

(Re)Imagining Rajputhood and Scheduled-Caste Identity along Tharparkar-Rajasthan Borderland in Sindh, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

New forms of social identities developing in the Tharparkar-Rajasthan borderland are challenging the earlier caste hierarchies in the region. The paper shows this development by following the history of border-making and analyzing the narratives of a once-dominant Hindu community, the Sodha Rajputs, and the currently mainstreaming Scheduled-Caste communities of Tharparkar. Whereas the Scheduled Castes discussed in this paper are redefining themselves as a majority within a minority (i.e. Pakistani Hindus), the Sodha Rajputs, a formerly powerful group in their (now trans-national) region, are re-imagining ideas of Rajputhood and seeing themselves as a real Hindu minority in Pakistan. The paper draws upon Farhana Ibrahim's ethnography in western India, which shows the process of border making through a complex mix of national, regional, and religious discourses and the way different communities respond to these shifting regimes. Drawing upon this important work, the paper offers a micro view of Hindu caste-identity in the Thar-Rajasthan borderland showing how caste identity is

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being reshaped in this region? The paper uses data collected through unstructured, in-depth interviews and observations during the fieldwork in the eastern-most district of the southern Sindh province of Pakistan, Tharparkar over the span of two years.

Introduction

On the eve of Partition of British India in 1947 (when India was divided into Pakistan and India) a *leeko* (Dhatki, line), an international boundary, *India-Pakistan jo border* or *India Pakistan jo had, dang* (Sindhi: India-Pakistan border or end of the limit/border of Pakistan), or simply border, was drawn in the desert district of the Sindh province, partitioning it from India. This international boundary replaced the provincial boundary in the East of the province, disconnecting Sindh from the present-day Indian States of Rajasthan and Gujarat. In this borderland, the eastern-most district of Sindh province, Tharparkar,¹ Scheduled-Caste² activists claim that they constitute a (numerical) majority within the Hindu minority in Pakistan. They argue for more share in power structures, citing their numbers. On the other hand, the once powerful and ruling elites of the region, the Sodha Rajputs (a sub-caste of Hindu Rajputs³ in Pakistan) lament the loss of their political domination⁴ over the region and argue that a sudden decrease in their numbers in the 1970s has

1 In this study, Tharparkar stands for the current administrative district of Sindh named Tharparkar. Historically and culturally, this region was part of Rajputana, and it was connected with Gujarat, Kutch, Bhuj and beyond. For a detailed history of the Thar desert and region, see: Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives: A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

2 The Government of India Act, 1935 introduced a technical term, "Scheduled Castes," replacing "Depressed Classes". "Untouchability" was the criterion for identifying such castes. Since the names of these castes were published as schedules attached to the Act, the groups came to be called Scheduled Castes. See: S. Charsley, "Untouchable: What is in a Name?" *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 1 (1996).

3 For a discussion on the origins of Rajputs, see: Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*.

4 J. W. Smyth, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind - Thar and Parkar District* (1919) (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), 8.

rendered them a real and powerless Hindu minority in Pakistan. In this paper, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Tharparkar, I offer a micro view of identity politics among Sodha Rajputs and Scheduled Castes of Tharparkar, to exhibit how different castes within what the Pakistani state assume to be a homogenous and fixed religious minority (i.e. Hindus) express distinct identities, including political ones? The paper presents an overview of Sodha Rajput and Scheduled-Caste narratives in the region. Their narratives reveal distinct caste identities and power struggles among the Hindu communities inhabiting the Thar-Rajasthan borderlands in Pakistan. It argues that (re)imagining themselves as a minority or majority is an important aspect of minority identity politics for these two communities. Both Sodha Rajputs and Scheduled Castes in contemporary Pakistan use political vocabulary introduced during the colonial period and continued by the post-colonial state to express their status within the framework of the nation-state. Those narratives are heavily conditioned by the empirical reality of their marginality not only in the Sindh but also within the wider society. Despite a strong presence of religious nationalism in Pakistan, external factors such as war on terror and its ripple effects globally has played a significant role in strengthening the citizenship narrative of Pakistani Hindus in recent years.

Conventional histories of the Partition have ignored the predicament of regionally powerful or powerless castes in South Asia, during or after the Partition. Rajputs and Scheduled Castes on the Tharparkar-Rajasthan borderland are two such examples. Significant studies on post-Partition Sindh discuss the predicament of Hindus in urban centres of Sindh.⁵ Other excellent scholars, such as Rita Kothari⁶,

⁵ Sarah Ansari and William Gould, *Boundaries of Belonging: Localities, Citizenship and Rights in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Sara Ansari, "At the Crossroads? Exploring Sindh's Recent Past from a Spatial Perspective," *Contemporary South Asia* 23, no. 1 (2015): 7-25. and *Life after Partition: Migration,*

Bhavani Nandita⁷ and Michel Boivin,⁸ have studied the shifts in Sindhi Hindu identity in India after the Partition. However, there has been only limited research on Hindu communities living in Sindh, those living in the Tharparkar region.⁹

Rajputs, the feudal elites in and around the Tharparkar region at the time of Partition, suffered during the Partition as their landed properties were pursued by the refugees as 'evacuee property'¹⁰ and have gradually lost their political dominance in Pakistan. Today, the Rajput community in the region is bisected by the international border between India and Pakistan. In India, Rajasthan has been reduced to a destination of culture and tourism. Two films, so far, have shown the impacts of geopolitics and nationalism on the lives of people living in Thar borderland. A Pakistani filmmaker Mehreen Jabbar portrayed the issues of Pakistani Hindu-Dalits living on the Thar-Rajasthan border who accidentally cross the border.¹¹ The film highlighted the issues of belonging, citizenship and the border. Ashvin Kumar's short film Little Terrorist showed a Pakistani Muslim-boy crossing the border into India and being saved by an Indian Brahman.¹² In Bollywood, the Rajputs have been depicted as a warrior people with a strong sense of honor and outward appearance of glamor. These Bollywood

Community and Strife in Sindh: 1947-1962 (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005),

- 6 Rita Kothari, *The Burden of Refuge: The Sindhi Hindus of Gujarat* (Chennai: Orient Longman, 2007).
- 7 Nandita Bhavnani, *The Making of Exile: Sindhi Hindus and the Partition of India* (Chennai: Tranquebar Press, 2014).
- 8 Michel Boivin, *The Hindu Sufis of South Asia: Partition, Shrine Culture and the Sindhis in India* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019).
- 9 Sadia Mahmood, "Minoritization of Pakistani Hindus: 1947-1971," (Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, 2014). It discusses the predicament of Pakistani Hindus after the Partition in Pakistan particularly in Tharparkar.
- 10 Mahmood, "Minoritization of Hindus in Pakistan (1947:1971)," Chapter 2, *Loss of Hindu Life from Pakistan: Sindh and East Bengal*.
- 11 Mehreen Jabbar. 2008. Ram Chand Pakistani. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1095421/>.
- 12 Ashvin Kumar. 2004. Little Terrorist. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0425200/>

movies not only construct certain kind of identity but also history and valour of Rajputs.

The histories of Partition have focused little on the Dalit communities affected by Partition. The works of Dwaipayan Sen and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay are significant contributions to the study of Dalits in East Pakistan (1947-1971). However, very little is known about the Scheduled Castes in West Pakistan soon after the Partition. Dwaipayan Sen writes:

We need to know more, for instance, about how Dalits who found themselves on the so-called "wrong side of the border" in West and East Pakistan fared, or whether freedom and independence from colonial rule lived up to the expectations of those who remained on the "right side"; or whether and to what extent violence between unmarked Hindus and Muslims and its tragic consequences in forced migration and resettlement led to the erasure of caste-differences between caste Hindus and Scheduled Castes.... One hopes that future research will provide answers to these questions....¹³

Most importantly, most of the Hindu communities residing in Tharparkar speak Dhatki, Parkari or Gujarati and are historically and culturally linked with the regions now constituting the Indian States of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Linguistically they do not belong to the category of Sindhi Hindus. Some of these castes are now trans-national and live in a region that was not a borderland before 1947 and was on the periphery of Sindh province.

Tanuja Kothiyal's¹⁴ and Farhana Ibrahim's¹⁵ academic works offer us useful insights into the complex processes of border

13 Dwaipayan Sen, "Caste Politics and Partition in South Asian History," *History Compass* 10, no. 7 (July 2012): 8.

14 Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*. Also: Tanuja Kothiyal, "Frontiers, State and Banditry in the Thar Desert in the 19th Century," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (April 2017).

15 For example, See: Farhana Ibrahim, *Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns; An Ethnography of State Formation in Western India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009). Also: Farhana Ibrahim, "Defining a Border: Harijan Migrants and the State in Kachchh," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 16 (2005). Also: Farhana Ibrahim, "Cross-Border Intimacies: Marriage, Migration, and Citizenship in Western India," *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 5 (Sep 2018).

making on the Indian side. Kothiyal studies the Thar desert and explores regional formations and questions of authority and sovereignty in the borderland and identity formation in relation to circulation of people, cattle, commodities, ideas and traditions in the region between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Ibrahim's works show us how, amid the complex contexts of religious nationalism, communal strife and the politics of living in a borderland, a region becomes a meaningful place for its inhabitants and how different peoples relate to it through time? It is now well accepted in academic discourse that even though 'borderlands may constitute the physical margins of the Westphalian state, they are at the very core of nationalist discourses about territorial survival and security and are also integral to the ways in which the nation is both imagined and produced. The frontiers of pre-modern states were thus zones of negotiated loyalties and competing sovereignties that sustained immense possibilities for the emergence of new social and political formations. These were not merely neutral territories but 'political wombs' where, 'cohesive, participatory, segment communities, endowed with great military potential' existed with tremendous potentialities for supplying new rulers.'¹⁶ Ibrahim's work shows how the border is created through a complex mix of national, regional, and religious discourses, and how different communities respond to these shifting regimes?¹⁷ So what kind of region is post-Partition Thar? The region is in a state of flux since 1965 and hence fluid. Drawing upon these observations and Ansari's paraphrasing of Ludden, 'when fluid processes, rather than, fixed structures, become our object of study, apparent peripheries - like - Sindh - are transformed into crucial sites for historical exploration'¹⁸.

16 Farhana Ibrahim and Tanuja Kothiyal, "Exploring Borderland in South Asia: Beyond Territorial and Jurisdictional Confines," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 15 (April 2017).

17 See: Ibrahim, *Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns*.

18 Sarah Ansari, "At the Crossroads? Exploring Sindh's Recent Past from a Spatial Perspective," *Contemporary South Asia* 23, no. 1 (2015): 7-25.

For this paper, data was collected through unstructured, in-depth interviews and observations during my fieldwork in the eastern-most district of the southern Sindh province of Pakistan, Tharparkar, where the number of Hindu (Caste and Scheduled Castes both) voters currently stands at 46percent of the total number of voters.¹⁹

The Scheduled-Caste voices in this paper are those of Scheduled-Caste notables and activists in Tharparkar. They belong to various professional backgrounds, such as law, human rights, government, and local NGOs. Three major groups among the Scheduled Castes (SC) in Tharparkar are: Kohlis, Bheels and Meghwars.²⁰ It is these major castes that are struggling for socio-political inclusion in Pakistan. During my research, I met several activist and non-activist SCs.

Thar and the Origins of Rajputs

The Rana of Rajputs in Umarmkot introduced Thar to me in the following way as we sat down in his Haveli in Umarmkot, surrounded by his men, for our discussion on the history of Rajputs in the region:

Desert Thar had always been divided into two parts: one part of Thar was known as Rajputana and the other one as Dhaat (i.e. Thar). Furthermore, the gateway to Thar from the plains of Sindh is Amarmkot [Umarmkot]. Desert Thar starts from Amarmkot and the plains of the Indus begin from Amarmkot, cross Sindh and go all the way to the Arabian Sea. Historically, trade routes passed along this stretch

19 *The Daily Times.*, July 31, 2018, "Three Hindu candidates elected from Muslim majority areas on general seats in Sindh". Accessed: March 30, 2020. <https://www.dailytimes.com.pk/275714/three-hindu-candidates-elected-from-muslim-majority-areas-on-general-seats-in-sindh>

20 The census of Thar and Parkar conducted in 1911 does not show a hierarchical order among local castes, tribes or other races, whether Hindu or Muslim. Billimoria shows that in 1931 'depressed classes' were not shown in the table for religion but appeared in the table for Caste, Tribe, Race, or Nationality. The table classified Bhils and Kohlis as tribals and Meghwars as Hindu Scheduled Castes. See: N. M. Billimoria, "Census Reports of Sind for the Years 1931 and 1941: A Comparison" In *Discovering Sindh's Past: Selection from the Journal of the Sind Historical Society, 1934-1948 ed.*, Michel Boivin, Matthew Cook and Julien Levesque (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

of land. When Sher Shah defeated Humayun, he took the same route through Amarkot to cross the River Indus to reach Iran.

According to Kothiyal, Thar, now divided by an international boundary between Pakistan and India and widely associated with barrenness and waste, has always remained a dynamic migratory region throughout history.²¹ It has existed as a frontier which connected Punjab, Multan, Sindh, Gujarat and Rajasthan for centuries.²² Various groups have ruled this region since ancient times.²³ The British presence in adjoining Rajputana or Rajasthan goes back to 1818 when they arrived in Udaipur.²⁴ The British conquest of Tharparkar took place in 1832 from Bhuj (Gujarat). In 1843, Sindh was annexed to the rest of the British Indian Empire. This conquest transferred the allegiance of the people of the province from Talpur Mirs to the British administration in Sindh²⁵ and from Rajputs to British in Tharparkar. During the colonial period, the British administered Tharparkar from Bhuj (now in India). In 1859, the Rajputs decided to revolt against the British and were defeated.²⁶ This was before the creation of Pakistan. The Rajputs, albeit losing to the British army, were able to maintain their hegemony over the region considerably till 1971. Thar commonly became associated with 'Rajputana,' as "the physical and intellectual area of study".²⁷ James Tod was first to use the word 'Rajasthan,' 'the abode of princes,' he became instrumental in associating the region with Rajputs.²⁸ As a territory ruled by Rajput clans, most histories on Thar have focused on Rajputs as the 'pre-dominant reference to its socio-historical

21 Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, 1.

22 Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*.

23 Rima Hooja, *A History of Rajasthan* (Rajasthan: Rupa & Company, 2006), 89.

24 Freitag, *Serving Empire, Serving Nation*, 51.

25 Stanley Napier Raikes, *Memoir on the Thurr and Parkur Districts of Sind* 1856. (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1859), 28.

26 Hughes, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 2nd ed., 57.

27 Hughes, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 2nd ed., 2.

28 Hughes, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 2nd ed., 3.

identity.’ Kothiyal finds this identification problematic. She argues that the region could be defined better ‘through the mobility of its peripatetic residents than through the political boundaries that divided it.’²⁹ Thar came to be primarily identified as ‘Rajputana’ by the nineteenth century. It meant “an assortment of princely states ruled by the Rajputs.”³⁰ Bardic traditions mention Rajput defence of land and forts particularly against Muslim invaders as central to ‘Rajput ethos.’³¹ Rajputs, once strong allies of the Mughals, have lived in this area with Muslims and with other Hindu and tribal communities.

British reports mentioned a large percentage of Hindus, including Bheels and Kolis (spelled Kohlis elsewhere), lived in Tharparkar. As a matter of fact, for the British, this district was different in this respect from the other districts of Sindh province. Many Hindus in this district differentiates it from any other district in Sind.³² Among the many Hindu groups of Tharparkar, the British found the Soda/Sodha Rajputs to be the dominant group of landlords and administrators of Tharparkar. British documents mention that ‘Rajputs,’ originating from Malwa, conquered Umarkot fort in 1226 A.D. The Umarkot fort is the same fort where Humayun and his family were sheltered, and Akbar was born in 1542. In 1750, Umarkot was conquered by the Kalhoras, a Sindhi Muslim dynasty. By that time, the Sodas/Sodhas had spread to the desert up to Parkar.³³

The contemporary state of Rajasthan was formed in 1948 to 1956 in India.³⁴ According to Kothiyal, it was after the formation of the current state that a deep sense of shared past and culture started taking its roots among the people of the state. This identity is further bolstered by the projection

29 Hughes, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 2nd ed.

30 Hughes, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 2nd ed.

31 Hughes, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 2nd ed.

32 Smyth, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, 8.

33 Raikes, *Memoir on the Thurr and Parkur Districts of Sind*, 4-5.

34 Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, 3.

of Rajputs as the proud protectors of the land of shifting dunes.³⁵ According to Tanuja Kothiyal, 'honor' constitutes the core of Rajputhood.³⁶ Rajput history portray themselves as the last resistance against Muslim rule in India, Turks and Mughals both. They also claim, 'to embody the spirit of sacrifice necessary to mount resistances even at the cost of their lives formed a crucial part of the idea of being Rajput.'³⁷

Rajputs and Scheduled Castes in the Nation-state

The Partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 led to the Hindu communities that remained in Pakistan being designated as 'minorities.' Religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan have voiced disapproval of their designation as minorities since the inception of the state.³⁸ Despite their disapproval of this category, it is the only constitutional category available to Pakistani Hindus to negotiate their social and political space in Pakistan.

Pakistan declared itself the Islamic Republic on March 23, 1956, and the pre-Partition census and electoral category of general was converted into Hindus (designating all Hindus who remained in Pakistan a religious minority). This new post-colonial religious minority thus had to negotiate its relationship with the new polity and reconfigure its identity, externally as well as internally in relation to the nation-state, new regional demography as well as borders. Those who stayed hoped they would still be relevant to the state and be part of the power play, however, soon they found themselves being excluded from politics.

35 Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*.

36 Kothiyal, *Nomadic Narratives*, 10.

37 Tanuja Kothiyal, "Persistence of Memory: Never Mind History, Padmavati is As Real for Rajputs as their Famed Valour," *Scroll* (Jan 29, 2017).

38 Saba Mahmood and Quinn Coffey's works on minorities in the Middle East are fine examples of problematizing the relationship of Middle Eastern Christian and Bahai communities to "minority status" in the light of the realities of secularism, citizenship, state-building and nationalism in the Middle East. Specifically, Mahmood shows us how modern secular governance has exacerbated religious tensions and inequalities rather reducing them in Egypt.

In 1951, there were 30 General (Hindu) seats in the East Bengal Legislature compared to 10 in the Sindh province, as opposed to 36 seats for Scheduled Castes in the East Bengal and none in Sindh.³⁹ Besides a few mentions of reservations for Scheduled-Caste students in East Bengal in the 1950s in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, government documents or national newspapers of the time are silent on the issues of the Scheduled Castes. In 1957, the Scheduled Castes Declaration Ordinance declared 40 non-Muslim castes in Sindh and Baluchistan as Scheduled Castes⁴⁰ (West Pakistan was one unit then). It is through this ordinance that Bheel, Kohlis and Meghwars, the largest groups of Scheduled-Caste people in contemporary Pakistan, were declared to fall into this category. Soon after, however, the history and struggle of Pakistani caste and Scheduled Castes became obscured within the larger political context of early era Pakistani national and regional politics in Bengal.⁴¹

Mapping the Shifting Geography and Political Identity of Rajputs in Pakistan

In Pakistan, Tharparkar as a region has remained on the periphery of the nation-state until recently.⁴² The Thar-Rajasthan region does not appear in the narratives of

39 Currently, ten seats out of 342 in all in the National Assembly are reserved for all religious minorities. See: Meena Menon, "An Unequal Election for Pakistan's Minorities," <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/an-unequal-election-for-pakistans-minorities/article5231812.ece>. Accessed: 14 Nov, 2019.

40 "1. Delimitation of Seats in East Bengal, 2. Revisions of Seats in East Bengal Legislature, 3. East Bengal's Elections." Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Secretariat. File No. 195/CF/51 (37/CF/51, 109/CF/51). National Documentation Centre, Islamabad, Pakistan.

41 Mahmood, "Minoritization of Hindus in Pakistan (1947-1971)". Also See: Sen, Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2018). Also See: S. Bandyopadhyay, "Partition and the Ruptures in Dalit Identity Politics in Bengal," *Asian Studies Review* 33, no. 4 (2009): 33.

42 The Government of Pakistan's decision of exploiting Thar Coal has reanimated the region.

Partition and is mentioned only in passing in histories of the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971.⁴³ The demography of this region, historically part of Rajasthan, thus changed only slightly in 1947. This border remained porous, allowing the local people to continue their relations on both sides of the border with minimal restrictions, till the 1965 Indo-Pak War. Local people mention that, in the case of a wedding procession (Sindhi: Janj) to Rajasthan, before the 1965 war, they were required only to inform the in-charge at the check post about where they were heading and with how many people. No travel documents were required. The border was sealed gradually, with the final stroke coming in 1971.⁴⁴ Today, in the part of Thar which is situated in the Pakistani province of Sindh, the local communities, Hindus and Muslim both, have blood and matrimonial relationships with people on the Indian side of the border. Before Partition, Sindh and Rajasthan were connected via railways as well. Raja ji Rail, the train of the Raja of Jodhpur, used to run on a 650 KM track from Jodhpur to Hyderabad.⁴⁵ After Partition, the Sindh-Jodhpur border and the Gadro-Monabao border were officially used as ports of entry and exit by outflowing Hindu and incoming Muslim refugees.⁴⁶ By May 1950, the Government of Pakistan had decided to take no more refugees through this crossing and discussions to seal the Sindh-Jodhpur border were underway. The locals who have

43 There are references to the region in early Vedic literature. See: Hooja, "A History of Rajasthan," 218.

44 Uday Singh Rana, "Deserted by a Line in the Sand," *News 18*. <https://www.news18.com/news/immersive/deserted-by-a-line-in-the-sand-rajasthan.html?fbclid=IwAR3fbsMVeUfFRs4Jnx1MFcNpKztgz4PIHG18YMK1u-kVgySge1caXiWsl1Q>.

45 "It was called so because the Raja of Jodhpur and other Rajas of neighbouring princely states helped Indian Railways to lay down a 650-km meter-gauge track from Jodhpur to Hyderabad." A. B. Arisar, "A Railway Station Steeped in History," *Dawn.com*. <http://www.dawn.com/news/742220/a-railway-station-steeped-in-history>. Accessed: 12/26/2019.

46 Cabinet Division. Government of Pakistan. File No: 95/CF/50-i) Reimplementation of Permit on Sind Border, ii) Measures to ensure effective sealing of Sind Jodhpur borer, iii) Illegal influx of refugees through Khokrapar. NDC Holdings. Islamabad.

relatives on either side of the border told me about the difficulties they face in visiting their relatives. Sodhas marry their daughters to Jadejas, a sub-caste of Rajputs now living in India. Until the first military conflict in the region, it was easy for the community to maintain matrimonial relationships and frequent family visits on the other side of the border. However, the conflict over the border in the Rann of Kutch area between the two post colonies, as well as smuggling and human trafficking, increased the surveillance of the border beginning in the 1960s, and after the 1965 and 1971 conflicts between the two nation-states led to the militarization of the border in the region, resulting in a definite blow to community affairs, especially affecting the lives of Sodha women. Pakistani Sodhas, due to border and visa restrictions, cannot keep track of their daughters' lives in India and complain that many women are abandoned by their Jadeja in-laws after their dowry has been confiscated.

As mentioned earlier, the Sodha Rajputs were the ruling elites of eastern Sindh at the time of the Partition. Being the landed and political elite, they did not see a reason to migrate from Pakistan at the time of Partition. According to Pakistani Thakurs, they did not need to migrate as they were a 'majority' (a dominant Hindu community of the region) here. While giving their justification of not migrating in 1947, the Sodhas told me that the Sindhi speaking Hindus of upper Sindh were already a 'minority' in Sindh and therefore it necessitated their migration in large numbers in 1947. However, the Hindus of Thar who were living on and around the present international border had no reason to move to India. The Rajputs in this part of the world have their own spatial and cultural geography, which is now split between two rival countries. Their communal, as well as political life, is passing through a struggle of maintaining some symbolic presence of their faded dominance in Umarkot and the Tharparkar region while trying to maintain relational bonds across the border. A Sodha Rajput leader explained the strategic complication of their location in the following manner:

We [Rajputs] inhabit an area that stretches over 450 miles along the Indo-Pak [international] border, stretching from the [Sindh] Runn of Kutch to [Punjab] Bahawalpur. We were the majority in our area. This was our native land. We, the Rajputs, never out-migrated from Sindh [after the partition] but the Sindhi Hindus did because they were a minority in Sindh. Hindus became powerful in Sindh during the British time. They became so because they were educated and progressive. But we [the Hindu community in general] misused the power of administration given to us by the British. We didn't know how to use it. The electoral system was new for us. [Then he pointed his finger towards me and asked me] "Do you know who was allowed to vote [during the British period]?" [He continued telling me] "A *Khate-daar* [landholder] possessing no less than 15 acres of land; only he was allowed to vote. People [the Indian people] didn't know the consequences of the electoral system. [This led to the partition of India]. Our community was approached by the Congress leadership [to join the Indian federation] but we decided to keep the geographical entity intact [by keeping Thar with Sindh province]. Post-Partition migration never took place in Thar, only the business class [Hindus] migrated from Upper Sindh.

Due to a reduction in numbers and hold over land, the Sodhas and other Rajput sub-castes have been unable to keep their power from fading in this region. Today, unhappy with their waning political power and the trauma related to it, they do not allow easy access into their lives and narrative, particularly to strangers or outsiders. While referring to the decrease in their political power in the region, my Rajput interlocutors lamented the loss of their political stature in the post-colony. Sodhas, in particular, emphasize that only they deserve to be designated as a 'minority' and not any other castes, such as Lohanas. They often told me, 'we have now become a minority, we are a real and a true (Hindu) minority (in Pakistan).' A majority of the Rajput community is less literate than other communities of the region. However, they are split about whether to maintain their traditional isolation or join with modernity. A few Bhatti Rajputs told me that they were not happy with Sodha continuing marrying their girls to Jadejas (on the Indian side). They considered it a form of servitude. The struggle between tradition and modernity is evident in the life and narrative of the community; however, change is not in sight.

According to the 1998 district census report of Tharparkar, until the early 1960s, 80 percent of the population was Hindu.⁴⁷ During the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, a sizeable area of Tharparkar fell under Indian occupation. After the Indian occupation of parts of Tharparkar, thousands of local upper-caste and Scheduled-Caste Hindus, along with Muslims, were displaced. This war reduced the Rajput dominance in the region when 24 years after Partition, the Rajputs of Tharparkar, members of the Sodha clan, decided to stay in India. This happened approximately a year after Thakur Lachman Singh (the Thakur of Chachro) migrated to India. After the conclusion of the Simla agreement in 1972,⁴⁸ which formally ended the 1971 India Pakistan war, the governments of India and Pakistan reached an agreement for the release of POWs and the return of occupied territory in Thar. The Pakistani premier, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, sent a delegation of three members to bring the Thari Hindu refugees back to Tharparkar. According to National Assembly records, an estimated 55,000 people returned to their homes.⁴⁹ However, the feudal elites of Tharparkar, the Sodhas, who had migrated to India remained there, leaving other communities to fill the political vacuum. The Sodhas I spoke to, estimated the exodus of their clan members to be around one lakh people. I couldn't find any records of people's movement to and from India during this period.

47 Public Census Organization, *1998 District Census Report of Tharparkar*, Census Publication no. 40. (Islamabad: Statistics Division, Government of Pakistan, September 1999). P. 7.

48 Bhutto.org. Indian and Pakistani forces shall be withdrawn to their side of the international border. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto: Simla Agreement. <http://www.bhutto.org/simla-agreement.php>. Accessed: 3 April, 2019.

49 The National Assembly of Pakistan Debates. 13 September 1972. *Adjournment Motion re: Settlement of 55,000 Indian Agents in Sind as Pakistani Hindus*, 1341-1347.

The Re-making of Border and the Narrative of Scheduled Castes in Tharparkar

At the time of Partition, there was a considerable Scheduled-Caste population in Sindh.⁵⁰ Some oral accounts do confirm the influence of the Dalit movement of the 1920s in the region. There is not much written archival record available on the activities of the Scheduled-Caste Federation in Sindh prior to or after the Partition.⁵¹ The oral accounts also narrate that before Partition, Gandhi's campaign of renaming untouchables as Harijans had made some impact on Sindh in the context of larger nationalist Indian politics and people did substitute *Harijan*⁵² category for the earlier *Achoot*. The departure of Thakurs in the seventies offered Thari Scheduled Castes the opportunity for upward mobility. I had the opportunity to meet with Bheel, Kohli and Meghwar activists⁵³ in Tharparkar. The Pakistani constitution enacted a prohibition on Untouchability in 1956.⁵⁴ But even with this prohibition Tharparkar's Scheduled Castes, as they told me, had to challenge the practice of Untouchability in public spaces, specifically entering local restaurants and securing the right to eat there. It was only towards the 1990s that they could enter restaurants and be served. As they describe their marginality, they are still struggling to be recognized as the 'human' by society around them as well as their country as a whole.

Three major groups among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Tharparkar are Kohlis, Bheels and Meghwars.⁵⁵

50 See: Introduction in Mahmood, "Minoritization of Pakistani Hindus (1947-1971)".

51 Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*.

52 Harijan is a term with Hindu meaning introduced by Gandhi to re-name Untouchables. "Harijans" means "Children of God Vishnu."

53 Unlike Kohlis and Bheels, Meghwars are more accessible.

54 Constitution of Pakistan 1956. 2nd March 1956.
http://lcwu.edu.pk/ocd/cfiles/Pakistan%20Studies/Maj/pak-st-301/Constitution_of_Pakistan_1956.pdf. Accessed: 20 January 2021.

55 The census of Thar and Parkar conducted in 1911, however, does not show a hierarchical order among local castes or tribes, whether Hindu or Muslim.

Tharparkar district has the lowest human development index in Pakistan.⁵⁶ Most people live in extreme poverty, are in poor psychosomatic health and lack basic infrastructure. Since most Bheel and Kohli men travel to bigger towns in search of employment, the women stay back in the desert. Illiteracy too is prevalent among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes as it is among the Rajputs. As Robinson and Kujur put it, the Scheduled Castes exist on the 'edges of the social world... these worlds are also often spatially/ geographically/ territorially marginal.'⁵⁷

According to the 1998 Census of Pakistan, 6.5 percent of the Sindhi population were enumerated as Caste Hindus and 0.99 percent were counted as Scheduled Castes.⁵⁸ These figures were disputed by Hindu communities in Sindh. According to Scheduled Caste activists, the Upper Caste Hindus are fewer in number than the Scheduled Castes in Pakistan. "Our community constitutes 90 percent of what is called 'the Hindus.' We are a majority and upper castes are a minority." Therefore, the Scheduled Caste leaders demand more representation in the legislature and quotas for jobs, which is why some of them campaign actively to get themselves enumerated as Scheduled Castes and not as Hindus for census data collection. For example, in 2017, a recently established Dalit activist movement known as *Dalit Sujaag Tehreek* (Awakening Movement for Oppressed) based in Tharparkar, Sindh campaigned among the Scheduled Castes (or, as they frame it, 'all oppressed') of Sindh to register their religion as 'Scheduled Caste' instead of 'Hindu' and designate their mother tongue as Sindhi in the census. To assert their importance, the Pakistani Scheduled Caste activists emphasize that they are non-Hindus, native

56 S. A. Khalti, "Life in the Desert," *Himal Southasian* (29 July 2015). <http://www.himalmag.com/life-desert-tharparkar/>. Accessed 29 February 2020.

57 Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), 2.

58 Population Census Organization, Government of Pakistan, Population by Religion: <http://www.census.gov.pk/Religion.html>. Accessed: 14 May, 2019.

and indigenous Sindhis, thus genuinely Pakistanis and, above all, 'a majority within a minority' i.e. Pakistani Hindus.

The Pakistani Scheduled Castes narrate incidents from their school days where they faced the prejudice of untouchability not only from the Hindu teaching staff but from Muslims as well. Increasing political awareness, and faster and collective means of transportation (buses), have challenged the upper caste Hindu community to consider adjustments to caste restrictions. However, many fear losing their hegemony and having not been able to maintain traditional control over the society. Where there is clear caste discrimination on certain levels, they feel pressure to remain part of the community and not give air to the communalism with their assertion on Scheduled Caste as a non-Hindu category only for the counting purposes. If they can establish it as a separate category constitutionally, Pakistani upper-caste Hindus will further decrease in the game of numbers which is linked with electoral representation.

A Scheduled Caste teacher who introduced himself as a Marwari (he withheld his caste identity) said:

The Marwari community is oppressed. People [the larger society] usually do not know about our condition. Only those among Muslims who are closer to us know about our problems.

Referring to shifts in Pakistani politics since the 1950s, a Kohli person told me, 'We had reservations and reserved seats in the 1956 constitution, but then those seats were given to Hindus, who became a minority from the general category of the electorate. Reservation is always for backward castes and not for a minority. They want to keep us weak and backward.'

Conclusion

Seventy-three years after the Partition, Thar remains a vibrant and interconnected region on both sides of the international border. In Pakistan, the Rajputs have lost control over their cultural anchorage and are left with little power to claim their share in Sindh's politics, let alone the politics of Pakistan as a whole. They view themselves as

having been transformed into a minority after 1971, as their numbers and power declined in the region after the war. This has caused the Rajput presence to fade from public space in Pakistan. The loss of Rajputhood is being internally processed by the community and it is not shared in public space. There are attempts by the Rana family of Umarkot to reclaim their lost glory, but the attempts are only symbolic.

In the same region, some Scheduled Caste communities are experiencing upward mobility and claiming equal citizenship, as well as seeking new spaces to share power in the post-colony. The internet and globalization have linked Pakistani Scheduled Castes with international Dalit forums. The change taking place in Tharparkar is evident in the narrative of Rajput and Scheduled Caste communities.

The colonial period's electoral categories of majority and minority still play a leading role in the political narrative of caste and Scheduled Caste Hindus. Although numerically they have always been a majority among the Hindus in Pakistan, the Scheduled Castes are now asserting themselves to be the largest minority in Pakistan. However, their narrative has yet to register on a national level. Whereas there is clear caste discrimination on certain levels, Scheduled-Caste members also feel pressure to remain part of the Hindu community and not to give air to 'communalism' by asserting that Scheduled Caste is a non-Hindu category – even if only for purposes of counting. If activists succeed in establishing Scheduled Caste as a separate category constitutionally, Pakistani upper-caste Hindus will further decrease their hierarchical hegemony as well as their share in electoral representation. One can safely say that the Pakistani Scheduled Castes have managed to assert the importance of their vote and found a voice through the local Sindhi media. Contemporary Scheduled Caste politics in rural Sindh are set to not only assert a separate identity but the power of their numbers. From a Rajput perspective, the changes in the social fabric are making them compromise with the emerging new contexts. For example, changes in clothing patterns have made caste identification difficult.

Whereas previously people would be able to identify another person's caste by her/his attire, it no longer is easy to do so. Rajputs fully realize that political awareness among Scheduled Castes enables them not to be controlled as they used to be in the past. On the other hand, Scheduled-Caste activists assert that earlier patronage networks with upper-caste Hindus need to be discontinued or redefined. New forms of socio-political ecology are beginning to develop in Tharparkar, challenging earlier caste hierarchies.