upon the Customary Law as Present Ascertained*, revised by Harbans Lal Sarin and Kundan Lal Pandit, 2nd edition (Allahabad, University Book Agency, 1960 [1880]), xvii.

⁹ Several instances of inter-caste marriages in second associations were cited by witnesses in Chanda Singh vs. Mela minor through Mussammat Ruri case. Several of these involved the dominant caste of Jats with other caste women, both lower and higher. For details see *Punjab Records* vol. XXXIV (1897), 334-8. Also see Malcolm Lyall Darling, *Punjab Peasants in Prosperity and Debt* (Delhi: South Asia Books, 1978 [1925]), 51.

¹⁰ "Suram Chand vs. Indar," cited in *All India Reporter*, Lahore (1934), 550-553.

¹¹ Prem Chowdhry, "Fluctuating fortunes of wives: Creeping rigidity in inter-caste marriages in the colonial period," *Journal of the Indian Council of Historical Studies*, 34:1 (Jan. 2007), 210-243.

¹² For *pratiloma* marriages see "Munilal vs. Shyama Sonarin," *Indian Cases*, vol. 97 (1926), 347.

¹³ Case no. 50, *Punjab Record*, 1900, vol. XXXV (1900), 184-46; "Musammat Kaur vs. Sawan

Singh," vol. XLV, pp. 232-34; "Chander Singh vs. Musammat Mela," vol. XXXII (1897), 334-38; "Sohan Singh vs. Kale Singh," *Indian Law Report*, Lahore Series, vol. V (1929), 372-80.

¹⁴ In the colonial period the extremely low figures for females were ascribed by the British administrators to a distant pre-colonial past before the annexation of Punjab when female infanticide was seen to have been widely prevalent among Jats and Rajputs. The British also ascribed the uneven sex-ratio to other reasons like neglect of female children in earlier times (both pre-colonial and in the early years of British rule in Punjab), the high rate of mortality due to frequent child bearing starting at a very early age, and the neglect of women of advanced age. Additionally, in the all-too-frequent famines, droughts and epidemics, the first casualties were women. All these factors undoubtedly combined to enable the persistence of a different form of femicide in order to keep the female ratio down. In Punjab in 1931 it was 844 females per thousand males and in 1941 it was 869 females per thousand males. See *Census of India, 1991*, India series-1, paper 1 of 1991, provisional population tables (New Delhi: Registrar-General and Census Commissioner, India, 1991), 76.

¹⁵ The recent and rampant use of sex determination tests and sex-selective abortions has put the very existence of females at stake. A state with a vast network of motorable roads, availability of electricity, fairly extensive urbanisation, has led to the penetration of this modern technology to some of the remotest corners of Haryana former southeast Punjab. This accessibility, along with other factors like economic surplus and the small family (two child) norm, has resulted in the materially advanced regions of Haryana showing the most adverse sex ratio. For latest figures see *Statistical Abstract of Haryana 2012-13*.

¹⁶ His two sons were Kalu and Ramsarup. Kalu ran away from home and became a Sikh. Ramsarup, also known as Ramsarup Bawala, was in the army.

¹⁷ For details see David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State, Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth Century India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 74-75, 93-94.

¹⁸ A. Kensington, *Customary Law of the Ambala District*, vol. X (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette, 1893), 160.

¹⁹ Calculated from the Board of Economic Inquiry, *The Size and Distribution of Agricultural Holdings in the Punjab* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette, 1925), 16.

²⁰ *Haryana District Gazetteer, Rohtak* (1970), 100-101.

²¹ Agricultural wells in Rohtak district in actual use were: 1909-10: 5,539; 1927-28: 6,137; 1930-31: 8,151; 1931-32: 7,971; 1932-33: 8,190; 1933-34: 6,720. India Office Records (IOR): P/784/1908. See Report, 22 Sep. 1906. The average depth of water was 25 feet.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Rohtak District total cultivated area averages: 1918-19 to 1922-23: 925,053 acres; 1928-29 to

1932-33: 1,076,211 acres. Percentages of cultivated area that was irrigated: 1918-19 to 1922-23: 28.4; 1928-29 to 1932-33: 33.1. Source: Government of Punjab, *Punjab Dist. Census Handbook, Rohtak*, 1951, II (Chandigarh: Controller, Printing and Stationary, 1965), 42.

²⁴ For details see Prem Chowdhry, "Sexuality, unchastity, and fertility: Economy of production and reproduction in colonial Haryana," in Martha Alter Chen, ed., *Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 93-123.

²⁵ Census of India, Punjab, vol. 17, pt. 1, report (1931), 117, 120 and part II, table, 6.

²⁶ M.S. Leigh, *The Punjab and the War* (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1922), 61-62.

²⁷ *War Services of the Karnal District, August 1914-March 1919* (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1920), in Microfilm from Pakistan, Punjab Official Selection, India Office Records, London, 17.

²⁸ Interview, Shanti Devi, June 9th, 1986. Born in 1921 in Sonepat, Shanti Devi married a soldier who rose to be a colonel in the army.

²⁹ For British reasons, see Prem Chowdhry, "Customs in a peasant economy: Women in colonial Haryana," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 302-336.

³⁰ For details see Prem Chowdhry, "A matter of two shares: A daughter's claim to patrilineal property in rural north India," *The Economic and Social History Review* 34:3 (July-Sept. 1997), 289-320.

³¹ *Hissar District Gazetteer 1907*, Vol. II-A (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1908), 229.

³² Darling, *Punjab Peasants*, 49. See also *Rohtak District Gazetteer 1910*, III-A (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette, 1911), 85.

³³ *Rohtak District Gazetteer 1910*, 85. See also Kensington, *Customary Law of the Ambala District*, vol. X, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁵ Darling, *Punjab Peasants*, 50.

³⁶ Nirmal Kumar Mukarji, *Oral History Transcript*, Vol. I (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), 407.

³⁷ Prem Chowdhry, *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Relations in Rural Haryana, 1880-1990* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61-62.

³⁸ Later in life Chhotu Devi always complained that she had been married to a man who was already married. This was clearly an imposition of the norm of monogamous marriage

hailed and advocated by the British and accepted legally as a part of post-independent India in a period when it did not exist.

³⁹ Calculated from *Rohtak District Gazetteer 1936*, vol. II, part II, statistical tables (Lahore, Civil and Military Gazette, 1936), table no. 21.

⁴⁰ The government had advocated consolidation of holdings as a solution to its fragmentation. As a young officer, Hardwari Lal felt that "a consolidation of holding [was] not a safeguard against the operation of law of inheritance and succession in future unless it be specifically arranged in these laws that property in land shall remain impartible in an issue of succession or inheritance and that the beneficiaries of partition shall be entitled to only a money value of their share of the land. The eldest male member of the family shall be responsible to discharging the claims of the other members by payment of an estimated money value of their respective shares. In the absence of sufficient financial resources, it should be the duty of the government to advance him a loan to meet his requirements and his loan should be legitimately come within the scope of agricultural improvements."

⁴¹ See Inquiry conducted by M.L. Darling, Financial Commissioner of Punjab, dated June 3rd, 1936, Darling Papers (South Asian Centre, Cambridge), Box 5, f. 1. The village surveys undertaken by the Punjab Board of Economic Inquiry 1920-40 also showed that in seven out of eight villages, in different districts of this region, the average area per owner had decreased noticeably in the previous 30 years.

⁴² Interview with Neelam Mukerji, New Delhi, June 12th, 2000.

⁴³ W.E. Purser and H.C. Fanshawe, *Report on the Revised Land Revenue Settlement: Rohtak District, 1873-79* (Lahore: W. Ball Printer, 1880), 49.

⁴⁴ For details see Prem Chowdhry, "Persistence of a Custom: Cultural Centrality of *Ghunghat*," *Social Scientist* 21:9-11 (Sept.-Nov. 1993), 91-112.

⁴⁵ Darling, *Punjab Peasants*, 51.

⁴⁶ *Hissar District Gazetteer, 1904* (Lahore, 1908), 65.

⁴⁷ Sarva Daman Singh, *Polyandry in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 161-165.

⁴⁸ Among the British were Denzil Ibbetson, H.A. Rose, W. Crooke, C.S. Kirkpatrick and J.M. Douie. Nearly all of them cited from earlier accounts as well as their own observations.

⁴⁹ Darling, *Punjab Peasants*, 51. For the entire debate around polyandry and whether it can be broadly taken to mean a relationship in which a number of brothers hold common sexual rights in a single woman who is married to one of them, see Paul Hershman, *Punjabi Kinship and Marriage* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1981), 176-188; also K.P. Singh, "Polyandry among the Jat Sikhs of Punjab," in Manish Kumar Raha, ed., *Polyandry in India* (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1987), 233-243.

⁵⁰ Interview with Khem Lal Rathee, New Delhi, May 24th, 1986. Born in 1912 in village Rajlugarhi, Sonapat, Rathee's large joint family had once been in possession of 100 *bighas* of land. He saw the stark poverty of the region as responsible for this practice.

⁵¹ Joyce Pettigrew, *Robber Nobleman: A Study of the Political System of the Sikh Jats* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 53; Hershman, *Punjabi Kinship*, 176-188; and Singh, "Polyandry."

⁵² Nirmal Kumar Mukarji, *Oral History Transcript*, Vol. I (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), 95-96.

⁵³ F.F. Monk, *A History of St. Stephen's College, Delhi* (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1935), 203.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ At a farewell speech in 1933, Hardwari Lal acknowledged his "debt" to the college.

⁵⁶ Interviews with Khushwant Singh, New Delhi, June 18th, 2000, and Nirmal Kumar Mukarji, New Delhi, June 12th, 2000.

⁵⁷ For details see Mridula Mukherji, "Some aspects of agrarian structure of Punjab, 1925-47," *Economic and Political Weekly* 15:14 (April-June 1980), A46-58.

⁵⁸ From Hardwari Lal's college speeches and debates, 1929-33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁰ Monk, *A History of St. Stephen's College*, 203

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 254-55.

⁶² Nirmal Kumar Mukarji, *Oral History Transcript*, Vol. I, 78.

⁶³ Hardwari Lal's unpublished piece titled, "St. Stephen's: A college with a difference.

⁶⁴ Edward O. Henry, "The Mother Goddess Cult and Interaction between Little and Great Religious Tradition," in Giri Raj Gupta, ed., *Religion in Modern India* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 174-197.

⁶⁵ From register of Hardwari Lal recording early years of Independence, 52.

⁶⁶ Chander Prakash Bhambhri, *Administrators in a Changing Society* (Delhi: National, 1972), 21.

⁶⁷ Bradford Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India: Status, Policy and the ICS in the late Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976), 351.

⁶⁸ Among others, see for example, Spangenberg, *British Bureaucracy in India* and Bhambhri, *Administrators in a Changing Society*.

⁶⁹ T.G.P. Spear, "Patterns of British Leadership in British India—Theme with Variations," in B.N. Pandey, ed., *Leadership in South Asia* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1977), 19-40.

⁷⁰ In conversation with Neelam Kumar Mukharji.

⁷¹ See testimonial of N.K. Mukharji, ICS, District Commissioner, Hissar, dated July 9th, 1949.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Jawaharlal Nehru similarly had little but scorn for the bureaucracy, which according to him had seen “a progressive deterioration, moral and intellectual.” Cited in Ramchandra Guha, “The Biggest Gamble in History,” *Contemporary India* 1:1 (Jan-March 2002), 33-34. Among political observers, see C.P. Bhabhari, *Administrators in a changing society*, 22-23.