Patronage and community in a society of thieves

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Patronage is a structural pivot of social life in South Asia. Drawing on the ethnography of relations between a caste of professional thieves in rural Rajasthan, known as Kanjars, and their patron-goddesses, I show that patronage is also, crucially, a normative formula which encompasses a set of values. I examine the nature of these values, and why the Kanjars value them such a lot, to show an alternative sense of hierarchy, based neither on substantive values (like purity or auspiciousness) nor on transactions, but on a set of relational values (like attachment and generosity) that may have cardinal provenance beyond the given context.

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I
Introduction

In 2002, when I first visited India, I lived for some weeks in Jaipur, Rajasthan's capital, with a family whose son Jay had just joined a software company. A fresh Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) graduate, Jay was euphoric about landing the job and spoke a lot about a new company office opening in Delhi, where he hoped to relocate. I left Jaipur for research in a remote village and lost touch with the family. However, several months later, I ran into Jay in Central Delhi. He was sporting a smart suit and a fresh haircut, and had just arrived from Jaipur to attend the inauguration of his company's new office. His dream had come true—he was moving to Delhi—and I *had* to join him. At the time, my interests lay firmly

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in rural India and tribal religion, and a corporate party was not my idea of fun. Besides, I had no suitable clothes. But Jay was unrelenting and I soon found myself on the fifth floor of a corporate glass office wearing newly bought clothes.

The office was packed with young people 'networking' beneath a cloud of suspended balloons. It was as boring as I expected and I was plotting an escape when Jay pulled me into a room filled with incense smoke: 'here is something you'll like', he said. Three young priests were sitting in front of a fire they had made right on the floor, periodically feeding it *ghee* (clarified butter). The object of their devotion was a bearded god depicted on a poster hung on a wall on the other side of a spread of coconuts, flowers, bananas and a mosaic of coloured rice. The caption on the poster stated:

> May Lord Vishwakarma bless you with a smooth and trouble-free functioning of your phones, computers, internet and vehicles! Happy Vishwakarma puja!

Vishwakarma, explained one of the priests, is the 'lord of universal engineering' and the patron-god of anyone who works with machinery. Mechanics and engineers (including software engineers), sellers of machine parts and tools, industrialists, architects, blacksmiths and drivers of buses are all Lord Vishwakarma's devotees (e.g. Bear 2013). The priest explained that each professional guild worships its own form of the Lord in the image of their work's instruments: a blacksmith's mallet, a driver's bus or a hard drive of a computer (he pointed to a computer tower smeared with vermilion). 'You can say that each group venerates a different Lord Vishwakarma, a patron-God of its own', he added. Back then, I did not give his comments much thought. The sight of loin-clothed priests burning butter and smearing vermillion on the floor of a corporate office was certainly odd. But having spent several months in India, I was accustomed to seeing gods in the least likely places. What I had not seen back then was the deeper normative sense of patron-deity worship.

It was not until some years later, when I conducted research in rural Rajasthan, that I began to see the moral import of patronage right up and down social scales and contexts (Piliavsky 2014). Over the years, the young priest's words came back to me, time and again, as I watched shopkeepers venerating their account books (an emanation of the wealth goddess

Lakshmi) and students offering *puja* (prayer) to notebooks (as avatars of Saraswati, the goddess of learning). In fact, every self-identified community in north India claims the tutelage of its own unique patron-deity: castes, clans, sub-clans, trade guilds, political parties, caste associations, the staff of police stations and corporate offices, youth clubs and more.[1]

This article reflects on some things I have since understood about the normative role of patronage, both divine and human, in north Indian life. My ethnography describes a community I have worked and lived with for 18 months, in 2005 and again in 2007–08: a caste of professional thieves called the Kanjars who live in rural Rajasthan (Piliavsky 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2015). This article offers a focused discussion of the Kanjars' relations with their patron-goddesses, especially as these become manifest during the goddesses' annual festival of Navarātri. I show what this relation consists in for the Kanjars, why it is so valuable for them and what it tells us more broadly about the system of values in the locale. I argue that 'patronage', an imperfect gloss for an asymmetrical and mutually co-creative bond, is not only a prevailing relational norm and pivotal source of collective identity for the Kanjars, but also an ideal that brings together some crucially orienting values. Building on an earlier generation of studies of hierarchy in South Asia, I examine the nature of these values, and why the Kanjars value them such a lot, to show an alternative sense of hierarchy, based neither on substantive values (like purity or auspiciousness) nor on transactions, but on a set of relational values (like attachment and generosity) which play a cardinal role.

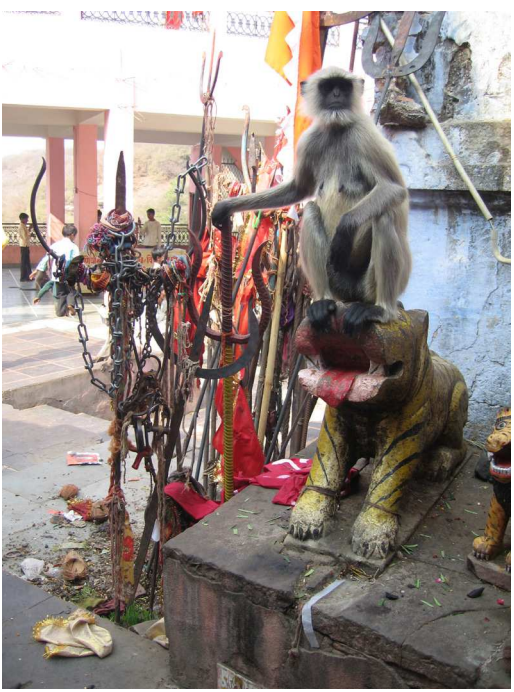
II
Heroic stock

The Kanjars in question, who live in a rural corner of south-eastern Rajasthan, are identified, and they identify themselves, as thieves by hereditary caste trade, and they occupy the extreme periphery of respectable local society. By common account, the Kanjars are of a 'heroic stock' (*bahādur kom*) distinguished by their strength, pluck and cunning, the dispositions

[1] Much has been written on Hindu clan deities (*kul devatā*) (e.g. Hardgrave 1969; Harlan 1992). On Krishna, the patron-god of the politically charged Yadavs, see Michelutti (2004: 45ff; 2008: chs 3 and 6) and on Sawaliyaji, the divine patron of Rajasthan's opium traffickers, see de Wilde (2009). Or, on India's best known patron-deity Ram—the tutelar of the Hindu right—see Hansen (1999).

necessary for thieving, a 'heroic business' (*bahadūrõ kā dhandhā*) like hunting or war. People say that these virtues bespeak the Kanjars' 'special relation' (*khās sambandh*) to the goddess, the personification of force (*śakti*) that animates the Hindu cosmos. The devi has myriad forms, including classic goddesses of Sanskrit mythology and her innumerable regional avatars. The chief local goddess in south-eastern Rajasthan is Joganiya Mata (literally, 'yogi mother'), who is also known as the 'goddess of thieves' (*chorõ kī devī*). It is widely believed in the area that Joganiya favours the Kanjars. She readily blesses their thieving raids, ensures rich spoils, shields them from the police, assists in prison breaks and, when they escape, removes their shackles. The proof of her patronage can be found in Joganiya's hilltop temple, which houses a display of shackles and chains deposited over the years by escaped jailbirds (Figure 1).

Figure 1
The irons of escaped jailbirds at the temple of Joganiya



Source: Author.

For Kanjars, Joganiya's tutelage is not only useful, but it has also existential meaning. As one priest at the Joganiya temple explained:

> When the Mother grants a boon (*bar-dān*) to petitioners (*māṅgne-wāle*), she gives them her power. Then their work gets done. Because they have the Mother's power, they can do things they could not do before. The Mother grants Kanjars many boons. Kanjars always get her blessings (*pātī*) first. This is why they are such formidable (*zabardast*) thieves.

This tutelage carries with it a degree of social recognition, something the Kanjars value a great deal. One Kanjar boasted: 'Our relation with the Mother is our caste's glory (*shān*) and recognition (*pahchān*). Everybody recognises our community (*kom*) because they know we are the Mother's special people (*khās log*).'

The goddess's boons and blessings are gifts of the kind anthropologists have written much about—gifts that confer something of the donor on the donee (e.g. Marriott and Inden 1977; Mauss 2002 [1924]; Parry 1986, 1994; Raheja 1988). As the temple priest explained, they transmit to the Kanjars her particular distinguishing trait, her śakti, imbuing them with courage (*himmat*) and strength (*ṭakaṭ* or *bāl*). The goddess is the source of the caste's nature: the ascribed mental, moral and physical characteristics referred to collectively as *khandān*. In folk etymology, the word is said to refer to the 'gift of food' (from the Hindi *khānā* [food] and *dān* [gift]), an idea that quite plainly describes communal identity as something received from another, as an outcome of a social interaction.[2] Across northern India, divine and human patrons are often referred to with honorifics such as 'bread giver' (*anndāta*) or 'giver' (*dāta*), which designate them as sources of the client-communities' khandān.

The Kanjars distinguish sharply between members of their own brotherhood (*birādari*) they call *bhẫṭu* (f. *bhaṭẫṇi*) and outsiders they refer to as *kādzā* (f. *kādzi*).[3] The society of Bhẫṭus is a classic segmentary system, which has been widely described by anthropologists of Africa and the Middle East (e.g. Dresch 1988; Evans-Pritchard 1940) as a set of relations

[2] Although Platts (1884: *ad loc*) provides the same etymology as my informants, historically the term derives from Persian with no reference to 'gifts' or 'food'.

[3] The term kādzā is, curiously, cognate with the European Roma word *gadjo* for an outsider. The bhẫṭu brotherhood includes Kanjars as well as a set of other 'vagrant' castes, such as Bẫcṛā, Sẫnsī, Bhāṭ, Kālbeliyā and Naṭ.

organised through a structure of nested oppositions: two exogamous moieties, patriclans (*got* or *gotra*), village segments, families and households. Historically, the ranks of the bhāṭu brotherhood have shrunk and swollen, as its members moved from one to another of its constitutive castes, members of other castes joined the Kanjar clans and Kanjar families split or migrated to form new clans. This mobility, nonetheless, operates within a rigid structure of complementary opposition, which organises the most significant exchanges and relationships within the caste. Women and bride price (through isogamous, cross-cousin marriage practised by the Kanjars), resources, business contacts and information all flow most readily between the two moieties. Most gangs operate across moieties and training in the thieving trade relies on inter-moiety exchange.[4] It is customary for young boys to run away (inf. *bhāgnā*) from home and live for several months or even years in their father's sisters' or mother's brothers' villages. These villages become their 'second home' (*dūsrā ghar*), where they learn the tricks of the trade, make life-long friendships, join a gang and find future wives. For most, this second home remains the chief source of funds, intelligence, bail sureties and contacts with landholders and the police who offer protection and sometimes help identify potential burglary targets (Piliavsky 2013a). As one elderly man reflected, 'What are we [men of our moiety] without the others [men of the other moiety]? Whom would we marry? There would be nobody to give to and take from (*len-den*). Who would we be? What would our Kanjar society (*samāj*) be?'

Unlike African and Middle Eastern segmentary systems, where the closest and smallest segments have the greatest social and political value, segments of the Kanjar caste are ranked inversely, with the largest and most encompassing, the moiety, valued most and the smallest, the household, valued least. One may think of it as a structure of hierarchical encompassment where households are encompassed by families, which are encompassed by clans, which in turn are encompassed by one of the two moieties. As we shall see, the patron-goddesses are also correspondingly ranked: each segment corresponds to a form of the goddess (see Table 1). When the Kanjars explain why they value the more encompassing segments more, they say that they have greater śakti and unity (*yektā* in Kanjari), both of which are highly valued by them. As the level of encompassment drops from caste to moiety, clan, family and household,

[4] Because most Kanjars live in single-moiety villages, this means that they conveniently have at least two villages as their base of operations.

Table 1
Major divisions within the Kanjar jāt together with their goddesses

Aḷmoḍi moiety	Āśāpāl moiety
Great Aḷmoḍi	Great Āśāpāl
Little Aḷmoḍi	Little Āśāpāl
Nascent Aḷmoḍi	Nascent Āśāpāl
infant & mother/ household	infant & mother/ household
family	family
Clan representing Aḷmoḍi moiety	Clan representing Āśāpāl moiety

Source: Author's fieldwork.

the segment weakens and disintegrates into a fractious mess. The Kanjars insist that because moieties are strong and cohesive, they bring to their members good fortune, integrity and strength. Families and households, on the contrary, are 'weak' (*kamjor*) and, therefore, mired in squabbles and fractiousness. This is why, they say, boys always abscond from homes, abandon their fathers' gangs and betray their brothers.

III
Donor-goddesses and the logic of sacrifice

The pantheon of the Kanjar goddesses, where each form of the goddess is related to a segment of the caste, mirrors the caste structure. Just as every Kanjar belongs to one of the two moieties, each claims the aegis of one of the two moiety goddesses: either Aḷmoḍi or Āśāpāl.[5] When Kanjars first meet, they may not have heard of the other's clan (clans differ from place to place), but they can instantly establish the other's moiety by asking: 'to which Mother do you belong?' This clarifies whether the other is their 'sister' or 'brother' (from same moiety) or 'wife's sister' or 'wife's brother' (from opposed moiety) and how they ought to relate. Like the moieties themselves, the goddesses Aḷmoḍi and Āśāpāl are segmented into a number

[5] Another name for Āśāpāl is Āśāpura.

of ranked forms: the 'great', the 'little' and the 'nascent', each associated with a clan, a family and a household, respectively (Table 1).

Attachment to a moiety goddess does not only locate Kanjars within their caste, it is also a measure of their good standing, a sign of being a 'proper' (*khandāṇī*) Kanjar. If, for one or another reason, a clan, a family or an individual is in disgrace, Kanjars say that their ties to the Mother must have been severed (*ṭūṭi jā*) or that the Mother abandoned them (*chalī jī* or *choṛ dī*).[6] Thus, if patronage by the regional goddess gives a degree of legitimacy to Kanjars' standing in broader society, bonds with the caste goddesses locate them inside the caste and are greatly valued by Kanjars, who spend much of their time nurturing these relations. Service offerings to the caste goddesses are part of daily alimentary practices, especially the drinking of liquor and the butchery, preparation and consumption of meat. Every bottle of alcohol (*madh*) that Kanjars brew and drink (which they do often), they offer first to the goddess by spilling a little onto the ground while invoking her name. Every goat and sheep they rustle, slaughter and eat, they also sacrifice to the goddess—an act of service to the donor-goddess (*deyāṛīs*, literally 'those who give') which repeatedly cements the bond, designating the Kanjars as servants and goddesses as their donors. As one woman put it, 'these goats belong to the Mother. They are her gifts. When we sacrifice them, it is our service to her (*unnochi sevā karte hai*). This is how we get our khandān.'[7] As they serve meat and alcohol to the goddess (as wives do to husbands), the Kanjars receive the goddess's 'gifts' (dān) and with them their landmark virtues: strength, boldness and humoral heat (*garmi*). As Kanjars put it, a properly sacrificed animal quite literally 'makes the bhẫṭu' (*bhẫṭu banātā*). Kanjars' neighbours accuse them of being 'addicted' to alcohol and meat, something non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for 'Kanjar upliftment' also militate against. But for the Kanjars themselves, the consumption of meat and alcohol is an existentially vital process through which they maintain their communal

[6] In south-eastern Rajasthan, the Guḍarāwat clan has acquired the repute of a 'fallen clan' (*girā huā got*) or a 'half-clan' (*ādhi-got*) 'with no brothers' (*koi bhāī nahī hai*). It seems that someone from the clan was a police informant and now members of other clans avoid eating with and marrying them. It is also said that this clan 'has no goddess' (*mātājī nahī hai*).

[7] Contrary to conventional Brahminical conceptions of sacrifice (Dumont 1957: 377; Good 1985), Kanjars do not conceive of sacrifice as their gift to the deities, but as work (*kammā*) or service (*sevā*) for them. A fellow ethnographer reports that in central Karnataka, villagers also conceptualised sacrificial animals as 'gifts from' the deities and sacrifice as the devotees' service (Neil Armstrong, personal communication).

substance that must be earned diligently by serving the goddesses every time they eat or drink. During the 18 months when I lived with one gang leader's family, hardly a day passed without a carnivorous and an alcohol-fuelled feast. Not every Kanjar can afford to eat meat and drink alcohol every day, but those who do—mostly successful thieves—enjoy the esteem of proper, khandāṇī Kanjars said to have sufficient strength and courage to be successful in their hereditary business. The consubstantive process does not run in one direction. Inasmuch as the goddesses' gifts make up her devotees, their services also manufacture the goddess in a process the Kanjars refer to as 'making the Mother' (*mātājī banānā*).

IV
Making goddesses

The most important annual service for the goddess takes place during the autumnal festival of Baṛī Navarātri, the 'nine great nights'.[8] The festival is so central to the Kanjar sense of collective self that my informants often insisted that this is what I must write my book about. As my host explained, during the festival, the Kanjars 'create a map of the Kanjar society (*kanjar samājõ kā nakśā banāwe*). You can see our caste as it really is!'[9] Navarātri involves two main rituals: offerings made to the goddess and the initiation of children, both centring on animal sacrifice. Over the course of the festival, the celebrations move from a quiet, domestic affair to raucous, village-wide celebrations when the Kanjars sacrifice animals and initiate newborn children. The festival involves a procession of the goddesses' avatars (*rūp*), which appear in a succession, each in receipt of its own order of offerings from its corresponding segment of the caste.

Navarātri is also the time of year when every Kanjar is socially born. At the centre of the celebrations are the haircutting initiation rites (*laṭī chaṛhānā*) for children born since the festival in the previous year. The ritual is the Kanjar's communion when they first receive both their khandān and name from the goddess. Prior to initiation, the infants remain nameless, are barred from wearing proper clothing, eating with others and receiving proper burial and mourning rites if they die. During this time,

[8] For more on the Hindu festival of Navarātri, see, for instance, Fuller and Logan (1985).

[9] The Kanjars' idea that sacrifice is an act that generates the order of existence echoes the old textual conception of sacrifice as a cosmogonic act (e.g. Biardeau and Malamoud 1976).

their mothers also remain in a state of post-partum isolation when both the infants and their mothers are said to be vulnerable (*bholī*) and weak (kamjor).[10] The mothers and infants have their own goddesses, known as 'nascent' or 'birth mothers' (*bey mātās*), to whom the mothers make offerings during Navarātri. On the first day of the festival, the new mothers make egg-shaped icons of the nascent goddesses from a mixture of ghee, water and cow dung (Figure 2). Over the following seven or eight days, they make offerings of milk and boiled rice, with which they also feed their infants, to the goddesses. One young mother explained: 'the Birth Mother is like a child—very innocent, vulnerable. She is so small, so weak. We take good care of her and she eats milk and rice.'[11] Kanjars

Figure 2
The nascent goddess with a few grains of offering rice

Source: Author.

[10] See Ann Gold (1988: 13) for a discussion of the moral weight of the term 'bholī'.

[11] The vegetarian offerings made to such goddesses befit their vulnerable character, reflecting the widespread equation between weakness—the moral and corporal frailty attributed to 'grass-eating' Brāhmiṇs and merchants—and vegetarian diet.

say that it is because their goddesses are so weak, that uninitiated infants and their mothers are highly susceptible to illness and death.[12]

On each night of the festival, the senior households of every family light oil lamps and offer ghee, incense, cow dung and coconuts to their family goddesses. This form of the goddess is known as the 'little mother' (*nannī mātā*), an avatar which ranks above the nascent mother, but below the great moiety goddess.[13] The little mothers are thought to be more potent than the nascent mothers, but weaker than the great clan and moiety goddesses. As protectors of families, little mothers are meant to keep families away from quarrels, illness, poverty and the police—a task they perennially fail in. Kanjars say that it is because little mothers are weak, relations in Kanjar families and households, between parents and children, and between siblings, are volatile, as they indeed often are. Brothers often do not speak to each other, sometimes for years on end. Even if on speaking terms, they often avoid visiting one another or sharing meals.

Kanjars blame this fractiousness (*yektā koy*) on the frailty of the little mothers, a condition further reinforced by the fact that entire families hardly ever perform services jointly for the family goddess. Navarātri is the only time they do this. The service to the little goddess is more extensive than to the birth mothers, but it remains, nonetheless, a modest affair. As one elder explained:

> [I]f little mothers had more strength, our villages and families and brothers would stick together. But how can they [the goddesses] have strength, if we do not give it to them? There is no unity in our families. There is no family in this village where brothers light a camphor lamp to their goddess together.

Or, in the words of another: 'how can the family mother be strong if we give her no service? It is the caste that makes its mother.' If that would improve their lot, why don't the Kanjars put greater effort into serving the goddess collectively? 'They did', said one elder of the village I lived in. 'But those were the old days.' They always are. What is true is that more often than not, Kanjars cannot do this for they are incommunicado.

[12] Of 11 children born during my stay in one village, three died at birth and one did not survive till the haircutting ceremony.

[13] Family goddesses can be represented either with an anthropomorphic image (*mūrat*) or with vermillion marks on the walls of the house.

The cycle is vicious: family discord is both cause and effect of the little goddesses' impotence.

On the final days of Navarātri, the villagers carry the icons of family goddesses to the open shrines (usually located in the south-western corner of villages) where they transform little mothers into one of the two great moiety goddesses (Figure 3).[14] On the eve of the installation, the Kanjars hold all-night vigils (*rāti jugā*) to rouse (*jugānā*) the deities with bright lights and raucous songs of devotion (*thālī*). They explain that the vigil does not only make the goddess 'accessible, approachable and active', as some scholars of popular Hinduism have suggested (e.g. Erndl 1993: 102),

Figure 3
Great Āśāpāl adorned with a shawl, rupee notes and flower garlands

Source: Author.

[14] Sometimes instead of moving the household goddesses to the village altar, Kanjars set up a new image of the deity.

but actually 'creates' the great goddess. While encouraging me to join in the singing, one man said:

> The more of us get together and the louder we sing, the more things we offer, the more ghee we burn, the greater our Mother becomes. Why do you think our Mother has so much strength (*ṭakaṭ*)? Because we celebrate (*manāte*) Navarātri with the most bustle-and-pomp (*dhūm-dhām se*), more than any other caste.

The next morning, the Kanjars construct makeshift altars on which they perform final rites of sacrifice later that day. The altars are not just the places of sacrifice, they are also themselves forms of the goddess. Kanjars say that the making of altars is itself a pūjā, a service central to 'creating the Mother' (mātājī banānā). One young woman described the process: 'When we make the Mother's altar, we pay homage (*pūjte*) to her. We make our Mothers (*mātājī ko banāwe*). We give them form (rūp) and then we offer them services (*sevā karte*).' Clans of each moiety construct an altar in a shape peculiar to their moiety: the Āśāpāl clans make something they call a *chauk* (a patch of ground outlined with cow dung) and the Aḷmoḍi clans erect a superstructure known as the *teydā* (Figure 4). The altars are later decorated with flags, flowers and various offerings, and the Kanjars set up the goddesses' images, adorning them with shawls and flower garlands or rupee notes.[15] Kanjars say that since each altar is itself a form of the goddess, the fact that one should be vertical and another horizontal is essential to the opposition between Aḷmoḍi and Āśāpāl.

Each Kanjar clan further adds distinctive features to its altar. The Chatrāwat (Aḷmoḍi) clan, for example, constructs a second level, known as the *upparmāḷī* (or *dāgḷi*), on their vertical teydā altar and the Karmāwat (Āśāpāl) clan shapes its chauk into a triangle. The altar structure and the arrangement of offerings on it can be further elaborated with details particular to a clan's village segment. Kanjars who wish to distinguish their segment of the clan can also add distinctive features to their order of service. As the services are constitutive of the goddess, doing so also segments the goddess into a variety of clan- and village-specific forms.

[15] The offerings normally include spirits, incense, oil lamps, grain, rice pudding, jaggery, vermilion, turmeric, henna as well as the burnt offerings of cow dung, coconut and ghee.

Figure 4
A teydā altar erected by the Bamṇāwat (Aḷmoḍi) clan

Source: Author.

Chatrāwats in one village offer the ears of sacrificial rams to their goddesses and Karmāwats in another veil the goddess during sacrifice. Old men from the clan that makes offerings of rams' ears explained that they started doing this about two decades ago to distinguish themselves from another, less respectable Chatrāwat family that moved to a nearby village. Although Kanjars lament disunity within their caste, specificity is as central to the rites of Navarātri as it is to their otherwise lives. The goddesses—which are at once unitary and segmented—embody the tension between unity and difference, values that run in conflictual ways through Kanjars' lives and find expression in their simultaneous

insistence on uniqueness and unity, and in their fiercely egalitarian and fractious lives. The conjunction of unity and difference is not particular to the Kanjar caste, although it is intensified in it, but runs in greater or lesser measure through much of what South Asian anthropologists have long thought of as 'caste': an order of unity and differentiation, connectedness and specificity. The order of segmented patron-gods, whether Kanjar goddesses or the different avatars of Lord Vishwakarma worshipped by engineers, reflects this order.[16]

The goddess's chief avatar, which appears at the end of the festival, is the sacrificial animal itself, which, as the Kanjars say, embodies her form (rūp) and nature (*prakṛti*), and is known as her 'image' (*mūrat*). Each goddess receives one of the two sacrificial animals: rams (*miṇḍā*) for Aḷmoḍi and he-goats (*tsāḷi*) for Āśāpāl. The animals are further differentiated by colour particular to its clan. Karmāwats sacrifice only black goats, Chatrāwats white rams, Chanḍāwats silver or mottled rams and Singhāwats red goats. As embodiments of the goddess, the animals receive offerings prior to sacrifice: rice pudding (*khīr*) and alcohol (*madh*), which the Kanjars sprinkle over them. In the moments immediately before their slaughter, the animals receive another service of sprinkled water and alcohol, cow dung, ghee and sacrificial *kuśā* grass which Kanjars tie across their mouths (Figure 5).[17] Contrary to the Brahminical logic of sacrifice, Kanjars do not see the pre-slaughter services as rites of purification, but as an offering of service made to the goddess in her animal avatar (e.g. Moffatt 1979: ch. 6; Whitehead 1921: 55, 68ff, 99). The victims are, thus, both recipients and victims of sacrifice: 'When we offer burnt offerings (*dhūp lagāte*) to these goats (*tsāḷiyā*)', said one woman, 'we serve our Mother. The Mother goes inside (*ghus gaī*) the goats.' Most Kanjars slaughter the animals with the conventional Hindu *jhaṭkā*, a 'jerk' of the sword aimed to sever the head of the animal in a single stroke.[18]

[16] See also Evans-Pritchard (1956), Campbell (1964: 33) and Michael Herzfeld (1990) on the relation between segmentary social systems and the order of 'refracted' divinities in Africa and Greece.

[17] The sequence of events follows the classical structure of Hindu sacrifice (Biardeau and Malamoud 1976: 138–53).

[18] This is true of all but three Kanjar clans (Bamṇāwat, Nannāwat and Guḍaṛāwat) who perform sacrifice with the Muslim *halāl* (or *dhabīhah*) method, a bloodletting cut on the neck.

Figure 5
The Bamṇāwat men making offerings to Great Aḷmoḍi they are about to eat

Source: Author.

V
Eating the goddess

To pay proper homage, the Kanjars must slaughter the goddesses, not in an act of deicide but in one of reincarnation that transforms the goddess into her final manifestation: the meat consumed by her devotees. Kanjars pour the blood that gushes from the neck of the animals over the goddess's image, an offering they call the 'blood-service' (*khūṇ sevā*). Without the blood-service, they say, the animal's life will have been 'spoiled' (*bigṛā huyā*) or 'gone to waste' (*ujaṛā*), its flesh (*gulli*) failing to become the meat (*botti*) Kanjars consume in the final act of communion with the goddess. Kanjars think of the sacrificial meat generated by the sacrifice as the goddess's 'gift of meat' (*boṭṭiyẽchī dān*) or call it simply 'the meat of the goddess' (*mātājī ke boṭṭiyẽ*). One elder put it this way: 'Where is our Mātājī? When we eat [sacrificial] meat, she goes inside

us (*ghus jāwe*). She lives (*rewe*) in every piece of meat (*boṭṭi*) that we eat. When we sacrifice goats, when we eat the meat, she goes inside us.' Simple enough. As an act of eating the deities, the Kanjar sacrifice is closer to Catholic communion than Brahminical rites.[19]

The consumption of goats and rams physically substantiates the opposition of moieties. When each goddess manifests herself and is consumed in the form of a sacrificial animal, members of each moiety take on the distinct material properties of each kind of meat. As Kanjars say, 'one becomes the goat that one eats' (*jo tsāḷi ko khāwe, wo tsāḷi ho jāwe*): one is quite literally what one eats. Whereas the sinewy meat of goats, humorally hot (*garam*) and potent (*tej*) in texture and flavour, imparts special strength to the clans of the Āśāpāl, the soft and fatty mutton of the rams makes the Aḷmoḍi clans more gentle (*mulāyam*) and generous (*udār*). As one old woman explained, this makes the Āśāpāl Kanjars better thieves, while the tender flesh of the rams makes the Aḷmoḍi Kanjars softer and more peaceable. The opposition of moieties is further demarcated by the totemic consumption, or avoidance of gallbladder, *aḷmoḍā*, from which the name Aḷmoḍi derives. The organ contains Aḷmoḍi, Mother's essence, and at initiation, infants born into the moiety receive a taste of raw gallbladder, which elders swipe across their lips along with a sip of alcohol (Figure 6).[20] Few babies enjoy the procedure and the initiations are always full of babies' wailing and the hilarity it generates among the adults. But the mirth of the moment belies its significance, for this is when children first eat the goddess, receive their khandān and join the caste.

While food and drink are central to the rites of Navarātri, the festival occasions no communal feasts. Instead, meat and bread are cooked only halfway (*madda*), the latter prepared by the initiates' parents on special hearths (Figure 7).[21] At the end of the final rites, each family carries away its own share of meat and flatbread, which they cook later to completion

[19] Appadurai argued that alimentary relations between Hindus and their gods during sacrifice or worship services are normally about 'feeding the gods and eating their leftovers (*prasadam*)' (1981: 496). See also Babb (1975: ch. 2), Dumont (1957, 1959 [1953]), Fuller (1988) and Moffatt (1979: 261–64).

[20] The Āśāpāl Kanjars, conversely, avoid the gallbladder during the festival as much as at daily meals.

[21] The senior clansmen boil the meat and roast the entrails without using spices or grease required for a *pakka* (cooked) preparation and the flatbreads are also half-baked with oil.

Figure 6
The haircutting rite (Bamṇāwat clan, Aḷmoḍi moiety)

Source: Author.

and eat in the isolation of their homes. This final preparation and consumption of food is the goddess's final service.[22]

The absence of communal feasts may suggest that communal solidarity is not what the rites are for. But Kanjars insist that this is the very aim of the festival. One young woman said: 'When we eat the meat and flatbread of the Mother, our society comes together. Just then Kanjars forget their squabbling. The clans and villages become one (*yek ho jāwe*).' Kanjars

[22] The idea of food preparation as 'service' (usually offered to husbands by wives) is a widespread South Asian thought, which has received little attention from India's anthropologists, apart from a brief mention by Khare (1976) and Appadurai (1981).

Figure 7
Parents of an initiate infant half-cooking flatbread for initiation

Source: Author.

do not, however, achieve communion by exchanging or sharing food; they commune instead by consuming their goddesses' common substance. The goddess's body, quite literally incorporated by each Kanjar, becomes the Kanjar 'community' and the two become one. In the words of my Kanjar host, 'Because the Mother is inside us, you can understand our society as her form or you can say our society is the Mother's body'. Or, as one woman said: 'The Kanjar caste *is* the goddess's body, isn't it?'

VI
Patronage and community

To an outsider, the Kanjars' dealings with their goddesses appear as peculiar as the Kanjars themselves. Yet, in all their eccentricity, Kanjars enact a relational formula that has a general presence on the subcontinent and which was once described in great detail by the region's historians

and anthropologists. The shorthand for this relation is 'patronage', but it may be more precisely described as a mutually constitutive, asymmetrical bond between persons marked as 'donors' and those marked as 'servants'. That the givers of gifts transfer their substance to the receivers is an idea long familiar to scholars of South Asia, who have repeatedly shown that patrons—kings, big men or village *jajmāns* (patrons)—play a role that is central not only politically and economically, but also structurally, something first suggested by A.M. Hocart who described the institution of patronage (paradigmatically, kingship, replicated on all social levels right down to the village and family) as the structural axis of South Asian social life (1927, 1936, 1950). Later ethnographers corroborated this idea, showing political, economic and ritual relations in rural India to revolve around the figure of the landowning patron.[23] Critics of Louis Dumont from the so-called Chicago and neo-Hocartian schools further affirmed the patrons' centrality, showing how gifts created bonds of substance between donor-patrons and servant-donees.[24]

And yet, in their conclusions, scholars have stopped short of what their findings brought to light: that the donor–servant relation was not just a set of transactions through which persons and communities interacted, but a process through which they genuinely emerged. In her seminal analysis of patronage, Gloria Raheja (1988) demonstrated that life in rural north India revolved around dominant landholding families who continually distributed consubstantive gifts to their servant–clienteles. She concluded, however, that these gifts were socially 'poisonous', that they helped patrons dump ritual pollution and inauspiciousness onto clients, thereby asserting and reinforcing their own pre-eminent role. In the end, the exchange was not socially transformative, but conservative, achieving little more than the maintenance of the status quo. Some time before that, Raheja's teachers at Chicago (Marriott and Inden 1973, 1977) developed a rich theory of consubstantiation in South Asia, arguing that transactions such as feeding, marriage or sexual intercourse involved the circulation of persons' 'bio-moral particles', some more and some less pure. Upper castes, they implied, insisted on a rigid exchange protocol for fear of being diminished by substances received from below. Yet, these theorists

[23] For some accounts of the 'jajmāni systems', see Dumont (1980: 98ff), Kolenda (1967), Mandelbaum (1970: 159–80) and Wiser (1936).

[24] See, for instance, Dirks (1987), Marriott and Inden (1977), Quigley (1993), Raheja (1988) and Snodgrass (2006).

too, like Raheja, failed to explain why the low castes should continue to engage in transactions which only reinforce their humiliation. Nor did they show how exactly Indian persons and communities 'emerged' from transactions. For them too, although people exchanged substances, they only seemed to perpetuate pre-existing arrangements.

A more careful reading of the historical and ethnographic archive, and my own ethnography presented here, shows that patronal relations, as observed and described explicitly by parties to them, actively and continuously constitute persons and communities. Ethnographers of South Asia have long been aware, if often unwittingly, that local 'sub-castes', the collectivities that share commensal and marital relations, are defined not only by their occupations but also by the patrons for whom they do their work. In Rajasthan, for instance, while the bards and genealogists (*chāraṇs* and *bhāṭs*) of kings have historically occupied the society's apex (Shah and Shroff 1958; Tambs-Lyche 1997), the bards of tribal groups have been among the lowest standing groups (Snodgrass 2006). The two classes of bards neither ate together nor intermarried and were, in fact, as socially far apart as their patrons, the kings and tribal groups, themselves. This has been shown to be equally true of other castes: the 'Ḍholi [drummer] caste', observed Rajasthan's ethnographer Komal Kothari, is divided on the basis of affiliation to different patrons into 'Gujar Ḍholis, Bania Ḍholis, Patel Ḍholis and so on. These individual groups do not intermarry' (Bharucha 2003: 226). In fact, they do not even see themselves as members of one caste, but as entirely separate communities. Moreover, for the many Indian service castes, it is patronage that turns their work into an occupation (*peśā*) or work done in service to *someone*, human or divine, king or Lord Vishwakarma. Historically, this applied to genealogists, priests, potters and barbers as much as to thieves who also operated under patrons' auspices (Piliavsky 2013b, 2015). Kanjars too have, and have had, human patrons. Historically, these were Rajput aristocrats and village landlords, and since Independence, increasingly policemen, farmers, businessmen and petty politicians (Piliavsky 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b). But for a vagabond caste like the Kanjar, human patronage has never been a stable arrangement; and without a master, thieves are mere pickpockets (*jeb-kaṭ*), beggars (*maṅgne-wālā*), vagabonds (*ghūmne-wālā*), 'stray men' (*ruḷne wāle*) who, in local parlance, 'eat from everyone's hand' (*sabhī ke hāt se khāte*). As promiscuous receivers of gifts (and personal substance) from a jumbled

array of donors, they are perceived as jumbled, promiscuous people with no definite or respectable self. However despised the outcome of thieves' business may be, thieves who have patrons have a place in the world.[25] An elderly Kanjar explained:

> Our caste has always roamed in the jungle. From olden days, we have been coming and going. No patron has ever kept us for long. Sometimes we served Rājputs, sometimes Gujars, Bhīls, Mīṇās, and now the Kanjars serve the police. But we have always been Joganiya Mother's servants; she protects (*rakṣā kare*) us and gives us food (*ann*).

As I have argued elsewhere, historically in Rajasthan, castes have been defined as service communities of a given patron and the entire fabric of local society could be seen as a concatenation of donor–servant relations, each person and community at once patronising and patronised by the others (Piliavsky 2011b). The existentially pivotal role of the patrons is most vividly visible at the extreme ends of the social scale, among the lowliest Kanjars and the highest royals, both of whom lack human patrons: Kanjars as historic vagrants and kings as themselves the supreme patrons in the human realm (ibid.: ch. 2).[26]

Kanjars say that during Navarātri, as the Kanjar caste is produced, segment by segment, and the goddesses also emerge segment by segment, the goddesses become a 'map' of the Kanjar community. Anthropologists have long described the pantheon of the Hindu deities as 'maps' of human society. In his seminal study of the Tamil god Aiyanar, Dumont argued that the organisation of relations among Hindu gods mirrored the caste system: the worlds of humans and gods were equally organised by the structural opposition of purity and pollution (1959 [1953]; also 1957).[27] Human and divine societies were, thus, tied by an analogy or a common organising principle. The Kanjar goddesses are maps of a different sort. They do not bind gods to humans by analogy, but by direct, 'vertical' bonds of gift and service between goddesses and their devotees (see also Haekel 1963: 197). In other words, divine and human societies are not tied into,

[25] For a further discussion of this, see Piliavsky (2011b: ch. 1).

[26] On the splendours of royal devotionalism, see, for instance, Appadurai and Breckenridge (1976), Dirks (1987), Fuller (1985), Harlan (1992, 2003), Peabody (2003), Stein (1978) and Vidal (1997).

[27] See also Babb (1975) and Fuller (1979, 1980, 1988).

and are not appraised and ranked through, a single order of substantive values that describe the states or qualities of persons or things (purity, honour, auspiciousness and so on).[28] Instead, they derive their substance and social 'worth' from a shared set of relational values through which relations, not persons, are ordered and appraised. Insofar as persons and communities emerge from relations, their ranking is a result of judgements about whom they relate to, what these relations are like and how closely they match an ideal relational form.

VII
A note on hierarchy

Patronage is not the only relational ideal in the region, but it has proven to have special resilience over time and space. Wherever you go in South Asia, from temples to villages, corporate offices and political rallies, you will find acts of patronage on display (see Piliavsky 2014). Scholars of religion recognise that patronage is the fulcrum of popular Hinduism, historians know it to be the pillar of Indic political life and political scientists see it everywhere, albeit as a perversion of modern political life. Yet, however 'patronage' is conceived by each discipline, none would dispute its importance in the subcontinent's life.

What I suggested here is that patronage is not only a central structural mechanism in the formation of persons and communities in the region (something also suggested by De Neve 2000), but also a *normative* conception that is clearly audible in the Kanjars' insistence on just how good and worthy the rites of Navarātri are. Whereas in their otherwise lives, Kanjars are stray men in disgrace with polite society, the festival is their chance to put on a show of life as they would have it. When they described to me with great relish every nuance of the give-and-serve process, how they create the goddess and how they 'eat her', they were not only imparting the correct ritual form, but also telling me how centrally *desirable* all that Navarātri puts on display really is.

[28] For descriptions of alternatives, Dumont's critics have shown that different communities in South Asia orient themselves towards values other than Brahminical purity, including kingly honour and valour (e.g. Burkhart 1978; Das 1982; Dirks 1987; Fox 1971; Lerche 1993; Malamoud 1982; Sinha 1962) or the merchants' urbaneness and financial independence (Babb 2004; Cort 2004; Hardiman 1996).

Elementary aspects of patronage—asymmetry, attachment and co-creation—are an instance of hierarchy and social interdependence not only as structural facts, but also as normative ones. That hierarchy and sociality make up one distinctive social sensibility is what Dumont taught long ago: only individuals can exist in isolation (or at least that is what individualists think), but in a hierarchy, there are no persons without relations, something the idea of caste lays bare. This is the crux of Dumont's (1980) contrast between 'holism' and 'individualism'. There are many problems with Dumont's vision, not least the idea of a social 'whole'.[29] What he did get right, however, was the persistent normative force of socially constitutive difference, which we see asserted widely across the subcontinent, but which egalitarian scholars find so difficult to accept, both morally and intellectually.

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[29] For a balanced recent engagement with Dumont, see Rio and Smedal (2009).

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