

Article

Modernity and Caste in Khatri and High-Caste Men's Auto/Biographies

Anshu Malhotra 

Global Studies Department, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; anshumalhotra@ucsb.edu

Abstract: This paper studies the auto/biographies of high-caste middle-class Punjabi Khatri men, and those of cognate castes like Arora and Baniya, written in the first half of the twentieth century: men who were born in the second half of the nineteenth century or early twentieth century. While the discourse on caste under the colonial regime exploded, there was also an embarrassment about caste, or re-thinking its place in society among the upper-caste groups who invested in ideas of progress, improvement and scientism. It is argued that caste was referenced in the memoirs, life stories and self-reflexive writing when these men spoke of their familial backgrounds and admired the deep religiosity and devotionism of their fathers even though some paternal practices were incongruent with the reformism of the sons. Caste is also in play when one traces the advantages of literacy, education, professional accomplishments, mobility, and reformist activities of men who came to have an important presence in public life. A number of these men had similar life trajectories, indicative of how some aspects of colonial educational and administrative structures could be utilized by them.

Keywords: auto/biography; memoir; life-writing; caste; Khatri; education; reform; self-improvement; progress; science; rationalism; Government College Lahore; Lajpat Rai; Munshi Ram; Ruchi Ram Sahni; Prakash Tandon; Bhagat Lakshman Singh; Amolak Ram Mehta; K.L. Gauba



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1. Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century many high-caste Punjabi Khatri men, and men of the cognate castes of Arora and Baniya, began narrating their lives in auto/biographical writing—memoirs, family biographies, journals—a self-referential fluid genre that sought to capture history, or record their making of history, through personal accounts.¹ A habit of daily diary writing was reported by many, including the leading Arya Samaj leader Lala Lajpat Rai who referred to his *roznamcha* (diaries) that were destroyed by his family when he came in the crosshairs of the British regime during the 1907 agrarian agitations in Punjab.² Another stalwart Arya Samaji, Munshi Ram (later Swami Shraddhanand), wrote a diary, then published his autobiography in instalments in his weekly journal *Saddharm Pracharak* under the title *Kuch Aap Biti Kuch Jag Biti* (Some My Experiences and Some of the World) (Shraddhanand 1924, p. 3)³, finally bringing it together in a book form, demonstrating the hybridity of the genre.⁴ However, ordinary men, like Bhola Ram, the grandfather of the author Ved Mehta, also had an everyday private diary writing practice. Mehta tells us that his diary was like a “commonplace book” where he recorded, among other things, his favorite Urdu and Persian quotations (Mehta 1972, p. 21). A growing self-awareness and individuation was signified here: Munshi Ram referred to his *atma-chintan* or self-reflection as motivation for writing. All also noted their portentous memory—signifying a backward look at life from the present moment—in facilitating their endeavors in recollecting and writing their life narratives.

Mostly written in English, though Hindi was chosen as the medium of writing by the two aforementioned Arya Samajis, Rai and Ram, as part of the Arya Samaj's politics of promoting Hindi as the national language, around half a dozen life narratives will be discussed here. These are necessarily selective texts, chosen for their popularity and

appositeness to the topic, though many more life narratives are now available. Literacy, a hallmark of these men, was a prerequisite to writing memoirs, showing the high-caste bias of this genre in its early form in Punjab. The primacy of English as a language to express the self speaks of the newness of the genre, aligned to new education, professions, and travel, some of the themes that will be elucidated below. As Tim Allender has argued, the education of the “masses” by the state was abandoned in Punjab from an early period, and education came to be restricted to “children whose parents pursued occupations that embraced raj commerce”, driven by administrative practicality (Allender 2006). By 1891, forty percent of the literate population of Punjab was made up of the trading castes of Khattris, Aroras and Baniyas (Ibid., p. 7).

As has been observed by many scholars of Indian modernity, autobiographical writing, along with novels and lyric poetry, was the literary genre through which the idea of the “modern” life came to be disseminated, along with establishing its economic, rational, and ethical superiority over earlier social formations (Kaviraj 2015a). In this context, it is interesting to note that someone like Lajpat Rai had started writing a novel (*upanyas*) that would have covered his life—a “faction” genre, a mix of fiction and fact—though he never finished it (Rai n.d., p. 3).⁵ An example of faction was the autobiographical poetry of the courtesan Piro (*Ik Sau Sath Kafian*), who wrote of an event in her life in allegorical and performative language (see Malhotra 2017, chap. 2, pp. 55–91). Although narrating the self was not unknown in the early modern period, as seen in the writings of the likes of Banarasi Das (*Ardhkathanaka*) or Mir Taqi Mir (*Zikr-i-Mir*), it was not common either (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015; Arnold and Blackburn 2004, pp. 1–28, 116–43). Besides the novel form that described fictive lives realistically, though some were autobiographical, it was in the writing of ordinary lives, made special only by inscribing them in print, that modern life and its possibilities of individual achievement as against social convention could be made exemplary for others to admire and emulate. Thus, writing the self into history, as also viewing history from the stand-point of the self, became more commonplace, especially among classes/castes that were the early beneficiaries of new education promoted by the colonial state and the social reform movements.

The peculiarities of Indian men’s auto/biographical writing have been noted by scholars. While there were exceptions, most men eschewed writing of intimate matters, concentrating instead on their public lives and personas. Men deployed the genre as a means of documenting a world seemingly rapidly transforming, writing history through one’s personal experience and perspective (Kumar 2008, 2016). History writing, the modernist discipline that distinguished an earlier time from the present, through life history, became a mode of demonstrating one’s modernity. The crafting of modern subjectivities required that men distinguish themselves from their “pastness”—the past of colonized peoples critiqued as degenerate by the colonial state—without necessarily breaking with the privilege that the past offered. Past was also mined by reform-minded men for uncovering a perfect golden age, as with the Arya Samajis, underlining a complicated relationship with the past in these memoirs (Appadurai 1996). Often, the impulse in this writing was to capture the past that seemed to recede quickly while exulting in the present. At times, the very act of narration depicted change in organizing lives from earlier habits, what Sudipta Kaviraj has called “the invention of private life,” as seen in descriptions of transmuting relationships with parents (fathers here), of conjugality, and of friendships (Kaviraj 2015b). Self-reflexivity in life narratives was rare; there was generally an absence of an interior dialogue that uncovered the cogitations of the mind. However, there were notable exceptions, like the well-known *Experiments* of M.K. Gandhi, or, here, of Munshi Ram; the latter’s prolix autobiographic inscriptions, as noted, were performatively self-fashioning, a bildungsroman where the author’s moral and psychological dilemmas were highlighted until being resolved (Gandhi 2016).⁶ In most accounts, attention was paid to events, personal and public, that propelled a life forward towards the goal of having “made it”, of contributing meaningfully to public life: a transformation from humble beginnings to mature achievement.

Such life stories captured the zeitgeist of the age. The dominant emotions of the period, of newness and progress, rationality, science, and material growth, resonated with many. Discussed by Margrit Pernau as *stimmung*, the mood and atmospherics of the time revolved around fresh potentialities that modern life provided (Pernau 2021, p. 3). Of course, the colonialist project with its civilizational impetus, its creation of global hierarchies, categorized the world on “stages of development”, at the apex of which sat Europe with the varied colonized people perpetually playing catch-up. This could induce despair and shame, a desire for change, reform, or reviving a “golden” period. However, it is also noteworthy that for many, modernity’s promise unleashed hope of a better future, if only the moment could be seized. The new indigenous elites took to scientism as advocated by the colonial state as an ideology to practice “improvement”, on the one hand, and, on the other, to propagate it among the masses as an ideology of reform. These elites, according to Gyan Prakash, “stood on the interstices of Western science and Indian traditions, embodying and undertaking the reformulation of culture in their reach for hegemony” (Prakash 1999). The upbeat optimism of these elites is best captured in the much-quoted words of Prakash Tandon that celebrated “*angrezi raj ki barkaten*” (the blessings of the English rule), a school lesson that spoke to his generation of the immense potential that the future held (Tandon 2011, p. 18).⁷ Something similar has been discussed by Pernau in the context of Indian Muslims as *josh*, fervor, the “masculine” passion that was a significant conduit for attaining the ideal future, along with the emotion of nostalgia for the past and that of the humiliation of the present, evoked after the mutiny of 1857, especially by the Muslim elite (Pernau 2019).

In the life-writing discussed here, the linking of the past and the future, mediated through the present, could also take different forms. For the Samajis, Lajpat Rai and Munshi Ram, a golden Vedic past, indeed Vedic universalist scientism, the basis on which the founder Dayanand Sarasvati organized the Samaj, could be recreated in the future by the efforts and sacrifices of its members. For others, the past could elicit nostalgia, as, for example, in the loving description of his ancestral home town, Gujrat, by Prakash Tandon. It was the future, though that glittered with hope, to be reached via the springboard of the present. For Ruchi Ram Sahni, who was among the small number of Punjabis in the Brahmo Samaj in Lahore, an organization that was otherwise dominated by Bengali professionals in Punjab, and who became a professor of science at the Government College, the past, marked by superstitions, was to be replaced by the rational scientism of the future. The future was to be beget by the present via education, brought to the masses by the indigenous elites (Burra 2017).

In this milieu that came to regard scientific epistemology as shaping futurity, what did caste mean when it was viewed as a backward relic of the past? Was it to be abandoned, or re-imagined? Were there subtle ways in which one’s caste privilege and legacy could be referenced, fed into one’s class ambitions, while its stranglehold, its sedimentation, or petrification, was criticized? What were the advantages that high status bestowed, the push that led Khatri Punjabi men, among others, to imagine themselves as shaping the world, that albeit lay in the future?

2. Caste in Colonial Punjab

This is not the place to debate the multiple ways in which caste’s tentacles reach into Indian society, or how it has constantly evolved and shape-shifted with demands of modern polity and society. Whether caste is legible through its association with occupation, ritual, purity–pollution concerns, commensality, endogamy, inheritance, land ownership, *jajmani* or client–patronage relations, and other vectors, including political vote-bank politics, it continues to incite vibrant discussion among scholars.⁸ Here, I will refer to the significance of two scholarly views relevant to our purpose, then go on to discuss colonial administrator Ibbetson’s opinion on caste, before I revert the discussion back to high-caste auto/biographies.

Though not an “invention”, as Nicholas Dirks ingeniously put it, the incessant discussion of caste by the colonial state did transmogrify it into an Indian institution that became a discursive staple for the colonial state, but also for Indian elites (Dirks 2001). From the manner in which the Arya Samaj reinvented caste based on one’s potential merit, or how the Singh Sabha’s polemics denied that caste could exist in the Sikh egalitarian ideals as conceived by the Gurus, or the Brahmo Samaj dismissed its relevance in a future world underwritten by universalist values, caste was everywhere in Punjabi public life.

Sumit Guha, on the other hand, has directed attention to the importance of the state’s political intervention on caste matters throughout South Asian history to understand the dialectic between the fluidity and fixity of caste (Guha 2013). The colonial state’s governance and discursive interventions on the ontology of caste can be understood as precisely such political interventions that made caste prominent under its rule. The state under colonialism, through new institutional practices like the Census and its numerous ethnographic projects, could be seen as deliberating on caste like its predecessors through disseminating “knowledge” rather than overtly controlling and fixing caste groups within a social hierarchy like the pre-modern state.

Good examples of colonialist caste studies are the reports of officers like Denzil Ibbetson, who became the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab in 1907. His work on Punjabi society as the Census Commissioner in 1881 is salient with his close observation of society reflected in his jottings. He rejected the theory of the religious origins of caste, including any exclusive association of the institution with Hinduism, and instead spoke about caste being socially embedded, in contravention to the Western Orientalist explanations of caste as religious and ideological (Ibbetson [1970] 1995, p. 2).⁹ In his estimation, it would be difficult to find the normative four-fold division of caste in society, just as it would be a task to fit someone into Kshatriya or Vaishya categories in Punjab. In Ibbetson’s reading, castes were highly variable, and any presumption that generations descended from the same caste, he noted, would be “liable to be defeated by an infinite variety of circumstances” (Ibbetson [1970] 1995, p. 2). At the same time Ibbetson did absorb some of the Orientalist bias with regard to Indian society, calling it more “priest-ridden” than the experience of Europe; and though caste was changeable, the change was slow, over generations, and not individual-driven. Hence, he wrote, society was not solid, but liquid, i.e., it could change; however, he stated, “the liquid is viscous”, there was more friction and inertia to overcome than elsewhere (Ibbetson [1970] 1995, pp. 4–9).

The discussion around caste in public fora grew exponentially under colonialism. Ordinary people, who could access the new print and associational public sphere, felt compelled to share their opinion on matters such as caste. An example of such public interest is an article published in the *Indian Antiquary* on Khatri by Kashi Nath in 1873 (Nath 1874). Calling himself a “Dehliwal Khatri” from Agra, i.e., the Delhi Khatri who fled to Agra during Nadir Shah’s massacre in Delhi in the eighteenth century, he went on to trace the mythological origins of Khatri, and then to link all Khatri to Punjab, designating them as being of “pure Aryan blood”, in accordance with the new racial typologies prevalent at the time. Calling them a most religious people (only next to the Brahmans), he connected them to Guru Nanak, calling Nanak a great Khatri reformer and a patron saint of the Khatri. Khatri sub-caste divisions and how they came about, their movement outside Punjab, links with Sikh Gurus, rituals, and prominent Khatri from history were all matters of interest to him.¹⁰

The descriptions of physiognomy and race, occupations, and comparative social standing among Punjab’s castes were discussed in governmental studies like Ibbetson’s. He created taxonomies to group castes according to occupations, but also inserted in the discussion their physical appearance, their ethnological “superior” or “inferior” aspects. The “Jat, Rajput and Allied Castes” was one category, “Religious, Professional, Mercantile and Miscellaneous Castes” another, and “Menial and Artisan Castes” yet one more. Among the “mercantile castes”, comparisons were made between the Baniya, Arora, and the Khatri. The Khatri, for example, were presented as “superior” to the Aroras in physique,

manliness, and energy; were not mere shopkeepers, but claimed Kshatriya descent, though Ibbetson questioned the validity of such claims (Ibbetson [1970] 1995, p. 247). Similar claims and counter-claims between land-owning Jats and Rajputs were also noted. A Jat was lauded as husbandman, peasant, and revenue-payer par excellence, with Ibbetson calling Jats industrious, honest, sturdy, and manly (Ibid, p. 102). Comparative statements between castes were also made throughout his discussion: “As a whole they [mercantile castes] occupy a position superior to that of the landowning classes if measured by religious standard, for the great mercantile castes come next after the Brahmans in strictness of religious observance; but indefinitely inferior if the comparison be made from a social or political standpoint” (Ibid. p. 27).¹¹ Such common-sense knowledge about castes, their origins, and positions within regional hierarchies came to circulate among those interested in such issues: reformers and ideologues of various associations, intellectuals, government employees, and more.

What impact did the prevalence and consumption of such learning, which seemingly combined intimate knowledge of one’s past with the stamp of authority of the colonial institutional processes and products like the Census, signify? How did men, brought up under colonial dispensation, eager to participate in its educational and administrative institutions, use this knowledge to comprehend and promote themselves in a competitive world where caste, kinship, and community could enhance one’s career and life circumstances? How did caste, which assumedly bestowed intrinsic qualities, come to be referenced in their writing, when, on the surface, associating with it pushed against proclaiming one’s modernity? Let us turn to the auto/biographies to see how caste was both present and presented in them.

3. Fathers and Sons: Khatri Religiosity, Ritual, and Reformism

The life-writing that I use here covers roughly two generations of Punjabis: men born around the 1860s, who included Munshi Ram (1856), Lajpat Rai (1865), Ruchi Ram Sahni (1863), and Bhagat Lakshman Singh (1863), (Singh 1965) and those born around the turn of the twentieth century, who included Amolak Ram Mehta (1896) (whose biography is detailed by his son Ved Mehta) and Prakash Tandon (1911), with brief references to Mulk Raj Anand (1905) (Anand [1946] 1957, pp. 9, 11) and Kanhaiya Lal Gauba (1899) (Gauba 1974) Among the men, two were Arya Samajis (Munshi Ram and Lajpat Rai, of two factions within the Samaj), one a Brahmo (Ruchi Ram Sahni), and one a Singh Sabhiya (Lakshman Singh). The rest speak of some association with the Arya Samaj through their fathers and families (Mulk Raj Anand, Amolak Ram) or Brahmo Samaj (Gauba’s father, Lala Harkishen Lal, was an entrepreneur and politician, and close to Brahmos; Gauba himself became a convert to Islam).

All auto/biographers began their accounts by mentioning the caste of the family into which they were born. This seemed like a good place to start because this connected them to their ancestors, to hometowns they had left behind, where caste conglomerations and brotherhoods—*biradaris*—were socially important. Besides Prakash Tandon, who described Gujrat’s *mohallas* (neighborhoods), others mentioned aspects of their hometowns or villages—Talwan near Jalandhar for Munshi Ram, Jagraon near Ludhiana for Lajpat Rai, Bhera near Sargodha for Sahni, Nawankote near Lahore for the Mehtas, and so on. This also allowed the articulation of how their lives had changed as they had moved to big towns and cities. Almost all ended up in the most cosmopolitan city of Punjab, Lahore. However, tracing the family’s beginnings also established their high-caste credentials. At a time when caste was furiously debated, and when the colonial state associated it with peculiar Indian religiousness cum backwardness in relation to European civilizational progress, caste could legitimately enter their writings through the discussion of their pasts. Of course, we need to bear in mind that caste, despite all the noise around it, was never abandoned: for instance, the Arya Samaj resurrected caste through “merit”, and not birth, as ingeniously advocated by Dayanand Sarasvati, the founder of the Samaj in his Satyarth Prakash, although his advocacy of caste on merit was uneven.¹²

How was caste then mentioned? The opening lines of Tandon's memoirs were characteristic: "Our family were Khatri from the West Punjab countryside. For two centuries we had been moving along the banks of the Jhelum river. . . . We know about our past because in the Punjab it is possible to trace one's family records at certain holy places. . . ." (Tandon 2011, p. 15). These holy places where some postmortem rituals were performed included Haridwar, Kurukshetra, and Matan, all places where priests kept records of the specific Khatri families they served, indicating their statuses. Ved Mehta, similarly, mentioned his Kshatriya ancestors and family records with the *panda* (priest) in Matan (Mehta 1972, pp. 6–9). Bhagat Lakshman Singh wrote that his ancestor was a Kohli Khatri who had migrated to Garhi Habibullah in Hazara and that he could not go further back in time because the *bahi* (hand-written record) of his family Pandit was a new one, having lost the earlier one; however, he underlined his "high" lineage (Singh 1965, p. 1). Mulk Raj Anand, who described himself as a humanist and a socialist, and was one of the founding members of the Progressive Writers Association established in the mid-1930s, and who wrote with great empathy on caste exploitation, began his autobiographical jottings similarly: "I was born in a Hindu family of Kshatriya, the second highest caste in the old, four-fold scheme. . . ." (Anand [1946] 1957, p. 9). The conflation between Khatri and Kshatriya was common in Punjab, as Ibbetson had noted. Lajpat Rai mentioned his Agrawal Baniya ancestry through a discussion of his grandfather, who had been a *patwari* (an important cog as a subordinate revenue official) serving the British after their conquest of Punjab in 1849 and who had known only the "Mahajani script" (used by mercantile classes) and was also a Jain (Rai n.d., pp. 16–17). And Gauba spoke about being an Arora from western Punjab (Lieah, Bhakkar, the two Deras) and, interestingly, of the rivalry between the Aroras and the Khatri, who, according to him, did not intermarry: "The Aroras. . . were a kindred branch of the Khatri. Like the Khatri, the Aroras were primarily traders and, although regarded with disdain by the Khatri, they were the more active and prosperous of the two. . . ." (Gauba 1974, p. 13).

I will utilize a few of these memoirists to show how, in the descriptions of their ancestors and relationships with their fathers, they provided a glimmer of the forms of worship and devotionism that further indexed their high-caste backgrounds, the strictness of religious observance noted by Ibbetson, declared in the beginnings of their writings as shown above. This was not deliberately practiced in order to establish high-caste status, which was obvious given their educational and professional credentials. Rather, it was to speak of heritage and the respectability of their families according to the sensibilities of the time. The fathers emerged in this literature as figures of authority until replaced by their sons, who, after all, wrote from their perspective. Whether our memoirists got along with their fathers or rebelled against their religious and social beliefs, or when they exceeded the expectations their fathers had of them, they ended up creating lives different from their fathers and in tune with the demands of modernity.

In the unsettling of life from traditional paths and places, and as a result of mobility and experiencing lives in cities like Lahore, reformism and bonding through reform associations very often became a center-piece among many men's lives. A class of Punjabi professionals came to be educated in Lahore, creating a class of a Lahore elite of public men (van der Linden 2008, pp. 84–85). Lahore, as William Glover has appositely noted, was as much a material city, as it was one that fueled Punjabis' imagination of modernity—a hub of education, administration, and reformist associations (Glover 2008). In a few cases, reform associations could be replaced by new modes of sociability like clubs, as in the cases of Amolak Ram Mehta or Kanhaiya Lal Gauba, but lives were beginning to be distinctly lived from that of their fathers. Below, I will deploy the writings of Lakshman Singh, Ruchi Ram, and Munshi Ram—a Singh Sabha follower, a Brahmo, and an Arya Samaji—to underscore how caste-inflected religiosity was elaborated in their writings.

Bhagat Lakshman Singh's posthumously published autobiography is particularly interesting in this regard as he spent some time in describing the illustrious devotional family he belonged to.¹³ He took pride in tracing his descent from his great-grandfather Dayal

Chand, whom he described as a Vaishnava Hindu, a Sanskrit scholar, and an Ayurvedic practitioner. He elucidated his devotional practices in the local *thakurdwara* (Hindu temple), his bi-annual visits to Mirpur in Jammu to visit the shrine of Swami Shankaracharya, his punctilious dietary and cooking habits, his feeding of Brahmans and maintaining a Sanskrit school, and his fame as a Bhagat (*bhakta*), a devotee, in that area. One of Dayal Chand's sons (though not Lakshman Singh's grandfather) was Bhagat Jawahir Mall, also called Sain Sahib, an honorific respecting his renowned devotionism, who was a devotee of the *Gurbani*, the Sikh scripture, and was brought up under Sikh influence. Bhai Balak Singh, the Guru of Bhai Ram Singh of the Kuka/Namdhari movement, was his disciple. Singh also referred to his father's, Bhagat Kahan Chand's, picky eating and cooking habits, noting his attention to *chouka*, the cooking square (to keep it free of impurity), and his regular listening to *Katha* (religious exposition) in the *dharamshala* (Sikh temple) before taking his meals. He also told us of his mother Bhagatani Gurditti, who learnt Gurmukhi characters at age 20 from Mata Bhan Dai, the wife of Baba Khem Singh Bedi, a prominent Bedi descendant from Guru Nanak. She read and recited the *Gurbani*, studied Vedanta, and cultivated religious friends among devout women. Singh himself was brought up in a religious manner, made to bathe early in the morning and to fast on the occasions of *Janamashtami*, *Ramnaumi*, *Ekadashi*, *Puranmashi*, and *Nauratas* (all religiously auspicious days) (Singh 1965, pp. 1–14).¹⁴ Though Singh became a Sikh at age 33, impressed by the teachings and hymns of Guru Gobind Singh, and a member of the Sikh reformist Singh Sabha, his eclectic Hindu–Sikh background remained ingrained in him insofar as he related his ancestry, as also his closeness to a “*sanatan*” Sikh like Baba Khem Singh Bedi, the latter being unwilling to let go of heterogeneous religiosity and kindred relationship with Hindus, which came under attack from a section of reform-minded Sikhs (Ibid., pp. 102–4).

Unlike Singh, who delineated his prestigious lineage, Ruchi Ram Sahni eulogized his parents in his lengthy opening chapter “Growing Up in Dera Ismail Khan 1863–1878” (Burra 2017, pp. 9–73). Though he spent some time in describing his “pious” and “conservative” mother, whose piety centered around fasting frequently, he accorded more attention to his “revered” and “pious” father Lala Karm Chand Sahni. His adroit businessman father, well versed in the *lande* mercantile script, who had taught him mathematical formulae from a young age, lost his fortune and became penurious when 3–4 of his ships carrying expensive merchandise sank in the river Indus. Ruchi Ram portrays his father in glowing terms, though he mentions some of his addictions and idiosyncrasies—his habit of taking an opium pill daily, his smoking the hookah, and his experiments with a Muslim friend in alchemy. It is his equanimity in the face of severe misfortune that draws Ruchi Ram's admiration. It is in the portrayal of his father's religiosity, whether his routine of ritual worship or his continuous generosity towards Brahmans and itinerant sadhus whom he often fed, that he shapes the personality of his father as a devout man. Elucidating on his father's mixed Hindu–Sikh religious inheritance, he calls his father an “extremely orthodox man” who performed “puja to the idols scrupulously every morning” even as he recited the Sikh prayers *Rahoras* and *Sukhmani*. Sahni commented that his father never felt any inconsistency in worshipping idols while also saying Sikh prayers: “All I can say is that he was perfectly sincere in his idol worship as he was in his recitation of Sikh scriptures”. Of course, any notion of inconsistency was related to Ruchi Ram's time, when Hindu and Sikh legacies were being separated by reformers, rather than in that of his father. Indeed, Sahni refers to his family's close association with the Bhais of Karijala, descendants from the Sikh martyr Matidass, and the initiation of his elder brother and also himself by these aforementioned Bhais into being *sahajdhari* Sikhs.¹⁵ His father also routinely read the *Bhagavad Gita* in Gurmukhi text, and also made Ruchi Ram read it to him.

Ruchi Ram retold, in some detail, an incident that illustrated his father's “pious Hindu heart,” which was a source of inspiration and pride for him. One evening, his father had come across a Muslim vendor of sugarcane mercilessly beating, with a stick, a cow from a herd that had snatched a sugarcane stalk from his stall. His father, whose earnings had been very straitened after his loss of fortune, bought up the whole of the vendor's stock

of sugarcane reeds and fed it the cows, even though this would have meant privation for his own family. Ruchi Ram noted that “he was happy that he had done that which was expected of every good Hindu”. The fact that Ruchi Ram chose to write of this incident that underscored cows as holy animals to Hindus and Sikhs showed his desire to burnish his father’s image as a religious, honorable man, especially as he was conscious of his own rationalistic bent and heterodoxy as a Brahmo. If the dominant mood of most of the memoirs, as noted earlier, was one of optimistic investment in a rationalist future, there was also, particularly in Sahni’s writing, a nostalgia for a simpler time of noble people like his revered father, whose pious ethics permeated all aspects of his life (Ibid., pp. 38–39).

Munshi Ram, in his autobiography, also painted a picture of his father as an intensely devout man. However, here, we come across tension between the father and the son with regard to religious beliefs and rites. This was expected as Munshi Ram’s steadfast adherence to the Arya Samaj ideals, once he accepted its tenets, clashed with the more traditional piety of his father that revolved around idol worship and Brahmanical rituals. The Arya Samaj condemned the corruption of Hinduism by Brahmans and made the Vedas the bedrock of the future resurgence of “*Aryavarta*”. Dissonance between the father and son was also present in Lajpat Rai’s life-writing, again because his father too disliked the Arya Samaj and its politics. Rai’s father, unlike Munshi Ram’s, who followed *sanatani* Hindu practices, was attracted to Islam, Islamic culture, and particularly the Farsi language, which he taught in a school established by the British (Rai n.d., pp. 20–25).¹⁶ Munshi Ram self-consciously constructed his “before” and “after” Arya Samaj selves: a degenerate, decadent youth to a responsible adulthood, depicted as emerging from darkness to light, in the fashion of emotions associated with renaissance, a rebirth. Pernau has discussed the centrality of such an emotional makeup as ubiquitous in this period, a gloom of civilizational decline but also a hope of utopia (Pernau 2021, pp. 25–47).

Munshi Ram described himself as belonging to a “*Kshatri kul*”, a clan of Kshatriyas, and, starting from his great-grandfather, showed his elders as devout men. His grandfather Gulab Rai had ritualistically bathed early each morning at 4:00 a.m. and recited the Sukhmani prayer and the *Bhagavad Gita*, followed by singing Kabir’s songs. His father Nanak Chandra was a devotee of the god Shiva. He had served the British during the Mutiny, and was recruited into the police as an inspector, employed through his career in the various cities of the North-Western Province (United Provinces), so that Munshi Ram spent his childhood there (Shraddhanand 1924, pp. 1–4). His father also became devoted to Ram and began to listen to the recitation of the *Ramayana* regularly. Munshi Ram, as a child, would say the *Hanuman Chalisa*, Tulsi Das’s forty verses on the god Hanuman, a hundred times on Sundays while standing on one leg, eat saltless food, and read the *Ramayana*. Later, he described his religious routine in Benares, including regular visits to the Vishwanath temple and more (Ibid., pp. 10–11, 17). Of course, constructing his religious routine for his readers was a framing device to contrast it with his later non-idolatrous ideal self; however, it still gives a glimpse of the daily routines of families like his.

The clash with the idolatrous father in Munshi Ram’s case occurred in his hometown of Talwan in Punjab when the whole family, including his brothers and nephews, were expected to keep the Ekadashi fast, perform rituals, and feed Brahmans. His father, who knew Munshi Ram had turned “Arya”, was annoyed at his disrespect toward idols, as also toward Brahmans.¹⁷ Munshi Ram told his father that he did not believe in the father’s manner of worshipping Brahmans, though he believed in “Brahman-ness”, i.e., in a person with noble qualities, a typical Arya Samaj reinterpretation of caste. It seemed, though, that after a time, his father reconciled with his beliefs (Shraddhanand 1924, pp. 102–3).¹⁸

At the time of the death of his father, again, Munshi Ram alluded to dissent within the family—his brothers, who wanted Puranic rites to be observed—while he insisted on cremating his father in accordance with Vedic rituals newly minted via the Arya Samaj. His elder brother, in step with orthodox Hinduism, later organized the reading of the *Garuda Purana*, traditionally a text read as part of ancestor rites, while Munshi Ram organized a reading from the Upanishads (Ibid., pp. 123–26).

Interestingly, unlike all the devout Hindu or Hindu–Sikh fathers discussed thus far, Mulk Raj Anand referred to his father as an adherent of the Ismaili sect of the Agha Khan. So intense were debates on religiosity at this time in Punjab, and the need to follow a tradition with roots in India, that Ismaili eclecticism seemed inappropriate for his time; his father gave it up formally in 1913–1914.¹⁹ He joined the Arya Samaj, “a social club for respectable professional and businessmen”. Though he never became religious, he did follow the ritual of mentioning various names of God while rubbing himself with the towel after his bath! (Anand [1946] 1957, p. 11).²⁰

Thus, through a discussion of family heritage, devotional practices, pious rituals, and relationships with fathers—whether of prayerful admiration or respectful dissent—our memoirists constructed a style of writing that laid bare the privilege of high-caste inheritance. While some dutifully followed caste conduct into which they were born, others challenged caste—either because they believed it contradicted their religious teachings, as with Sikhism; or contravened their scientific temper, as with Brahmos; or required reimagining, as with the Arya Samaj—and yet, family backgrounds recounted a story of inherited entitlement through purity rituals and routinized devotion. The patrimony of familial piety in an upper-caste Hindu–Sikh world, as demonstrated by all our authors, established their elite respectable status, one they could boast of even as they established their cultural hegemony through bringing reformist modernity to the people.

4. Education, Professions, and Mobility: Making Modern Selves

Daily rituals of worshipful piety established familial reputations of respectability; however, modernity, the ability to grasp it and dwell in it, was conceived via educational achievements. Education in the new institutions that grew multifold under colonialist effort and reformist impetus became a gateway to new professions, mobility, and travel within the subcontinent or to Europe for further studies. These were accompanied by fresh family arrangements, of moving places with transferable jobs, or new ways of organizing households, which could begin to disregard some older constraints of caste and kinship bonds, though by no means all.²¹ Scholars have pointed out the head start that Hindu mercantile and professional classes had in Punjab when it came to advantageously utilizing new educational and professional avenues under colonialism so that they came to dominate the lower echelons of officialdom (Jones 1989). So skewed did Hindu numbers appear to the British in administration that they changed their policy from looking with impartiality at all communities to balancing the Hindu–Muslim numbers from the 1880s onward (Barrier 1968). Hindus had been able to beneficially put to use their literacy and service–gentry backgrounds to forge ahead under the colonial dispensation.

It may be most appropriate to begin this section with Ved Mehta’s tribute to his father Amolak Ram, aka Daddyji, because Amolak Ram’s achievements seemed so extraordinary to his family. Amolak Ram’s father, Bhola Ram, had already broken off from family shopkeeping and taken employment as a *patwari* under the colonial state, which required low-level revenue officials in numbers as the British went about creating new irrigation schemes and setting up Canal Colonies, besides the regular revenue work. Amolak Ram studied in various village schools as the family moved with his father’s transferable job. His university life was initiated through study at the coveted Government College at Lahore, where almost all our authors eventually found themselves, a most sought-out rite-de-passage. From there, Ram went on to study medicine at the King Edward Medical College, Lahore, and then further afield to England, where he received a Diploma in Public Health at the University College in London and another in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene from the London School of Tropical Medicine. Back in Punjab, he became a Municipal Health Officer in Rawalpindi at the lordly salary of Rupees 600 per month. Here, he successfully explained why bubonic plague lingered in Rawalpindi’s humid warehouses in a British journal. He later applied for the Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships and left for New York, then started pursuing a doctorate at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, which he left midway to study malaria control in Richmond, Virginia. Then he found himself in

London once again, a city he contemplated settling down in, though he abandoned the idea when he came across a mixed-race couple looking for an abortion, assumedly because of miscegenation, perhaps unwilling to bring a mixed-race child into the world. Thinking eugenically, he imagined it would be preferable to return to India in order to “produce pure kshatriya babies who would grow up in a stable Hindu society” (Mehta 1972, pp. 45–121). Flamboyant and sociable, Amolak Ram hobnobbed with the British, visited clubs, and rode phaetons and cars. So lofty seemed his achievements to his father that he advised his son to banish from family memory their humble beginnings, i.e., that Bhola Ram started his career as a mere *patwari* (Ibid. p. 112).

Once again, it is from the facility of Prakash Tandon’s pen that we get the most dramatic expressions of what education and the new professions meant to young Khatri boys in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his words, “the Khannas, Kapurs, Chopras, Malhotras, Sahnis, Dhawans, Talwars, Puris to mention only some among the Khatri; Batras and Kumars. . . among the Aroras; were soon spread all over the Punjab government civil list, the medical service of the army. . . and the professions of lawyers, barristers, doctors, scientists and professors”. He spoke about their hunger for learning, of boys who tied their topknots with a string to the ceiling to prevent themselves from sleeping in order to study, “so that each time they nodded with sleep they woke up in pain when the hair was pulled up with a jerk”. The desire to cram all information in their brains led them to wish “that they could grind the books into pulp and extract the knowledge out of them and drink it” (Tandon 2011, pp. 31–32). Tandon’s father Ram Das, an orphan brought up by an uncle, studied civil engineering at the Roorkee Engineering College and later served in the Irrigation Department of the government, supervising the making of canals in different small towns, in the new ambitious engineering projects of the British. Tandon himself went to the Government College in Lahore, and then on to Manchester University in Britain to study accountancy, and ended up as the chairman of the multinational company Hindustan Lever, among other accolades he collected throughout his career.

The upbeat mood that pervades the two accounts above was also present in Ruchi Ram Sahni’s memoirs. He framed his personal story of growth as driven by his willpower, where no obstacle was insurmountable. His early education with a local *panda* in Dera Ismail Khan taught him arithmetic and multiplication tables “up to 20 times 35”, fractional tables, and *lande* characters used by merchants. He also apprenticed in an ordinary shop, then a big Marwari firm, and finally went on to work for his father. At age 15, he decided to look for a better high school than his small town offered and went on foot across a desert and the Jhelum–Indus river confluence and on camel-back, 106 miles to Adhiwal in Jhang, where he came to associate with a beloved teacher, Babu Kashi Nath Chatterjee. Later he went to Lahore and the Government High School. He inevitably ended studying at the Government College in Lahore, where he later became a Professor of Science. In Lahore, he interacted with intellectuals and reformers of the time, joining the Brahmo Samaj. Professionally, however, he felt discriminated against, and when, after many years of service, a younger Englishman superseded him as the head of the Chemistry Department, Ruchi Ram took the decision to leave his professorship and study further in Germany to pursue research on radioactivity. This was interrupted by the First World War, and he left for England, joined the famous Manchester Laboratory, and worked with stalwarts like Ernest Rutherford and Niels Bohr on research that was published later. Ruchi Ram did much to popularize science in Punjab, performing experiments in public and holding lectures. He also got elected to the Punjab Legislative Council in 1923, working on many public issues, including support for women’s enfranchisement (Burra 2017, pp. 12–15, 74–150, xi–xxxii).

If there was pride in hard work among men like Ruchi Ram, Amolak Ram, and Ram Das, who felt it was in their ability to shape their future by investing in the British-given gift of education, the “*barkaten*” (blessings) that Tandon exulted in—rather than reflecting on the advantage of caste and birth—on the other end of the spectrum was someone like Kanhaiya Lal Gauba, who made no bones about being born with a silver spoon in his mouth.²² The

son of the rich industrialist Lala Harkishen Lal, Gauba was brought up in luxury and under the tutelage of British governesses and teachers. After brief stints at Dyal Singh College and the Government College in Lahore, Gauba smuggled himself to England without his father's knowledge, though he later thrived there due to his generosity. He spent four years studying and socializing at Cambridge, performing indifferently, academically speaking, but enjoying the extracurricular life to the hilt before finding his way back to Lahore. Here, he embarked on a career of journalism, practiced law, and worked in his father's many businesses (before these failed) and also politics. The other memoirists described here exemplified traits of frugality and determination in their quest for success. These attitudes, learnt from Protestant missionaries, were ethics that had an over-sized influence on crafting the moral language imbibed by the social reformers, as explicated by van der Linden (van der Linden 2008, p. 23). Gauba, on the other end of the spectrum, flourished because of his ability to amplify the inherited profit of his station. He underscored what it meant to have perquisites of right birth in a hierarchical society (Gauba 1974).²³

The acquiring of education was not painless, however. While Gauba could rely on the social capital and wealth of his family, and others on being diligent students, many struggled with making something of their lives through schooling and getting into the coveted professions. Lakshman Singh, for instance, while educated at the American Mission School in Rawalpindi and the Government College in Lahore, was not zealous about his studies, and managed to become an Assistant District Inspector of Schools, and later a District Inspector—low-paying jobs—though he was a dedicated reformer of the Singh Sabha who edited the Khalsa newspaper. He wrote that he “took five years to get through my Matriculation examination. I failed to pass my Intermediate Examination and twice I failed in the Teachership Certificate Examination” (Singh 1965, pp. xi–xii, 51). The rigor and discipline required to master the new educational system was not conducive for all, and many stayed in the ranks of the subordinate bureaucracy for which the state had undertaken to educate them.

The profession that seemed most in demand for being lucrative with a degree of independence was the legal one as society grew more litigious under the British judicial system, with Punjab as its most litigious province (van der Linden 2008, p. 85). Our two Arya Samajis, Lajpat Rai and Munshi Ram, while ultimately successful as legal professionals, also faced an uphill task in mastering the varied exams required to reach their goals. Their progress was slow and incremental, described in excruciating detail in their writing, though, like the others, the remarkable teachers in their lives received loving mentions.

Despite being a good student, Rai was dogged by ill health, the straitened circumstances of his father, an early marriage, and the responsibility of educating his siblings. He studied for two years at the Government College Lahore, describing the co-occurrence of exams and fevers; e.g., the first-year law exam—*mukhtiyari*—was accompanied by jaundice. He finally was able to clear the exam for his legal degree—*vakalat*—in his third attempt, though eventually he was able to set up a successful practice in Hisar, so much so that he could then move to Lahore to solely take up reformist work in the Arya Samaj, to which he wished to dedicate his life (Rai n.d., pp. 28–82). Later, during World War I, he traveled to England as a representative of the Indian National Association, and also to the United States, meeting with a variety of Indians among India's growing diaspora.

Since Munshi Ram's self-construction was, as noted, a conflict between his younger degraded self and a mature goal-oriented one, educational efforts and repeated failures were firmly placed in the first, dark half of his life. This rather long phase was presented as one in which his father attempted to educate him. It was his vagrant and dissipated self's carelessness (*aavargi*)—self-propelled or circumstantial—that inhibited his achieving the requisite signposts. His father, a police officer and a man with substantial means, was presented as indulgent towards him; Munshi Ram, because of his many distractions, was casual about studies. However, his descriptions of his various dedicated teachers were colorful and entertaining over the years—from Lala Bhaiya, the *kayasth munshi* who taught Farsi, to Ralph T.H. Griffith, the Sanskritist, to the kindly Maulvi Sahab to Mathura

Master (Shraddhanand 1924, pp. 15–24). His educational journey was depicted as a continuous whirl of minor successes followed by failures. However, ultimately, Munshi Ram also reached Lahore, and sequentially was able to pass different stages of acquiring legal proficiency. He became a *mukhtiyar*, a pleader, and, finally, a *vakil*, albeit over a few years, enrolled with the Government College. He managed to establish a successful practice in Jalandhar and wrote in detail of his legal career, along with his dedicated work as an Arya Samaj organizer there. Among our memoirists, Munshi Ram and Bhagat Lakshman Singh were among the few who did not travel abroad, though they were mobile within North India.

Thus, education for young Khatri and high-caste men, whether through sheer doggedness or easy facility, became the ticket to new professions and a modern life. An aspect of being modern was a self-conscious inhabiting of it. As legatees of their fathers, through caste and respectability, but also as expanding and exceeding the lives of their fathers through educational achievements and performance in public life, these Khatri men came to see themselves as progressive and modern. Though it will be difficult to parse the different ingredients that made them modern—caste, family patrimony, education, participation in public life, mobility, travel—an effervescent combination of all went into making their novel lives.

5. Conclusions

Speaking of Brahmans, Prakash Tandon noted, “That they could be the leaders of society, in a position of privilege, I only discovered when I went to live outside the Punjab. With us the Brahmans were an unprivileged class and exercised little or no influence on the community”. Tandon went on to elaborate that Punjabi Brahmans were rarely erudite, barely literate, had a perfunctory knowledge of ritual, knew only a smattering of mantras to get by, and often depended on the family of the *jajmans*, whom they served, for cooked food or *handa*. Indeed, they were treated with “mild derision” (Tandon 2011, pp. 73–74).

From these rather well-known lines of Tandon, we can draw three conclusions. Firstly, as many scholars have noted, caste and *jati* in India were variable and region-specific, and the four-fold hierarchy of the religious texts was a textual construct and not a visible reality. Secondly, Tandon’s peroration also underlined how colonial knowledge circulated within society and became a point of discussion, and often action, insofar as caste was evoked with regularity, and cross-local caste organizations came up in society. Thirdly, while Punjab may not have had powerful Brahmans, it did not mean that “Brahmanical” characteristics, adjectively speaking—whether in terms of rituals, purity/pollution injunctions, commensal and matrimonial matters, or inculcating pious lifestyles—were absent in Punjabi society. Tandon himself noted that “Khatris and Aroras were the two props of our Hindu society. . .” and went on to discuss the castes that served them, marriage practices where a daughter was treated as a debt and given away in *kanya dan*, the gift of a virgin daughter, and practices wherein one affirmed one’s superiority by pejoratively asserting that one was not like the Sonars, a service caste seen disparagingly by Khatris like him (Ibid).

Tandon went on to describe many castes, but looked at the caste system as a benign institution, as behooved a privileged caste member, calling the Hindu society a multi-unit one “in which each caste had its functional place without oppression by a higher caste”, and emphasized, rather ingeniously, that there were no untouchable castes in west Punjab. He said this even though he described how Muslims were served in separate utensils (Ibid., pp. 75–79).²⁴ The privilege of class, closely associated with caste, never entered his reflections.

The auto/biographical genre discussed here has highlighted a prosopography of Khatri men born under the colonial regime whose lives followed similar trajectories given their caste–class backgrounds at this time. It has drawn attention to how caste advantage—ritual, educational, professional—created a class of men who came to occupy positions of power in modern public life. Piety performed by the fathers established upper-caste status. The sons either respected these practices or critiqued them as unworthy of a new enlightened push for self-improvement and progress as they developed a new language of morality, scientism,

and modernity. Though in the shadows of the colonial state, they worked to create a society where they could deploy the rhetoric of reason, and eventually the principles of liberalism and democracy, to inherit the future that would be India. They set themselves to benefit from caste despite their discourse that caste was backward and in need of reform, if not erasure.

The colonial state's governmentality had utilized caste for its own benefit. It had divided Punjabi peoples into agricultural and non-agricultural castes (Barrier 1966).²⁵ If the Khatri and cognate castes had an educational advantage, the Jat caste group came to have land-owning privilege: land ownership that was denied to the mercantile, as also to Dalit castes. The Partition of the subcontinent disrupted the old, but also the relatively new, patterns of life that came into being in colonial Punjab, though certain changes in society were perpetuated. In the post-Partition period, and in the truncated Indian Punjab, the Jat Sikhs are indubitably the high-status group, being politically and socially powerful, in contrast to the greater pre-Partition Punjab, where multiple castes and groups deemed themselves prestigious among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. Many among the mercantile and professional Hindus and Sikhs of west Punjab migrated to the cities of a newly created/divided India, just as many Jat and increasingly Dalit castes have relocated in the Diaspora, definitively changing the caste, class, and political configurations of postcolonial Punjab.

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Notes

- ¹ I have preferred to use the compound term auto/biography for this genre. While many were self-referential first-person accounts, others were biographies by family members, or memoirs of a time, a place, or people, including the self. The fluidity of this genre is captured better through the use of a slash between self (auto) and life-writing (biography). For the complexity of this genre, see Smith and Watson (2010).
- ² Lajpat Rai explicitly wrote about his long public life and his participating in the making of history (Rai n.d., pp. 1–3).
- ³ *Aap Biti*, according to Barbara Metcalf, is an ordinary Hindi term for one's life story in written or oral form. According to her, the term connotes "what has happened to one" or "an account of one's sorrows". Thus, the English translation does not quite carry all the nuances of the term (Barbara D. Metcalf, "The Past in the Present: Instruction, Pleasure, and Blessing in Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya's *Aap Bitii*", in Arnold and Blackburn 2004, pp. 1–28, 116–43).
- ⁴ Regarding the hybridity of the genre, see the Introduction in Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (2015).
- ⁵ The autobiographical genre is often considered a mix of fact and fiction. See the discussion in Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (2015, p. 22). Also see Milani (1992).
- ⁶ This is not the place to discuss in full Munshi Ram's lengthy and remarkable autobiography. See M. Singh (2018).
- ⁷ Tandon's *Punjabi Century: 1857: 1947*, which he wrote in 1961, and is referred to here, is now available in this compendium of his writing. Also see the discussion on Tandon's writing in the introductory chapter in Malhotra (2024, pp. 1–52).
- ⁸ A useful introduction on caste is available in Banerjee-Dube ([2008] 2015).
- ⁹ On Orientalists' understanding of caste, see Guha (2013, p. 1).
- ¹⁰ How Khatri sub-divisions came about, for example between Lahori Khatri and Sarins, was a story that involved discussions around allowing or not allowing widow remarriage and featured either Emperor Aurangzeb's or Alauddin Khilji's intervention in Khatri social customs. I have seen this story in many colonial publications, including in Ibbetson ([1970] 1995).
- ¹¹ For a discussion of the colonial state's broad generalizations on castes see Malhotra (2002).
- ¹² On Arya Samaj and Dayanand refer to Jones' book (Jones 1989). On not abandoning caste by birth even by Dayanand; to understand Dayanand's position on caste by merit and birth see (Malhotra 2006).
- ¹³ Ganda Singh, his editor, writes that Lakshman Singh had handed him his manuscript for publication a few months before he died in 1944, but the volume was published only in 1965.
- ¹⁴ On *sanatan* Sikhism see Oberoi (1994).
- ¹⁵ *Sahajdhari* Sikhs referred to Sikhs not initiated into the Khalsa order and therefore not obligated to keep uncut hair, among other requirements.

- 16 Also see the discussion in the Introduction in [Malhotra \(2024\)](#).
- 17 Munshi Ram also went through a phase when he was a *nastic*, an atheist.
- 18 Lajpat Rai similarly reported that eventually his father too started respecting the Arya Samaj.
- 19 The question of belonging/not-belonging came to be tied around the “origins” of traditions. See the discussion in Anshu Malhotra, “The Conversion Loop: Gender, Identity, and Storytelling in Bhai Vir Singh’s *Sundari*,” in [Malhotra and Murphy \(2023\)](#).
- 20 The similarities with Lajpat Rai’s father stand out.
- 21 For novel ways in which marriage and gender relations were organized in Punjab, see [Malhotra \(2002\)](#).
- 22 That is the title of his first chapter, “The Silver Spoon”, ([Gauba 1974](#), pp. 13–19).
- 23 Gauba pursued notoriety all his life—he made money by writing the salacious *Uncle Sham* in retaliation to the American journalist Katherine Mayo’s scurrilous *Mother India*, paying her back in her own coin; he later converted to Islam in a public ceremony and married three Muslim women sequentially in his life, making a splash, at least in his own descriptions.
- 24 I have argued elsewhere that the Muslims were encompassed within the hierarchic Indic caste customs related to pollution and (un)touchability (*chhua-chhut*). See Chapter 6 on the Dalit Sikh reformer Ditt Singh in ([Malhotra 2017](#), pp. 201–36).
- 25 See the discussion on caste in Chapter 4 in [Gill \(2024\)](#).

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