Chapter 1

HIERARCHY AS HOPE

HIERARCHY IS INDIA'S BIGGEST SCANDAL. For the self-consciously modern, globe-trotting, rich, English-medium-educated citizens of the world's largest democracy, it is embarrassing to be members of the most famously hierarchical society on earth. The denizens of chic city enclaves will tell you that hierarchy is India's dead weight, the burden of backward, illiterate villagers, and they will flatly deny having any part in it, laughing, should you inquire about their caste, which they will say is the lore of yore. This denial of hierarchy is often visibly at odds with how the deniers themselves interact with servants, colleagues, and family, with the strikingly vertical choreography of their everyday lives. Those who enter the academic profession will join the chorus of critics who decry hierarchy as systemic oppression, writing about "degrading hierarchies" (Appadurai 2004: 65) that leave no room for the dignity of human will. The indignities of Indian "hierarchy"—caste-ism and clientelism; paternalism and dynastic politics; the plight of women, Dalits, and various other "subalterns"—fill the pages of novels and monographs, glossy magazines and academic journals alike. What appears even more objectionable than hierarchy itself is its patently widespread cultural endorsement, including among people "down below." In this archaic and seemingly motionless order of subjugation, how can anyone form their life's purposes? How can most of those whom it imprisons conceive of, let alone

pursue, a good life? How can there be ambition and flourishing? Where is there room for hope?

And yet India throbs with ambition. Its village councils, voting booths, exam halls, and session courts brim with hopeful pursuits. From the advance of the burgeoning middle class to the political upsurge of lower castes and the rise of Narendra Modi from poverty to the prime minister's seat, India holds out one story after another of startling social ascent. Social ambition is not only headline fodder, but something that Indian citizens genuinely value a great deal, something that even a casual visitor will feel all around. One thing that has always struck me about people I have met in India, regardless of their position in life, is the voracious vigor of their ambitions. Nobody, not even the most downtrodden, slumps into a sullen acceptance of their fate. Nomads and farmers, civil servants and residents of city slums all talk incessantly about ways in which they intend to improve their lives, often through elaborate, sometimes improbable, schemes.

Meanwhile, hierarchy flourishes in every corner of Indian life: at home and at work, on the streets and in classrooms, in hospitals, government offices, political rallies, and courts of law. It shapes how people carry themselves, what they wear and eat, how they speak, whom they marry, where they work, and how they vote. In formal and familiar settings, at village hearths and in New Delhi drawing rooms, hierarchy is the ordinary grammar of life. It shapes relations between individuals as much as those within and among groups, relations within and beyond castes, not only between them.

So what is it like to live an ambitiously hierarchical life? This book gives an account of hierarchy as a source of active social imagination, as a normative idiom and a set of social principles through which the people I have known in India advance their lives. Taking readers on an ethnographic journey to the North Indian countryside, it shows how hierarchy frames, motivates, and enables my Indian hosts' and interlocutors' ambitions, and why they look to it as a vehicle of their hopeful pursuits. It shows how and why hierarchy operates as a cultural resource for the making and unmaking of persons, why people appeal to it to assert their worth and pursue better lives, how it assists their movement through the social ranks—and why its absence can lead to social obliteration.

To perceive dynamism in hierarchy asks most of this book's readers to reconsider what they think "hierarchy" is—a word that evokes images of oppressive stasis, what Dipankar Gupta called "a passive layering of crust upon crust" (2005: 21). The reader will need to reflect on the beliefs that make them averse to the idea: that personal autonomy is the root of all purposeful action, and that equality is this autonomy's necessary precondition. To the egalitarian, "emancipatory" (Ferguson 2013) mind, hierarchy appears as a structure of diminishing freedom and opportunity, as an intrinsically oppressive system, a social permafrost. While endowing superiors with power, resources, and privilege, it reduces the subordinates' capacity to judge, decide, and act, humiliating them and crushing their humanity.

The beliefs in autonomy and equality are foundational to how metropolitan thinkers now see the world; they are pivotal to their conceptions of dignity, justice, and flourishing, indeed to what it means to be human at all. In anthropology, however much its practitioners try to distance themselves from Euro-American sensibilities, these beliefs have shaped the choice of analytical concepts, the kinds of topic anthropologists prefer to study, the sorts of argument they tend to make, and the types of theory that they find most alluring. They have also made hierarchy into a pariah concept, blocking from view what ethnographic evidence puts plainly in sight: the fact that people the world over place positive value on hierarchy, not only in supposedly traditional hierarchical societies, but also in "modern, egalitarian" ones.[1]

Nobody's People is an effort to put hierarchy back in its place, as an intellectual resource vital not only for comprehending India, but also for undertaking the broader comparative study of social life. In showing why my friends in Rajasthan see value in hierarchy, I invite readers to reflect on what thinking with hierarchy—not against it—may reveal about their own lives. I shall further suggest that the logic of hierarchy is not only amenable to ambitious living, but forms the very essence of it, and that this is not only true in rural Rajasthan, where people openly celebrate hierarchy, but also among strident advocates of equality, wherever and whoever they may be. I suggest that hierarchy, rather than being a particular social form, is a fundamental aspect of any cultural environment where people see ambition and personal achievement as the necessary constituents of a good life. Challenging the hoary contrast between "holism" and "individualism," I suggest

that the people I write about here are as individualist as they are hierarchical, and that being both implies no logical or moral conflict.

Whatever Happened to Our Favorite Quarrel?

In a lecture Dumont gave to the British Academy in 1980, he complained that he failed "to sell the profession the idea of hierarchy" (1981: 209). Even in 1980, at the height of hierarchy's career in social theory, when Dumont's *magnum opus*, the expanded English-language edition of *Homo Hierarchicus*, went into print, its earlier editions (1966; 1970) having already attracted a large global readership, the task of convincing social scientists that hierarchy may be a value, in analysis or even in ethnographic fact, was decidedly forlorn.[2]

There is much to disagree with in Dumont's work (see my prologue, and below in this chapter). But in summarily dismissing his work, anthropologists have not only rejected his theory of caste hierarchy, but have also abandoned all theoretical interest in hierarchy. If hierarchy was once South Asianists' favorite quarrel, which generated many exciting theoretical insights that the region's scholars were known for, today it has altogether vanished from their debates. While caste still animates theoretical discussions (for example, Gupta 2004; S. Guha 2016), hierarchy has lost all polemical purchase (but see Gupta's reflections 2000; 2004).

Let me be clear: this book is not about caste. For caste is not hierarchy, and hierarchy is not caste. As a general category of Indian collective life, "caste" is amorphous and has been invoked in all kinds of discussions, ranging from colonial social classification to village relations and democratic mobilization. The question of hierarchy, or normative inequality, is a different matter. It is a question of relational logic, which may or may not involve communities we call "castes." If an earlier generation of anthropologists assumed that caste and hierarchy were inexorably entwined—that caste was essentially hierarchical, and hierarchy in India was necessarily "caste hierarchy"—more recent work has pulled caste and hierarchy apart (for a recent overview, see Vaid 2014). Writings on the "substantialization" (Dumont 1980: chap. 11) of caste or its "ethnicization" (Barnett 1977: 158–59) have shown that castes are not necessarily arranged hierarchically (for an overview, see Manor 2010), while work on political patronage (Piliavsky 2014) and family life (Trawick 1990) has described hierarchical principles operating deep inside and far beyond castes. In this book, since I am

interested in hierarchy rather than caste, I am engaging with works on caste only when they are relevant to the questions raised in my study—that is, with studies that address hierarchy in the analytical rather than the activist mode.

Discussions of caste now focus on identity politics, intercaste competition, or the leveling of caste by development and the democratic process.[3] It is as if the forces of democratic modernity took the pyramid of caste hierarchy apart, setting in motion a society that had been inert previously and by tradition. The eviction of hierarchy as anything other than inequality from regional anthropology has been so decisive that two new compendia of "key terms" in South Asian studies have no entries for the word (Jeffrey & Harriss 2014; Dharampal-Frick et al. 2015), and one of them, tellingly, redirects readers from "hierarchy" to an extensive entry on "inequality" (Dharampal-Frick et al. 2015). Wide-ranging recent collections of essays on hierarchy include pieces on Vietnam, Hawaii, Mongolia, and the Ottoman empire, but not one on India (Rio & Smedal 2009; Haynes & Hickel 2016). In 1988, when Gloria Goodwin Raheja published her seminal intervention in the debate on Indian hierarchy (of which more later), Valentine Daniel thought that "her findings [were] bound to have the effect of kicking that keystone that has prevented a long-overdue avalanche. The landscape will be different" (from the back cover). The landscape has certainly changed, but not as Daniel had hoped. No avalanche followed, not even a rumbling. It was more as if the snow simply melted away.

It is not that India's anthropologists have lost all interest in hierarchy. On the contrary: it comes up in their writings again and again. But their interest in it is no longer theoretical. So how and why did Indian social science, once the chief laboratory for hierarchical theory, lose all interest in it, despite such rich intellectual antecedents and hierarchy's patent persistence in Indian life? At fault was a mix of (1) the latter-day politics of regional studies; (2) anthropology's new normative commitments; and (3) Dumont's picture of caste hierarchy itself. I shall discuss each in turn.

The Politics of Regional Studies

In 1980, when the second edition of *Homo Hierarchicus* went into print, India's social sciences were undergoing a major transformation and becoming suffused with political advocacy. If an earlier generation of anthropologists focused on endogenous patterns of action and thought, on "ethnosociology"

(analysis through local categories), cosmologies, systems of value, forms of personhood, and relational norms, by the 1980s analytical interests aligned increasingly with the project of Indian nation-making. As in the discourse of the republic's founding fathers, so in the social sciences, India's political modernity, development, anticolonialism, and the "uplift" of the lower classes became the prevailing concerns. The outlawing of caste hierarchy and untouchability, the abolition of royal titles and the inclusion of antidiscriminatory provisions in the Indian Constitution were each echoed in writings on the "ethnicization" of caste, the rise of nontitular political elites, and the plight, resistance, and upward mobility of the Dalits. Criticisms of colonialism saturated the social sciences, and development became such a major focus of research that much regional anthropology now more closely resembles development studies than sociology.[4]

The study of local conceptual and value schemes gave way to reflections on inequality (its origins, variety, and perpetuation, as well as resistance to it), which emerged as the chief focus of South Asianist scholarship (and social science at large). This new literature described how Indian citizens struggled for and achieved (or failed to achieve) social, political, and economic equality, the presumptively universal aspiration and the precondition of justice and participation in modernity. "As an ideal and a value," wrote André Béteille,

> equality has acquired a certain appeal in every part of the modern world . . . if there is an overall design in the [Indian] Constitution, that design may be said to put equality in the place of hierarchy and the individual in the place of caste. Hierarchical values are repudiated, and the commitment to equality is strongly asserted. (1986: 121, 123)[5]

If in 1986 Béteille was uncertain about what "the Constitution actually signifies for the different sections of Indian society" (1986: 123), today few social scientists doubt that every Indian covets its pledge. This egalo-normative standard now runs through Indianist writings as different as histories of labor and class, studies of gender and women's rights, peasant revolts, citizenship, neoliberalism, democracy and globalization, making odd bedfellows of Marxists and feminists, nationalists and postorientalists, democrats and advocates of human rights.

There were, of course, good reasons for regional scholars to start paying attention to formal politics, caste mobilization, Dalit movements, and the work of NGOs, in which the earlier generation of "village ethnographers" had little interest. But for all its promise and good intentions, this new social science brought with it an influx of advocacy that made it increasingly difficult to distinguish analysis of a phenomenon from its endorsement. Any account of values tends to be read as a commendation, and suspicion creeps in that the author may be promoting the unattractive aspects of lives in which these values are espoused: economic, political, and social abuses; misogyny; racism. From this point of view, the idea of hierarchy as a social good comes to stand for one or both of two cardinal academic sins: orientalism and elitism. And anyone entertaining it is complicit either in "othering" one's interlocutors or in endorsing their oppression. The Marxist version of this view is straightforwardly dogmatic: "Any social hierarchy . . . is perpetrated and perpetuated by elites and is struggled against, as circumstances permit, by those they oppress. This is true in India as everywhere else" (Berreman 1971: 17). Postorientalist objections differ more in style than substance. "Hierarchy," wrote Appadurai in a widely cited assault on Dumont, is "an elegy and a deeply Western trope for a whole way of thinking about India, in which it represents the extremes of the human capability to fetishize inequality" (1986: 745). And elsewhere:

> Hierarchy is one of an anthology of images in and through which anthropologists have frozen the contribution of specific cultures to our understanding of the human condition . . . [it is] a language of incarceration . . . that confines the natives of India. (Appadurai 1988: 36–37, 40)

Anthropology's Flatlands

Hierarchy disappeared not only from the study of India. From the 1960s, it began to vanish right across anthropology. The origins of its demise lay in postwar politics—the fall of the European empires and the rise of the American. As political advocacy came to dominate social sciences, inequality emerged as the principal problem of social analysis, as did the concomitant questions of power, domination, and resistance (see Lewis 1998 on this). As Joel Robbins observed,

> Various sorts of Marxism, feminism and cultural studies, along with the specific theories of Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Foucault, Gramsci, Hall, Saïd etc., have . . . motivated anthropologists to be on the lookout for [inequality] in all domains of social life. (1994: 23)

Hierarchical forms like rank, kingship, or chieftaincy and hierarchical norms like holism, asymmetry, or (inter-)dependence, which earlier generations of anthropologists have written so much about, fell by the wayside.

Meanwhile, the ideal of equality proceeded to entrench itself in the minds of many as a kind of natural, protocultural fact (on this see Lewis 1998 and Gregory 2014). If in the 1960s and 1970s neo-Marxists and feminists openly championed equality as a universal norm, by the 1980s egalitarian norm was so integral to the social scientists' unconscious that they no longer felt the need to advocate it explicitly. As Peacock (2015) observed, from then on, analytical egalitarianism gained ground in social theory less by open advocacy and more by the proliferation of flat model metaphors: networks, rhizomes, fractals, holograms.[6] While two-dimensional imagery filled the pages of journals, lecture halls resounded with calls to "flatten" the social: from Deleuze and Guattari's summons to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) to Latour's instructions on "how to keep the social flat" (2005: 165–72).

More fundamentally, the flattening of social theory was propelled by a broader turn within social sciences away from structuralism and its associated intellectual practices. This turn assumed various forms, but its shared premise was the rejection of what was *thinkable* in human life in favor of what was *visible or experiential*—a turn, in other words, to empiricism. Since then, this new social science has run the gamut of theoretical trends: from analyses oriented by the idea of "practice" to transactions, actions, and various forms of processualism, object-oriented ontology, discourses on immanence and embodiment, agency and materiality, infrastructure and so on. The many avatars of this new empiricism, different as their sources and purposes may have been, shared the basic conviction that what we can see, feel, or touch—our "direct experience," not people's perceptions and judgments—is what constitutes social life. In the end, as David Pocock wrote, "the realm of ideas was reduced to epiphenomenal status" (1988: 204).[7]

One popular recent variant of this approach, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), altogether expels values and categories, which Durkheim boldly termed "social

facts" (1895), from its analysis. Bruno Latour, the leading theorist of ANT and the most frequently cited contemporary "anthropologist" (he actually trained as a theologian) bids us abandon our interlocutors' motivations and purposes, their principles and norms, indeed, the very categories through which they think, in favor of what he calls "actual entities:" "actual interactions" and "actual occasions" that can be "directly observed."[8] If you "follow the actors themselves," writes Latour, and remain "as literalist, as positivist" as possible, you will "descend from the abstract ideas to the real and material local world" (2005: 170, 169). You will find yourself inside a perfectly "flat ontology," undifferentiated by considerations of worth. "By sticking obstinately to the notion of a flatland," he further asks, "are we not registering now in our account a view of the social rarely seen before?" (2005: 220).

Well, not entirely. Five decades earlier a very different social theorist, Fredrik Barth, advanced an analytical style, known as "transactionalism," with a striking affinity to Latour's. Barth argued that "society" was constituted not by what people thought, but by moment-to-moment interactions between self-advancing individuals (Barth 1959). It was a mistake, he argued, to think that people structured their lives through shared ideas, because in reality life consisted of actors, their actions, and the "social networks" they formed (Barth 1992).[9] At first blush, Barth and Latour bear little resemblance: the first was an old-fashioned postfunctionalist and the latter an avant-garde, post-postmodern *philosophe*. If Barth described autonomous, rational entrepreneurs, Latour writes about dehumanized "nodes" on "agentive grids." If Barth imbued his actors with sundry motives and attitudes, Latour strips his of either. And yet for both, the core analytical concept is the "network" of ontologically equivalent actors. Their networks have no hubs, centers, or leaders, no axes, and no unifying structuring principle apart from their actors' equivalence. Like connects to like—cellphones to cellphones, train stations to train stations, and individuals to individuals—by virtue of being the same.

The appeal of the network as a model of sociality lies in its promise of "greater naturalism," in its capacity to give access to life through what appears like direct, culturally unmediated experience, to get to life "as it really is" (Barth 1992). The model may make sense, at first glance, to a checkers player, but a chess player will protest that pieces play different "roles," that one cannot learn to play

chess by noting simply that pawns and kings are both pieces or by recording the trajectory of their moves across the board. To learn the game is to learn the roles of the pieces and the rules of their engagement. How much more is this true of human life. We do not live among abstract "actors" or "agents," but among friends, colleagues, and relatives, among neighbors and fellow-citizens—*people* who play different roles in each other's lives and have different obligations toward one another. Social relations rest on shared (if not uncontested) understandings of these obligations and roles (Goffman 1956). Without such shared understandings we could not possibly tell Gilbert Ryle's winks apart from blinks (Geertz 1973) or understand what a handshake or a kiss or a promise is. What can possibly be learned from thinking of them all as "interactions"? We could not understand why we cuddle pet rats while killing pest rats. They may be the same species, but, for all intents and purposes, they are different animals. Or, as Edwin Ardener wrote, the careful recording of the movement of chairs, rate of footfall, tilt of the floor, or squeaks in linoleum in a room (the kind of "literalist" analysis that Latour advocates) tells us nothing about what is actually going on until we learn that this is a dinner party (1989: 48–50). Without meaning, social science loses its basic heuristic (and ethical) bearings. As John Dunn (1978) once put it, it is not only dim, but also rude to describe anyone's conduct without asking them what they themselves think they are doing.

Flat models, however, exert an irresistible charm over egalitarian audiences by casting egalitarian value as a freestanding fact: "life as it really is." Flat models are, of course, anything but value-neutral. Their affinity with egalitarian individualism—the cosmology of essentially equivalent, free-floating actors—allows the analysts' own, culturally specific normative intuitions to infiltrate social theory in the guise of impartial analysis. "The real and material local world" is in fact a mirror reflecting the analyst's own normative vision. This is precisely why Durkheim, his students, and later Dumont insisted that moral facts are the foundation of human reality: things can never be experienced directly, since every perception, even the most "basic," rests on a category in our minds (Durkheim & Mauss 1963 [1903]); and every category is also necessarily value-laden—we can hardly tell right from left without passing a value judgment (Hertz 1960). Any claim to the study of human life through "direct experience" is thus an analytical and moral trap, which presents the analyst's own cultural evaluative judgments as hard, universal facts. Pets and pests become mere "animals," and

the intricate architecture of social roles is replaced by actors transacting (like business people) with identical others in pursuit of their own, equally knowable, and identical (profit-aimed) "interests." Instead of studies of other people, social scientists end up with a parade of self-portraits in fancy dress.

While the egalo-normative stance was consolidated in anthropology after structuralism, anthropologists have always been particularly susceptible to it. At its very inception, anthropology commanded attention both within and beyond academia as a vindication of the idea of primeval egalitarianism, of the movement of human society from "simple, egalitarian societies" to complex, hierarchical ones. In his pioneering study of the Iroquois League, Lewis Henry Morgan (1881), a founding father of American anthropology, described its members as being "equal in privileges and in personal rights" and thus as inhabiting a natural "communism in living," an idea that inspired Engels's theory of "primitive communism" (1902 [1884]). Franz Boas also famously insisted on "primal equality" (e.g., 1911). In the context of nineteenth-century evolutionism, the assertion that the "primitive" people whom anthropologists studied were not only fully modern, but also exemplary, was groundbreaking. But it also entrenched equality as anthropology's jurisdiction.[10]

As experts in "simple egalitarian societies"—tribal, hunter-gatherer, acephalous, band-level, segmentary, or various kinship societies—through much of the twentieth century, anthropologists purveyed many kinds of horizontal models of sociality.[11] Think of the classics read by every undergraduate student of anthropology: Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* (2002[1925]), Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940), Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969 [1949]), or Sahlins's "The Original Affluent Society" (1972). Models of *kula* reciprocity in the Trobriand Islands, much as segmentation in Nuerland, presuppose equivalence as the basic condition of sociality (even if in ethnographic fact, exchange in them is always asymmetrical, with persons and objects invariably ranked). In *African Political Systems* (1940), a founding text of political anthropology, Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard are explicit enough about the egalitarian remit of (political) anthropology. If state societies are hierarchical, stateless societies—those meant for the anthropologist—have "no sharp divisions of rank, status, and wealth," they are "homogenous, equalitarian, and segmentary" (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940: 5, 9). This program is especially striking (indeed self-contradictory), given

how much Africanists have written about chiefs, hierarchy, and kings, including in *Political Systems* itself.[12]

Against this background, anthropologists have projected a long slideshow of "acephalous" and "egalitarian" models onto societies that were in fact neither acephalous nor egalitarian.[13] As anyone who has read Malinowski's and Evans-Pritchard's ethnographies knows, both Trobriand and Nuer societies had elaborate aristocratic orders and a sharp division between nobles and commoners as their chief structural feature (many Nuer were in fact Dinka clients or slaves; see Sneath 2018). In the tribal Middle East, known for classical theories of segmentation and reciprocity, social imagination turns out to be "strikingly hierarchical" (Shryock 1997: 227): "nothing corresponds to the image of a needle weaving to and fro . . . Wealth in goods or in children comes vertically, as it were, from God . . . not from horizontal transactions" (Dresch 1998: 114). "Even the so-called 'egalitarian' or 'acephalous' societies, including hunters such as the Inuit or Australian Aboriginals, are in structure and practice cosmic polities, ordered and governed by divinities, ancestors, species-masters. . . . There are kingly beings in heaven where there are no chiefs on earth" (Sahlins 2017: 24). Where equality *is* widely in evidence, mostly among small groups of hunters and gatherers, far from being a "proto-cultural condition" (Sather 2006: 73), it is usually an *achievement* (e.g., Clastres 1977; Cashdan 1980; Woodburn 1982; Robbins 1994), hard won from hierarchy as the basic condition of life (Boehm 2009).

And yet anthropologists continue to teach their students the old story of the Original Equal Society, culling horizontal models of reciprocal exchange, bonds of shared blood, unconscious structures, psychic unity or shared experience, collective consciousness or mentalities, or shared ownership from ethnographies of profoundly hierarchical life (on this, see Sahlins 1983: 32). Think of the social sciences' most basic concepts: "class," "community," "culture," "tribe." They all presuppose bonds through one or another equivalence. Think of "identity" ubiquitous in the social sciences: "the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; [to] absolute or essential sameness" (*OED ad loc.*). Or think of the spread of "ethnicity" in anglophone academic and popular vocabularies, which has flattened the language of collective life: tribes are now "ethnic minorities," and castes are "ethnic groups" (e.g., Eriksen 2002: 8–9; Chandra 2004).

This flattening is part of broader changes in anthropology, which has grown positively allergic to difference in recent decades (Sahlins 1999a).

Even the anthropology of "radical difference," "otherness," or "alterity," which has been challenging the creed of identity-based solidarity, has not shed presumptions of basic equivalence. Societies, which Viveiros de Castro has termed "disjunctive" (2001) and which are based on difference rather than identity, people are still equals, conjoined by an equality of difference rather than an equality of sameness, but by equality nonetheless. This logic is commensurative (for more on this, see below and in chapters 6 and 7). Each person is equally other, stranger or enemy, in what Harry Walker has aptly called "equality without equivalence" (2020).[14] It is all as in the old AT&T advertisement: "What makes us all the same is that we are all different" (Robbins 1994: 30). This view leaves no conceptual room for differences of degree, only for differences of kind, no room for differences between differences, no room for discursive differences that arise and fade within social intercourse, only ontological differences that are essential and fixed (for a critique, see Humphrey 2012).

This egalo-normative commitment in the social sciences has meant that huge energies have gone into thinking through inequality as a *problem*—its sources and consequences, and resistance to it—but virtually none into analysis of egalitarian value,[15] and nothing like the sustained critique of individualism.[16] In this, anthropologists have kept close company with Western philosophers, who tend to treat equality as "an obvious and generally accepted truth" (Dworkin 1977: 272; also Waldron 2002: 3; Iglesias 2001: 114–15).[17] If one expects philosophers to stick by the norms of their own societies, the failure of anthropologists to tackle the subject is more surprising. For who, if not anthropologists, is to question features of their own cultural folklore, like the idea of "basic equality"? But even Dumont, who understood better than most that equality is a value and egalitarianism an ideology, did not subject it to sustained historical analysis or critique. While offering an elaborate discussion of individualism in *Homo Hierarchicus*, Dumont made only cursory remarks on Rousseau's and Tocqueville's views of equality (Dumont 1980: 17), thinking egalitarianism a mere corollary of individualism, which "follows immediately from the conception of man as an individual" (1980: 11).[18] His *Homo Aequalis* (1977) promised a genealogy of Euro-American egalitarianism, but ended up as a treatise on individualism, a category that stretches over thirty-one lines in

the index, from which "equality" and "egalitarianism" are altogether absent.[19] His later essays on "modern ideology" are again about individualism (1986).

The Pyramid in the Room

And yet, against this flat horizon, Dumont's hierarchical pyramid rises tall. His is by far the most cogent and enduring vision of inegalitarian moral ordering in social theory, with which anyone who wishes to think about hierarchy must still reckon.[20] His account runs, roughly, like this. Hierarchy is not social stratification, not an unequal ordering of society, but a structure of values. Every culture is oriented toward, or in Dumont's language "encompassed" by, a paramount value, in relation to which people make evaluative judgments and reckon social worth. In every culture, hierarchy is "the *principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole*" (Dumont 1980: 66, emphasis in original). This is to say that people's different value judgments are always ultimately oriented toward something they value most, a value that encompasses their cultural order, making it an ideologically coherent "whole." In cultures where people most value the individual—the post-Christian, Western cultures—people orient their lives toward individual happiness; and where they most cherish "society taken as a whole" (Dumont 1980: 232), they forsake personal ambitions for "the global order" (9). On the level of value, wrote Dumont, all cultures are arranged hierarchically because evaluative judgment, which is at the center of "culture," is a process of ranking things. And yet only what he called "holist" cultures reproduce the hierarchical structure of value in social form. For this, India offers the perfect illustration. Here the worth of every group and individual is determined in relation to the ideological whole by the degree of ritual purity that each is thought to possess. Social worth can be found "in the conformity of each element to the role assigned to it in the whole of Being as such" (Dumont 1980: 334). The Brahman-priests who handle the purest (divine) things, and thus embody the value of purity, are at the top, represent the whole, and so "encompass" the rest of the social order; people who deal with the pollution of organic life (barbers, midwives, or butchers), are, conversely, at the bottom.

There are many chinks, large and small, in Dumont's edifice, and they have already been fingered by a large army of critics.[21] But whatever his theory's nuances and infelicities, two central and closely related ideas give it a clear overall

shape. The first is the idea of a *social whole*, and the second is Dumont's vision of the *nature and location of value*. Both are heirs to a time-honored tradition in Europe. The specter of a social totality has long haunted Western social theory: wholes imagined as self-sustaining organisms or systems of complementary parts, wholes bound by common identity, wholes that are ideological, structural, or organizational have been the building blocks of both Western social theory (see S. James 1984) and Euro-American common sense.[22] Like the other wholes before his, Dumont's is a stable, self-organized, and self-sustaining unity. But it has one distinctive feature: it is shaped by a single transcendent idea, a point that Dumont illustrates with the story of Adam and Eve:

> Adam—or "man," in our language—is two things in one: the representative of the species mankind and the prototype of the male individuals of this species . . . You may well declare the two sexes equal, but the more you manage to make them equal, the more you will destroy the unity between them (in the couple or the family), because *the principle of this unity is outside them.* (1980: 240, emphasis in original)[23]

This is the crux of Dumont's analysis. The source of order is singular, transcendent, absolute, and eternal. People are located in the world through the degree to which they possess the attributes of this source, of this paramount value, be it purity, wealth, nobility, or whatever else. What Dumont meant by "value" were the treasured attributes that people (collectively or individually) can possess, and which I shall call *possessive values.*

While crafting hierarchy out of Indian material, Dumont used an (unacknowledged) old European blueprint. His immediate inspiration came from Hegel, but the idea goes back to medieval theology and further still to the antique origins of Christianity. Its most enduring formulation was the concept of the Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy 1936), an idea first articulated in ancient Greece and later adopted by medieval thinkers.[24] Every one (and every thing) in the chain, from rocks and pets to kings and archangels, was arranged along a ladder of rank that reached up to its ultimate source in God. Every creature, substance, and entity was ranked along this single scale of value, depending on how close each was to God and how much of His defining attribute (Spirit) each possessed. Kings had more Spirit than peasants, gold more than lead, cats more than slugs, and so on.

The idea of a unitary *scala naturae* was first developed by Aristotle, who ranked all living creatures by the degree of vitality they possessed; for Christian thinkers God replaced Aristotle's vitality as they refashioned this value ladder into one whose every rung "represented a divine institution, an element of the organism of Creation emanating from the will of God . . . the value assigned to each order would depend not on its utility, but on its sanctity—that is to say, its proximity to the highest place" (Huizinga 1955 [1919]: 57–58). The idea was institutionalized in the Christian church and later reverberated through the writings of Europe's godly thinkers from Aquinas, Dante, and Ficino to Leibniz, Hegel, and Husserl.[25] Later still, it was entertained by Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Durkheim before Dumont.[26]

The word "hierarchy," which means literally "divine or sacred rule," was part of this theology, which depicted the universe as a stable edifice graded by proximity to God.[27] This perfect, eternal positional order has been depicted as a pyramid ever since, from Didacus Valades's sixteenth-century drawing of the Great Chain of Being to the American dollar bill, with its masonic pyramid and the luminous eye of God as the hovering copestone. Dumont would no doubt take issue with this characterization, lest hierarchy as an order of value be mistaken for a chain of command, a structure of power or inequality, or social stratification, from which he was at pains to distinguish it.[28] And yet the pyramid captures all the rudiments of Dumont's theory of hierarchy: the dual principle of ranking and encompassment (on this, see Graeber 1997), the monism, and the top-down order of possessive value. This hierarchy is certainly a religious vision, as Dumont insisted, but is it an Indian one? Where are the pluralism, the pragmatism, the cacophonic vitality of Indian life? Where are the 33 million gods competing for their devotees' loyalties? While writing at length about the Christian origins of individualism (1986; 1980; 1994), Dumont himself left behind some hefty artifacts of Christian faith: a church-like monolith that bears little resemblance to most of what we know about life in India, or indeed anywhere else.[29]

Dumont's was a *theological hierarchy*, a classificatory map of an all-encompassing universe, a "cosmology" of the sort that has long haunted the post-Christian social sciences. But the idea of such a static totality is incompatible with much of what we know about hierarchical societies, whether in medieval England or in contemporary Rajasthan. Far from being millponds of docile harmony,

hierarchical societies have always effervesced with conflict and discontent. The hierarchical polities of medieval Europe were certainly no less tumultuous than the democracies of today, if anything more so. For the *demotic hierarchies*, or ideas about norms of relating, have little to do with the visions of harmony that theologians (whether Brahman or Catholic) ascribe to ranked orders, pinning the flutter of butterflies to the cork boards of their cosmologies.

It is little surprise, then, that while anthropologists of Christianity continue to invest in Dumont (e.g., Robbins 2004; Mosko 2010; Haynes 2017b), South Asianists have sold off their shares in him. Much more profligate was their disinvestment from hierarchy as an object and category of analysis, their refusal to think about it, not only with Dumont, but at all. Not least because hierarchical value remains an important aspect of Indian life. Not least because the abandonment of the discussion has meant that Dumont's model of Indian society, ranked by degrees of ritual purity, has quietly persisted in academic and popular accounts alike. For, despite its protracted disavowal by India's historians and anthropologists, the purity-pollution value complex still implicitly dominates accounts of "traditional" Indian hierarchy. It is still the go-to model in introductory courses and explanations offered to layfolk, when they ask what caste is (a point made by Jodhka [2012: 12]). It is still the model that the most recent synoptic theorization of caste sets out to disprove (S. Guha 2016).

While a large army of critics denounced Dumont's theory on empirical grounds, *conceptually* it has remained remarkably intact. Critics have shown that not everybody in India sees Brahmans as the highest caste; that alternative scales of value place chiefs or rich merchants on top; that values other than purity have been at work (courage, power, wealth, urbanity); and that hierarchy has its coercive side.[30] They have also shown that hierarchical thinking, of the kind Dumont described, holds no monopoly over Indian moral imaginations, which have ample room for individualist and egalitarian values, too. And yet, even Dumont's most serious conceptual opponents, such as McKim Marriott or the "neo-Hocartians" (on whom more shortly), still share his rudimentary analytical structure: a social whole encompassed by a preeminent caste (whether Brahman, Kshatriya, or any other "dominant caste," or combination of these), which embodies a paramount, possessive value—a value attributed to and possessed by people and entities (purity, power, auspiciousness, or any combination of these and others).[31]

There are also materialist or (broadly) Marxist readings of hierarchy, but these pose no analytical challenge to Dumont, as they see value as a closed question, one that is not and cannot be opened, for it would challenge the basic premises of their analysis.[32] The materialist theory of caste works on the egalitarian premise that disparities of resources and power are the basic causes of social injustice. A magisterial contribution to this tradition of thinking has been made by Sumit Guha (2016) in his account of caste across the centuries. Showing definitively that ritual purity is but one idiom of status on the Subcontinent, Guha argues that the hierarchy of castes has always been grounded in disparities of wealth and power. Any "cultural values" (Brahmanical or otherwise) glossed over the social "reality" (2016: 109) of land ownership and the exploitation of labor, or served as symbolic resources deployed strategically (à la Bourdieu 1984 [1979]) in pursuit of power and wealth, the protocultural, universal ends of life. Historically, various corporate groups asserted power over clusters of villages, from which they collected taxes, or entered into subsidiary alliances with kings, on whose authority they collected them. Guha's is important work. Deploying a vast array of historical evidence, he shows that in India social positioning—or "caste"—was never a calm or a consensual process, but always dynamic, competitive, and open to negotiation. He further shows that rank was never reckoned only in the Brahmanical idiom (see also S. Bayly 1989); that it was entangled in finance and politics; and that Europeans, on arrival in South Asia, joined in the South Asian game of rank reckoning. But without explicit attention to values, one is left to guess at what these rules actually were. Guha is "deeply skeptical of attempts to trace socio-economic institutions to fundamental values" (Guha 2016: 116). And yet, in order to give an account of motivations in the order that he describes, he finds himself appealing to values, which, following Barth (1965), he takes to be the pursuits of "interested" individuals. While dismissing "efforts to find a single, unified rationale for the internal workings and external relations of each of India's thousands of castes" (2016: 1), Guha's own account implies a highly unified rationale oriented toward wealth and power. But what were wealth and power *for*? the freedom to have power over others? so as to amass wealth? in order to further exploit others? for the sake of amassing more wealth? The analysis brings us, full circle, back to Dumont and the problem of value.

Hierarchy sans Holism

Dismantling the pyramid will take two analytical moves: to sever the link between hierarchy and holism, and to rethink the location and nature of hierarchical value.[33] It is one thing to insist on holism as an apperceptional mode and an intellectual method: to treat all social forms as products of broader relational complexes. This is just good anthropology. It is quite another to imagine a bounded collective entity as either an orienting value or an enclosure for people's lives (see Dresch 1998; Pirie & Scheele 2014: 16–21). There is a world of difference between heuristic holism and ontological holism, between holistic thinking and thinking in terms of collective wholes. There are, no doubt, hierarchical models, like Catholic cosmology or the Brahmanical *varṇa* theory, which invoke bounded totalities.[34] But my friends and hosts in India did not think in wholes. Surely, they cared about communities—families, castes, villages, the nation—but they were no more susceptible to the idea of an all-encompassing whole than my egalitarian friends back in Britain. And perhaps rather less so. Recall Tocqueville on the totalizing passion of American egalitarians:

> As conditions are equalized in a people, individuals appear smaller and society seems greater, or rather, each citizen, having become like all the others, is lost in the crowd, and one no longer perceives [anything] but the vast and magnificent image of the people itself. (2000 [1835]: 641)

Or think of the idea of the nation-state, which is both perfectly egalitarian and perfectly holist, an idea that puts the lie to the alignment of hierarchy with holism and egalitarianism with individualism.[35]

What concerned my Indian interlocutors instead of social wholes were social *relations*, a fact already attested voluminously in the ethnographic record. India's anthropologists, whatever their theoretical stance, have described at length the fastidious, even obsessive, attention to relational norms in India's cultural imaginations. They have shown that here people care a great deal, and can explain to foreigners in fine detail, who can give what to whom, and how; who can and cannot marry whom, and how; which foods, words, gestures, and substances can pass between people, and in which order of precedence.[36] What makes all these rules very difficult for an anthropologist to grasp or

even remember is that they apply to people not generically, but relative to the positions and roles in which people find themselves. As a person goes about their life, shifting from being a son or daughter to being a brother or sister, a husband or wife, a student, a guest, or a researcher, they are measured by different moral criteria. Obligations and expectations constantly shift. As people in many cultures recognize explicitly (e.g., Read 1955; Iteanu 1990), there are no generic humans or abstract moral codes, only particular roles and expectations appropriate to them. Morally, persons exist only within relations. It is relations, not abstract tenets, that anchor their evaluative judgments, an idea enshrined in the old South Asian concept of *dharma*, or the person- and role-particular moral code, an idea that reverberates through ancient literature (Olivelle 2009) and current ethics alike (Pandian & Ali 2010).

And yet, oddly enough, in the study of India, relations themselves have never figured as *locations of value*. As pillars of an already existing order of value, yes, but not as the moral coordinates of people's lives in their own right. Dumont himself wrote extensively about the minutiae of relational norms in India: rules of labor and marriage relations, contact and commensality, inter- and intracaste transactions, the exchange in gifts and services, and so on. He knew that these norms maintained the separation and ranking of castes, kept intercaste pollution in check, and so secured the Brahmans' superlative purity. He saw that the relative purity of castes was not assigned solely by occupation and birth, but was also negotiated in interactions. And yet, in his account of "preeminent value" relations fell out of sight. They were mere "interactions" with no intrinsic moral content, which, as Dumont rightly noted himself, "cannot replace the overall ideological orientation" (1980: 91).

Other theorists have placed more analytical weight on relations. Long before Dumont, Hocart wrote of gift-giving as the backbone of South Asia's social and political life (1927; 1950). Communities in the region, he argued, revolved around kings or chiefs, who were not only power holders, but also guardians of their cosmos, and so of their life. South Asian polities, argued Hocart, took shape through life-giving sacrifice, in which the king was the "chief actor who supplied the offerings and bore the expense" (Hocart 1970 [1936]: 35; also Dumézil 1973). While the king's continued generosity upheld this sacrificial order, his subjects acted as "priests," who performed various services that kept the king, and with him the cosmos, pure. My own argument takes a lot from

Hocart, who took relations seriously, had no time for the obstructive boundary between politics and religion (or ideology), and even hinted at the idea of a hierarchical individual, which I shall develop here. And yet, even he saw relations as ancillary to the order that he imagined as structured by the possessive value of purity as the moral foundation of South Asian life. In Hocart's world, as in Dumont's, value was the property of people and entities—the king, his subjects, the polity, the cosmos—not of relations.

Hocart inspired Dumont's sharpest critics, who argued that chiefs rather than priests were paramount in South Asia,[37] that hierarchy was as political as it was religious,[38] and that what gave caste its shape was power and not only purity.[39] The richest ethnographic account in this "neo-Hocartian" mode was Gloria Goodwin Raheja's (1988b) study of a North Indian village, in which she argued that life revolved around a landholding patron caste. The patrons gave gifts to others in exchange for ritual services, gifts through which they transferred their inauspiciousness, thus morally "poisoning" their recipients (also Parry 1994). Patrons reigned supreme not because they were the purest born, but because they continually shed "inauspiciousness" onto others.[40]

While Dumont thought that caste rank was a function of birth and occupational purity, the neo-Hocartians saw rank as a product of gift-service relations. But for them, as for Dumont, relations still ultimately served various possessive value aims, whether ritual purity, dominance, power, or auspiciousness. Just as the Brahmans' purity anchored caste hierarchy for Dumont, so did the king's purification anchor Dirks's polity, and the patrons' auspiciousness served as the pivot of Raheja's village life. The analytical compass still pointed to possessive values rather than relational ones.

McKim Marriott was the only anthropologist who moved some distance toward a truly relational theory of hierarchical value in South Asia. Deploying ethnographic material from across the subcontinent, he showed that here rank was not a measure of purity, but instead "castes were ranked according to the structure of interaction among them" (1959: 96). Marriott saw just what Hocart saw (although he never cited him): a system of gifts and services as the foundation of caste. Marriott's basic calculus of rank was quite simple: each transaction involved an asymmetric exchange between people who gave and people who served, and givers were superior to recipients,[41] with the most prolific donors floating up to the social top and perennial servants sinking to

the bottom.[42] Rank was not set in stone, and, at least in theory, people could work their way up by exercising generosity and expanding their servant clienteles. Intercaste relations were dynamic, competitive, described by Marriott as a "tournament," where each caste vied for supremacy, trying to "score" by aggressive giving (1968: 154).[43]

Although Marriott wrote that relations were the "master conception on which village thinking about caste constantly focused" (1968: 145), in the end, he too turned away from his own argument: the relational frenzy and alchemy of mutual co-creation that he documented so carefully ended up serving value aims that were external to them. He was never entirely clear about what exactly these aims might be, or rather, he changed his mind about them: at one point he insisted that the caste tournament was a pursuit of dominance or supremacy (1976: 123, 127); elsewhere that "transactions are oriented ultimately . . . towards . . . power understood as vital energy" (1976: 137); and somewhere else still that the transactional strategies deployed by different castes were determined by their "inborn codes" (1976: 123). Or he simply reverted to Dumont's vision in which "Brahmans take the highest place through their own divinity" (1976: 129; also 1959).[44] For all his insistence on the evaluative significance of relations, and the rich ethnographic support he marshalled to make his claim, ultimately for Marriott relations were in the service of possessive values, values that were properties of persons rather than of relations.

Elementary Norms of Hierarchical Life

During fieldwork, I was adopted by a family in Begun, a family from a caste of drummers, who took me in when I fell ill with pneumonia and needed a refuge from the rigors of life in the Kanjar *bastī*. They became my adopted family, and they took it upon themselves to instruct me in local ways. My chief mentor was Baiji, the family matriarch, who taught me how to speak, dress, and eat like a Rajasthani. I was a bad student: I drank, smoked, lived apart from my husband, and drove a motorcycle around town "like a boy." None of this was appropriate for a young, married woman. But as Baiji taught me her "culture" (*sanskruti sikhānā*), I also did my best to explain my own ways to her, and in time she came to appreciate that women from the "English caste" choose their own husbands, travel abroad alone, or even get divorced, if they wish. But there was one aspect of my marital life that she just could

not grasp. When my then husband visited me in Begun, Baiji became deeply perplexed by the way she saw us relate to each other. We went about town together, cooked and ate together, laughed, chatted, and fought like equals. Baiji's husband had been dead for some time, but his photo hung high on the wall, and every morning Baiji adorned his icon with garlands of fresh marigolds. His memory was so sacred that she would not so much as utter his name. And here I was, asking my husband to serve me cups of tea. Her son, Suresh, explained to her that in England husbands and wives live together as equals, "as friends" (*dost jaise*).

That she could not understand. How could such a vital relationship be equal? Friends, she said, come and go (*dost āte-jāte rahate*), but there is only one husband. No wonder, she remarked, the English get divorced every other day, adding pointedly: *in Rajasthan we treat our husbands like gods* [ghar walõ ko devatā mānate], *we serve them* [unake sevā karte]. Now that she was the head of the household, Baiji made all major and most minor decisions in it, and her family obeyed, just as she had once obeyed her husband. Even though her son was the breadwinner, it was Baiji who kept in her tin the money he earned. This was her prerogative, but also her responsibility (*jimmedāri*), for it was she who was the family bread giver (*anndātā*), its matron, its head, even if she herself did not earn the money. Baiji's family was warm and tight-knit, and I loved spending time with them, but nobody in it was equal.[45] Every part of daily life, from getting out of bed to eating, bathing, dressing, going out, and going back to bed, followed a strict order of precedence. Every evening Baiji burned incense before her husband's icon, and every morning her children and grandchildren touched her feet while she dispensed to them her blessings. Eventually, when I joined in their routine, she welled up with tears, tapped me on the head, and said lovingly: *Now you really* are *my daughter.*

In Baiji's world, rank correlated directly, not inversely, with care and intimacy.[46] This is how I was taken into her home: as a member of the family, a daughter with a particular role and rank. Baiji found it inconceivable that a husband, who ought to provide and care for his wife, could be her equal, or indeed that he should be. *Of course your husband is bigger than you, he has more strength* (takat), she once said in response to my feminist musings on marital equality, *How else could he feed you?* Friends cannot possibly care

for you the way your parents or husband or elder siblings do. They may have responsibilities *to* you, but they are not responsible *for* you, in the way that parents are meant to be for their children or the way husbands are meant to be for their wives (for more on this, see pp. 43–44). And isn't care what one wants from a marriage? Which is why "serving" (*sevā karnā*) one's husband was not a sign of humiliation, but constitutive of a loving relation. And so Baiji, in teaching me how to be a good wife, kept repeating: This is how we serve our husband: we massage his legs, we cook, we clean. This is what a wife *is*. Euro-Americans going on a date look for parity, whether in their tastes in music, shared political views, or common family backgrounds; they may delight in each other's differences, but it is things they discover to have in common that will suggest to them that a "relationship" is in the cards (Gullestad 1986). To Baiji, this logic made little sense. Surely, someone who can protect and provide for you cannot be your equal, making inequality basic to the most important ties in one's life: between husbands and wives, parents and children, gods and devotees, ancestors and descendants.

Egalitarian logic, of whatever hue, treats the *properties that people possess*—whether wealth, common humanity, skin color, dignity, rights, privilege, opportunity, or whatever else—as the basis of judgment. Equal people, it tells us, ought to "possess . . . a like degree of a (specified or implied) *quality or attribute*; [be] on the same level in rank, dignity, power, ability, achievement, or excellence; [have] the same rights or privileges" (*OED*, *ad loc.,* emphasis added). As Gerald Cohen put it, egalitarians take it for granted "that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of" (1989: 906). This is not to say that egalitarians do not care for social relations. Moral philosophers who have argued for "relational equality" note that meaningful equality can be found only in equal mutual treatment and respect, not in the equal distribution of resources or the leveling of living conditions or personal attributes (Anderson 1999; Scheffler 2010). Relational equality has also been discussed at length by anthropologists of Melanesia, where people are rendered equal, not distributively, but "through the exchange of equivalent things . . . by making the partners to the relationship equivalent in their 'gifts'" (Robbins 1994: 39–40; 2004). But even this process rests on commensuration: the equivalence of gifts, and thus of their givers. Equality may require exchange, but it is ultimately what people *have* that makes them equal.

By contrast, Baiji's judgment of what constitutes a good marriage and what makes people within it flourish (or at least avoid divorce) begins with relational considerations. Her moral reckoning does not simply reject equivalence. It makes all considerations of parity or correspondence—any kind of commensuration—altogether irrelevant. What matters instead is who is responsible to whom, for what, and how. To understand how this works, consider the archetypal hierarchical bond in your own life, whoever and wherever you are: the parent-child relation. No doubt, should you start comparing parents and children, you will find all kinds of similarities and differences, but such a comparison makes no sense of the relationship. What makes someone a parent is the fact that they are responsible (morally, legally, financially) for their children. The obligations that constitute this relation are never equivalent; their balance may shift over time, as parents and children assume greater or lesser degrees and kinds of responsibility, but it will never be precisely level.

Hierarchical thinking places value in the *content and properties of relations*. The primary criteria of judgment are relational qualities (loyalty, care, generosity) and relational states (attachment, belonging, incorporation), not virtues like valor or purity. If loyalty and generosity can be thought of as "virtues" at all, they are *transitive virtues*—cultivated and reckoned in relation to others rather than as properties of the self. Care is a property not of the self, but of relations, and it becomes manifest only within and through relations. Possessive virtues or "character," like strength, courage, or probity, do matter, but only insofar as they are deployed to relational ends. Strength and wealth elevate people socially only when these are deployed in the care of others. To use Dumont's language, relational value encompasses possessive value. In different parts of India people have tended to valorize one or another virtue (or set of virtues) associated with a preeminently positioned community. In rural Rajasthan what people celebrate, instead of Brahmanical purity, are the valor and strength associated with Rajputs, who have long been the preeminent patron-donors. In Tamil Nadu, it is Brahmans who have often played that role, hence the honor given to ritual purity. In Begun, people may agree that Kanjars have the courage and strength that is celebrated in Rajputs, but this recognition alone does not afford them respect. What matters is their "strayness," their unattachment, their lack of proper social ties. As Guha (2016) has

shown, across India and throughout its history various caste attributes, of which purity is but one, only marked a social precedence that was in fact reckoned with respect to relations.[47]

The encompassment of possessive value by relational value is what Robbins (2004) has called "relationalism," a sensibility that locates value in social relations and accords them the highest moral honor. What is less clear in Robbins's work is what difference having relations as the locus of value makes to the overall structure of value. I shall argue that the privileging of relations as the location of value radically changes the structure of value as well as the structure of relations that are organized by it. The relational calculus of human worth is not a linear accumulation of value. People do not acquire social worth simply by engaging in more relations, in a way that one might accrue virtues. They are judged, instead, with respect to a set of multiple, positionally determined values. As we shall see, sometimes it is good to have many relations and sometimes it is best to have only one. Kanjars, bereft as they are of vital relations, may appear like the Papuan "rubbish men" who have no relations (Burridge 1975). But for Kanjars the trouble is actually that they have far too many relations—but of the wrong kind. They engage promiscuously in a disheveled array of relations instead of securing fixed, steady bonds, which, as we shall see, are essential for good social standing.

If possessive values can change diametrically and at times very fast (as in cases of religious conversion), relational principles are much more resistant to change and can cause the greatest grief when forced into abandonment or too rapid change (e.g., Vitebsky 2017). Think of the rise of egalitarianism in seventeenth-century Western Europe. The most radical and controversial egalitarian assertion was made not by philosophers who advocated "basic human equality"—an idea that was already central to early Christianity and Roman law (Hoekstra 2013)—but by Quakers and Levellers who were advancing new relational norms. It was not their insistence that people were "fellow creatures" that scandalized their contemporaries, but their egalitarian handshake: the "uncouth, strange, and Immodest" practice of "feeling and grabling" (Bejan 2011: 414).

In India, the durability of relational principles does not mean that, in trying to follow them scrupulously, people are in any way immobilized. On the contrary, because relational principles enjoin people to *act* in particular ways, they

leave room for creativity, improvisation, and change. In fact, these principles are the basic notation of local social dynamism. The vitality of the structure is not a matter of value reversal or simple value flip-flopping, as posited by Dumont (1980: 225, 244; also Houseman 2015 [1984]; Robbins & Siikala 2014), but of adhering to principles that in themselves presuppose creativity and change.

The Life-Giving Bond

In Northern India these principles take concrete form in a relational formula that spans social spheres and contexts, shaping relations between parents and children, gods and devotees, teachers and students, political leaders and followers, hosts and guests, among many others. This relational formula—patronage—encapsulates and puts into practice the basic principles of hierarchy. It is hierarchy's elementary social form. It involves people who give and people who serve, and has already been documented meticulously by scholars of South Asia. From the courts of premodern kingdoms to household relations, devotional practices, political representation, and village relations, we know that people right across the subcontinent have long built their most important social bonds out of the asymmetrical pairing of obligations to give and to serve (see Piliavsky 2014b for an overview). Some patronage bonds are given by kinship: parents are their children's patrons; husbands, the patrons of their wives; and elders, of their juniors. Others are inherited at birth (relations with a caste's traditional patrons, for instance); yet others are forged over the course of life. Since in ordinary English usage we think of "patronage" as an instrumental relation with sponsors, customers, or financiers, rather than as a bond of intimacy and care, it may seem odd to think of parents as "patrons." But in India what I call patronage is conceived in much more vital terms, as a tie of concern and personal obligation, which involves practical support as the embodiment of care and love. That is why in rural North India people often address employers, patron-gods, and political patrons as "parents" (*mā-ī-bāp, bav-ji*) and describe themselves as their "children" (*aulād*).[48]

That givers are superior is a maxim as ancient as South Asian history itself (an observation pivotal to Mauss's [2002(1925)] famous analysis of gift-giving). The earliest known texts in the region focus on munificence as the defining duty of above-standing men (yes, in this context mostly men): early temple

inscriptions praise royal largesse and document royal gifts, ancient legal treatises enjoin leaders to generosity, and liturgical literature describes royal rituals as complex systems of gifting.[49] Crystallized over millennia in the institution of kingship, the duty and privilege to give (*dānādhārma*) has long defined political authority in South Asia (Richards 1978; Stein 1980; Dirks 1987; Olivelle 2009). It has been at the heart of religious and domestic life (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1976; Clark-Decès 2014), and it is alive and well today in public and domestic contexts, in homesteads and on politicians' platforms. It is alive, for example, in the practice of hospitality, which is lavished eagerly, but received with reluctance, for by accepting gifts offered by hosts, guests accept a subordinate position (see chapter 8).[50] There is nothing demeaning about subordination as such. On the contrary, as we shall see, it is a privilege that many seek. But it is something that people seek only from particular people, those to whom they attach themselves and from whose attachments they draw honor.[51] It is not so with neighbors or in-laws, with whom rank differences are an ever-fraught, unsettled business, and so they avoid visiting one another, dodging the demeaning effects of hospitality. Here the gift really is "poison," as Raheja (1988b) and Parry (1994) thought. Once, when I brought some presents for my Brahman hosts, I was told point-blank: *you can't give—it is the big people among us who give* [hamāre baṛe dete]. Kanjars, in contrast, had no trouble with my generosity, in fact they were very much after it; I was rich, white, and educated, and, for all they knew, maybe I even worked for "the government" (*sarkār*). So they hoped for my patronage, for my provision and protection from the police, which, as we shall see, I provided, unawares.

What Indian patrons must show, and what they are judged on, first and foremost, is their capacity to "feed" (*khilānā*), that is, to provide and care for their people. This is why people celebrate them with honorifics like *anndātā* (bread giver) or *ann dev* (god of grain). "Feeding" is often quite literally what patrons do. Eating and feeding lie at the heart of local devotional practices, household exchange, weddings, and other places where patronal bonds are forged. Feasts are as central to the life of modern-day royal courts (Balzani 2003; Ikegame 2013) as they are to village patronage and electoral politics (Piliavsky 2014c; Wouters 2015; chapter 8 here). Feeding is not merely symbolic, but an enactment of the moral essence of giving (as we shall see in chapter 6). This process has been familiar to anthropologists for a long time. As Mauss (2002

[1925]) had argued, giving is a foundationally consubstantive act: to give is to share oneself with others and, as an act of consubstantiation, feeding makes this fact maximally concrete.[52]

To be a patron is to disseminate oneself to one's recipient-servants by "feeding"; to have a patron is to absorb or "eat" their personal substance (chapter 6). This personal substance—the set of mental, physical, and moral dispositions that Marriott and Inden (1973; 1977) referred to as "bio-moral substance"—is known across Northern India as *khanadān*, which people say means literally "the gift of food" (*khānā dān*).[53] *Khāndān* (usually glossed simply as "family") is not "identity" or a person's inherent property, but rather character acquired in social intercourse and, more precisely, through vertical relations with those who "feed." *Khāndān* is what Indian children receive at initiation, during communion with their patron-deity when they enter the social world, when they become a person (see chapter 6). It is not only castes and families that are united by patronal communion. Every social unit, every community, be it a caste association, a political party, a student union, or a sports club, requires a patron-deity of its own in order to exist (De Neve 2000; Piliavsky 2015b; chapter 6 here).

This idea of exogenesis, the derivation of self from other, is integral to hierarchical morality. Perhaps most obviously this idea is embodied in the widespread institution of stranger-kingship, where a sovereign outsider gives life to his polity (Sahlins 1981; 1985: 73–103; 2008; Sahlins & Graeber 2017). Most elementally, the idea is that everyone must come from somebody else, persons can only come from other persons (human or divine). This is what we may think of as a theory of anthropogenesis. In Northern India, it is expressed in the idiom of substantive co-creation, in the idiom of "eating" from or of your superiors. This is why the parent-child relation, the concrete, universal manifestation of hierarchical exogenesis, is the archetypal hierarchical bond. The source figure, what Sahlins calls "metaperson"—a parent, a patron, a god—is preeminent not because they represent or exemplify a paramount value, but because they are the source of their subordinates' being. In this sense, relations with parents and patrons, descent and masterhood, kinship and kingship are the same in principle.

Social worth does not come from encompassment by an impersonal value, but is a measure of proximity to the source. All value, in other words, is

personal. This is why, as we shall see, having a single patron is so crucial in local calculations of rank. This normative preoccupation with existential sources, what Peter Bellwood (2006) called "founder ideology," has been discussed extensively by anthropologists of Austronesia in their writings on "precedence" (e.g., J. Fox 1988; 1994; 2009; Fox & Sather 1996; Vischer 2009). But it is also present implicitly in the vast anthropological literature on descent, and more explicitly in a wide range of studies of rank and status (perhaps most notably in Sahlins [1958] and Geertz [1980]). Hocart wrote about an "order of precedence" as the basis of social differentiation (1970 [1936]: 37) and Dumont himself, when not advocating encompassment, thought of hierarchy *as* precedence: "hierarchy, or rather the existence of an order of precedence, a status ranking, usually compels recognition" (1980: 75). The idea of precedence presupposes neither a social whole nor holistic encompassment. Instead, it posits an ordered series, or a concatenation of asymmetric relations across the spectrum of social life. Instead of ascribing an overall shape, a whole, to human societies, it describes a *relational logic* that guides people's actions and steers life as a "process of coming into existence" (Fox 1994: 34).

The long-held belief among social scientists that castes are professional guilds ranked by degrees of occupational purity has obscured the descent-like structure of caste, in which each is conceptualized in relation to others as a *service community*, united by a shared trade conceived as a service to a master, and envisioned as its descendants. Thus Hocart: "The European thinks of the barber and the washerman as men who ply a trade inherited from their forefathers; but that is not the native point of view" (1970 [1936]: 115; also 1950). Castes, he writes, are communities *that perform particular* (*ritual*) *tasks for a specific master*. Indeed, as Marriott noted, in India "an occupation is a kind of behavior rendered as a service by one caste for another" (1959: 98). There are no generic priests or drummers, only priests or drummers for someone in particular. And the drummers for goatherds and the drummers for aristocrats are socially as distant as goatherds and aristocrats themselves. They dress and eat differently (following their patrons' ways of dressing and eating; see chapter 7), they go by different caste names, and they certainly neither eat with each other nor intermarry. For all intents and purposes, they are members of different castes.[54]

The importance of exclusive and durable patronal attachments in reckoning rank is evident (if seldom discussed explicitly) in studies of traditional village exchange relations, known as *jajmānī* or *birat* (chapters 3 and 7). At the foothills of the Himalayas, studied by Berreman, the highest ranking castes were the family priests who had exclusive and durable ties of service to single patron families; and lower ranking castes had looser and more generalized patronage (1972: 57–58). Parry likewise observed that in Himachal Pradesh barber priests (*purohits*) who were bound to patrons by exclusive service ties ranked above other craftsmen (*kamīns*) with looser, more generalized service bonds, who, in turn, ranked above unattached "beggars" (*māṅgāts*) with no certain service attachments in villages at all (1979: 59–71). In South India, too, Fukuzawa showed that holders of hereditary, land-tied service rights (*watandārī*) ranked above servants with temporary (*uparī*) labor rights (1972: 34). The same has also been shown by ethnographers to be true of Rajasthan's craftsmen, entertainers, and bards. Those of them who enjoy hereditary service bonds rank above those employed on a short-term, contractual (*āyat*) basis (Kothari 1994: 206). And those who work for a single patron (*jajmān*) or a patron family rank above those who serve several villages, who in turn rank above those engaged in "patronage shared by all" (*siroli birat*), or service to a scattered array of patron castes (Snodgrass 2006).

Everybody needs a patron, for to be is to belong. As Ramesh neatly put it, *every man belongs to someone, every man has a master* [*sab ādmī kisī ke to hote, har ādmī kā mālik hai*].[55] Every community has its own divine patrons (chapter 6). Human masters, however, are much harder to come by (chapter 7). And we shall see the problems of those for whom this is not so. If patron gods locate people within their families, clans, and castes, it is human patrons who anchor people in wider society by giving them the recognition of people who belong. It is these vital bonds that Kanjars so painfully lack. They do work for different local employers—for whom they spy, police, burgle, and negotiate disputes—but this work happens offstage, it is not recognized publicly, and it does not help them escape the infamy of stray, masterless men (chapter 4).

And a masterless person is hardly a person at all. If patrons are the source of personhood, then people who "eat from everyone's hand [*sabhī ke hāth se khāte*]," people like the Kanjars, have no coherent or definite origin, substance,

or self. They lack integrity, which here is not a moral metaphor, but an actual lack of a coherent social self. In their neighbors' eyes, unattached vagrant people (*ghumnewāle*) are as loose as their relations, existentially as much as morally, and so they lack social worth. This is the deep conceptual source of Kanjar exclusion, and of the Mandawari pogrom. As stray or masterless people, Kanjars are existentially indeterminate and so morally obsolete.

We do not need to travel to extreme social peripheries to see the importance of patronal attachment at play. Take, for instance, the Brahmans. Conventional wisdom, and Dumont, tell us that Brahmans are the highest caste. But ethnographers have shown that Brahmans have occupied all kinds of status positions, from high to low to middling. We know that while Brahmans who acted as family priests (*purohits*) were socially very elevated (see Parry 1979: 59), Brahmans who were village priests ranked somewhere in the middle, alongside potters and gardeners (Mayer 1960: 71), and Brahmans who acted as funerary priests ranked among the lowest castes (Parry 1994). Degrees of purity and pollution cannot possibly explain this difference because all three kinds of Brahmans claimed proximity to the divine sources of purity and also performed polluting rites. What instead explains their status differences are the degrees of their attachment to patrons. While family priests enjoyed exclusive, hereditary rights of serving a single aristocratic family, village priests served a less regular community of village patrons, and funerary priests on the banks of the Ganges would work for all and sundry who came to cremate their dead. What counted was not purity, but the fixity and exclusivity of hierarchical attachments. Those with steady service bonds to one patron did well for themselves, and those with a motley array of patrons would do abysmally.[56] What further enhanced the status of the kings' family priests was not their purity, but their role as the keepers of royal patron gods, who were essential for the king's authority.[57]

If all gifts carried with them moral "poison," as Raheja (1988b) and Parry (1989) argued, every service community would be equally despoiled.[58] But gifts are a hazard only when they are exchanged haphazardly. When they come from one's own patron, they carry with them the most cherished thing—life itself. As Hocart observed, kingship—that is, patronage writ large—was essentially part "not of a system of government, but of an organization to promote life, fertility, prosperity" (1970 [1936]: 3). This is a point that Sahlins (2017) has

recently extended into an argument for kingship—or polity based on generosity—as the basic structure of social life. The dual point about the generativity of gifts and the social precedence of those who give is embedded in the English word "generosity," a cognate of "generate," "gender," and "genus."[59] The neo-Hocartians overlooked this crucial point: that the king is not only a vessel of purity, but himself the real, substantive source of life. In other words, the patron as *pater*. Generosity was the universal pillar of kingship because it was literally and ritually, materially and cosmologically, a life-giving bond. This is not an "idealist" or a "culturalist" model. Generosity needs resources, making "economic" considerations central to any patronal order. And it is precisely the conflict between the normativity of largesse and the practicalities of acquiring its means that places moral tension at the heart of all patronal orders, with patrons ever vulnerable to charges of venality (chapter 8). This is what David Gilmartin has called the "paradox of patronage" (2014).

Hierarchical Individuals

The gift of life flows both ways. If patrons transmit their *khanadān* to servants, it is servants who make their patrons into big men (or women). When patrons "feed" their servants, they share, and thus expand, their selves by incorporating their donees. By giving, they absorb their gifts' recipients, becoming (or trying to become) bigger people, socially enhanced. As a Rajput friend of mine put it: *Men who give are big men—that's how we see it—the more a person gives, the bigger he becomes. That is why in Rajasthan people believe that Rajputs are the biggest caste*.

If belonging to patrons is the basic condition of being, it is being a patron that allows people to become truly grand, and ultimately the grandest thing of all—an individual (see below). Because one is what one does in relation to others, by fulfilling one's obligations, one can make and remake oneself. One moves onward and upward not by releasing oneself from bonds, but by entering into them judiciously. These norms can certainly restrict, but in able hands they are levers—indeed, the very conditions—of socially creative opportunity. As in the South Africa described by Ferguson, hierarchical dependence was never "a problem or a debility—on the contrary, it was the principal mechanism for achieving social personhood" (2013: 226). There are, of course, limits to self-advancement. The other party must cooperate, and the relationship

must be publicly recognized. This is precisely where the Kanjars' attempts at mobility often falter (chapters 3, 6, and 8). For both the prospects and perils of hierarchy are relational, contingent on efforts of everyone who is involved. And (as anywhere else in the world) most attempts at upward movement are unsteady, incremental, and slow. As people go through life, they become older siblings, parents, or heads of family: bigger people with more dependents and respect, but also with greater responsibility. The ambitious can try to fast-forward their social advancement by assuming more responsibility for others, by taking charge of provision, protection, and care (see Piliavsky & Sbriccoli 2016). In this world, where everyone is at once patron and servant—even royals are servants of patron gods—positions constantly shift, and there is nothing like a discernible social whole or a steady arrangement or shape to society. Instead there are shared *principles* that steer how people judge, decide, and act, that motivate people's pursuits, and locate them socially.

Conceptually, this world is highly coherent, with a few simple ideas shared over great stretches of space and time. Conceptual coherence does not mean social cohesion or "solidarity," with people slotting effortlessly into set positions inside a bounded whole. Nor does it amount to agreement, harmony or stasis. The world I describe is in constant flux. Everyone is at once servant and patron to many, roles they continually acquire and lose. What constitutes a "gift" and a "service" is rarely uncontested (see chapter 7), relative positions are continually renegotiated and reinscribed, and relations (and fortunes) are incessantly made and unmade. People change their positions not by a primitive accumulation of possessive value, but by changing their position relative to others. Some movements may unfold before an ethnographer's eyes, but most take much longer and become visible only in the *longue durée*, as we trace the slow rise and fall of communities (as I shall do in chapter 5). In North India, these relational principles have persisted remarkably across time, social levels, and circumstances, enjoying moral purchase across differences of caste, religion, and class,[60] and across community-specific possessive values, irrespective of whether a group specially cherishes ritual purity, strength, auspiciousness, valor, education, wealth, or whatever else. For a long time, this has been the basic vocabulary of the ambitious poetics of social life. If the copycat model of Sanskritization never actually helped anyone rise in the ranks, what has

done so is the cultivation of patronage. The best documented instance of this is what historians have termed "Rajputization" (or Kshatriyaization), a process by which India's tribal groups have attained Rajput, or royal, status (e.g., S. Sinha 1962; Pocock 1955; Singer 1964; Kulke 1976; R. Sinha 1992). This process can be mistaken for a Rajput-focused variant of Sanskritization:[61] a cultivation of Rajput instead of Brahmanical attributes by the lower castes. In fact, the process has a very different logic; the difference is subtle, but crucial.[62] Rajputizing communities were not Rajput copycats, but in fact *became* Rajputs by capturing resources and land that allowed them to lavish largesse on newly acquired subjects, and so attain Rajput standing. Tribal chiefs in Western India became entitled to Rajput *attributes* (royal regalia, a royal history, and eventually even Rajput wives) only once they established themselves as patrons capable of supporting a sufficiently large communities of subjects. This process has long been the backbone of South Asia polities (e.g., Gordon 1994; Skaria 1999), ever in flux, ever the achievement of enterprising individuals. Here hierarchical norms were the chief mechanism of individual self-advancement and ambitious individuals, who actively deployed and maintained these norms.

As in the eighteenth-century polities, so today, hierarchy is not opposed to individual action, achievement, and responsibility. All these have great importance in the India I have come to know. In fact, I shall suggest that here hierarchy constitutes and enables individuality. If we abandon the conviction that hierarchy must be a ranked totality or a collectivist ideology, and conceptualize it instead as a *relational logic*, we will see that hierarchy and individuality go together easily and indeed rather well. As Mattison Mines (1988; 1994) perceived some time ago, in India people take great interest in individuals: in the details of their characters and biographies, their achievements and failures, personal motivations, reputations, and so on.[63] Whenever people recount history, discuss political events, or reflect on family problems, they focus on prominent individuals, on what they are like and what they have done. Here the idea of the individual is important not only for appreciating individual lives, but as a structural constituent of social and historical order. Indeed, as I shall show throughout this book, the individual is intrinsic to hierarchy: both as the endpoint of hierarchically organized social ambition and as hierarchy's pivotal structuring principle.

Let me explain. The hierarchical individual stands in contrast to the Euro-American egalitarian individual, whom Dumont invoked when he contrasted holism with individualism. In Euro-America's (post-)Christian, post-Enlightenment ideology (if not necessarily in Euro-American everyday moral reckoning), each person is born an individual. Individuality is an inherent condition, ungraded and unqualified. But in rural North India people are not *born* individuals, they *become individuated* through a protracted, cumulative, and frequently arduous process that may take a lifetime, or more. Here individuality is not a given state, but a hard-won achievement. This idea is inscribed in the Brahmanical theory of life stages, or *āśramas*, which prescribes rigid rules for the early stages of life (a student's, a householder's), but releases the old for solitary contemplation and finally for the ultimate individuation of retirement (*sanyās*) from social life. Such a retiree, the Hindu renouncer, whom Dumont imagined as holism's solitary antithesis, is not the exception to the hierarchical order of life, but its pinnacle. The process of individuation is readily visible in everyday life. If in Europe and the United States it is the young who tend to radicalism and displays of individuality, in rural North India it is older folk who brim with idiosyncrasy while the young conform meticulously to established norms. It is also usually older, grander, or more distinguished people who are feted as individuals: gods, gurus, elders, film stars, business magnates, political leaders.

A hierarchical individual is someone who has achieved something. Unlike the autonomous post-Christian individual—a person separate from and equal to others—the hierarchical individual is by definition attached and unequal to them. If this egalitarian individuality is rooted in *difference*, hierarchical individuality is based on *distinction*.[64] A distinguished person is not more valuable in an abstract sense, but stands in a particular relationship to the others and is distinctly valuable *to and for them*. The former is a matter of separation *from others*, the latter of being distinguished *among others*. Like Weber's "charisma," individuality is not the property of a person, but a structural effect of the relations in which the individual is enmeshed.

If the egalitarian individual is an atom in a flat network, the hierarchical individual is a grandee; not an island, but a mountain peak. One can distinguish oneself in all manner of ways—spiritually, professionally, financially,

politically—but one is recognized as an individual only when one does something magnificent *for others*, when one assumes responsibility for them. When Rajasthani grandees (royals, businessmen, headmen, politicians) give an account of their splendor—that is, of their individuality—they will always tell you about the many people, processes, and institutions that are in their charge. They will define their individuality by the extent of their social involvement. They will list things that they have done for their community, institutions that they have founded, or decision-making processes in which they have authority. The same is true in Tamil Nadu, where big men likewise define their individuality by the extent of their social involvement (see M. Mines 1994: 14). When others discuss distinguished people, they describe things that those people have done for them: funds they have made available, families they have supported, or security they have provided for others. The more significant their actions, the more vividly personal is the mythology that surrounds them. In local narratives, the grandest patrons—kings, gurus, or chief ministers of states—are the most incandescently individuated, and their magnificent qualities are celebrated on millions of posters and in innumerable legends of their deeds. They are not just individuals, but super-individuals.

People describe the uniqueness of grandees not as a matter of their being different from others, but of being *their* guru, political leader, husband, or mother. The icons of patrons that hang on the walls of ashrams, political party headquarters, or living rooms depict people who are revered not for being singular geniuses, but for being heads of religious sects, political parties, or households. If egalitarian individuals are autonomous figures, hierarchical individuals are deeply implicated in others, by virtue of both their responsibility toward them and the existential bonds that I discussed above. These bonds are the basis of social distinction and personal distinctiveness, which go hand in hand. To become a distinctive person—an individual—is to be socially *distinguished*. Dumont, who thought the individual a creature of egalitarian ideology—and hierarchy's value antithesis—had to place Hindu ascetics, whom he rightly saw as intensely individuated, outside ordinary Indian society. But, in the eyes of Hindu devotees, Hindu renunciants (*sanyāsīs*) are not external to social life, they are its final stage (*ashramā*), its pinnacle. Renunciation (*sanyās*) is not the abandonment of social life, but its exalted culmination.

Which is why in common parlance renunciants are often called Mahārāj—not "holy man" or "ascetic," but "great ruler" or "king."

As the source of people's collective selves, of their *khanadān*, the patron is the local communities' keystone. Because communities are defined by incorporative ties to their patrons, they are anthropomorphic in principle: their histories are often told as the stories of their patrons' achievements and failures, and their character as the character of their patrons. Educated Rajputs explain, for example, that their patron deities' iconography is a map of their *khanadān*. *The icon of our goddess,* explained Mahendra Singh, the king of Mewar, *is like a map of our character. We retrace this map in our minds every day when we do our morning prayers.* We shall hear Kanjars saying, and acting out, a strikingly similar view in chapter 6. And this is of course what Sahlins (1983), following Chadwick (1926), described as "heroic" sociality, bound not by horizontal links or any kind of equivalence or identity, but by vertical bonds with "metapersons" (Sahlins 2017) as the structural anchors of social life.

Far from being a system of stasis, hierarchy presupposes and enables people's capacity to will, judge, and act. It is thus the framework of freedom—not freedom from social bonds, but freedom as the capacity to act effectively in the world—and, as such, it is the necessary condition of hope.