

**LOCATING THE AGENCY OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE:
NOMADIC AND POST-NOMADIC SERVICE POPULATIONS
IN RAJASTHAN, INDIA**

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Abstract

Using both ethnographic and survey data, this article explores the complex ways in which camp-dwellers on the margins of settled communities in Rajasthan, India, have interacted with state agents, services and systems of knowledge in a manner that articulates their limited but nonetheless significant agency. I explore three arenas through which the state's presence is felt in the lives of these marginalized people: access to land, to health services and to public schooling. I argue that marginalized people are not merely the victims of centrist powers but exhibit a resourcefulness and flexibility that redefines group boundaries and the impact of state policies on their lives.

Introduction

The nature of interaction between state systems and nomadic peoples is a familiar one: because of their ability to change location, their dispersal and their inaccessibility, nomadic societies are often hard to control from the centre of state power. In their efforts to appropriate marginalized nomadic populations, central political systems are often recorded as demanding major changes in their lifestyles, but offer few services in return. States have often tended to discriminate against newly sedentarized communities. For their part, nomadic populations, pastoralists as well as non-pastoralists, have tended to resist political incorporation into state systems by developing and maintaining flexible subsistence strategies, an egalitarian social organization and the fierce cultural ethos of an autonomous and mobile lifestyle. This prevalent view of nomadic people's interactions with the state has been convincingly elaborated in the literature using historical and comparative data from different world regions (Salzman 2004, Scott 2009). More recent

scholarly research has tended to challenge several key elements in this opposition between the state and nomadic people on several grounds: by questioning our understanding of the 'state' as a monolithic player in such interactions¹ (Scott 1998, 2009, Hansen 2001, Rudolph and Jacobsen 2006), by re-examining the meaning of 'movement' among nomadic peoples (Marx 2005, Franz 2005, Berland 2003) and by exploring in greater detail and complexity what James Scott has termed the 'strategies of state evasion' deployed by nomadic populations (Scott 2009: 178). In this article, I build on this critical work to examine the kind of agency practised by non-pastoralist peripatetic people living today in marginal camps in Rajasthan. I argue that these marginalized camp-dwellers practice their agency in a multiple, fragmented and not necessarily coherent fashion that cannot easily be defined in simple terms of 'resistance' or 'accommodation' to centrist policies. I follow the literature that has pointed out that there are multiple manifestations of state power in the lives of the marginalized and that one must avoid referring to 'the state' and instead explore several arenas of such encounters between marginalized peoples and centrist discourses, bodies and policies. Exploring such spaces of interaction between local populations of service nomads in Rajasthan and a range of state bodies and policies reveals the complexities of such encounters and the limited, yet significant articulation of agency on the part of camp-dwellers.

I first discuss the place of mobile and post-nomadic marginalized communities outside the settled hierarchical caste order in India. I then proceed to analyse the manner in which camp-dwellers debate their classification as 'nomadic' and landless. I trace three arenas of exclusion: from access to land, to public health and to educational services. All in all, I show that camp-dwellers employ a selective strategy in their dealings with state policies and services and that the choices they make are not a mere reaction to these policies but a dynamic setting within which group boundaries are drawn and redrawn and new subjectivities emerge.

¹ Earlier studies that had begun to examine the state as non-monolithic entity include Irons 1974 and Anatoly Khazaov's 1984 classic book.

Nomadic people today: official classification, internal variation and recent transformations

Although there are no official census records, it is estimated that the category of those officially defined as ‘nomadic’ constitutes about 7% of the total population of India. The nomadic population in the state of Rajasthan is estimated at between 4 and 6 million (Dabral and Malik 2004, Nagda 2004). Yet, the very definition of ‘nomadism’ and its local, daily articulation is a field of fierce localized struggles.

Standing outside the caste system, those officially classified as ‘nomadic peoples’ have an ambiguous position within the elaborate policies of national ‘reservation’ and affirmative action in India. Nomadic populations are officially classified as Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT) people. On 14 March 2005, the Government of India introduced a special resolution that legally defined the category of DNTs, supported by a special National Commission for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic tribes.² Still, the position of those classified as ‘nomadic’ or ‘semi-nomadic’ within this official discourse of classification is not fixed but seems to vary from one state to another and to be defined by local struggles for official recognition.

Briefly, the official national policy groups the names of recognized communities who are entitled to the benefits of affirmative action into three main categories: Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The communities listed as the Scheduled Castes are essentially the lowest in the Hindu caste hierarchy, people locally referred to as Dalits. The Scheduled Tribes category includes mainly the people known as Adivasis, indigenous tribal populations often living in forests or hills, and physically isolated from urban centres. The Other Backward Classes category tends to include a range of groups and communities that are recognized officially as historically suffering from social exclusion that has rendered them educationally and economically backward.

² The Government of India vide Resolution dated 14 March 2005, Constituted National Commission for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Tribes to study various developmental aspects of these tribes. The official site of the commission is <http://ncdnsnt.gov.in/> but it has very little to offer.

A simple check in official public records demonstrates that in each state DNTs are listed under a different category: OBC, ST, SC, DNT, or not classified at all.³ While in some Indian states a few mobile groups fall within the OBC category,⁴ in other states such inclusion has become the ground for a fiercely politicized struggle. In Rajasthan, where this research was carried out, some of the mobile groups have secured such official inclusion, while others have no collective entitlement under the state's reservation policy.⁵

The populations of the twenty camps included in this study were seldom aware of this official national discourse. Their daily lives, and most critically their collective access to the land they occupy and their limited access to state resources such as health and educational services, were defined in local encounters with lower-level state officials (such as the forestry officers) and vis-à-vis their settled village neighbours. In the lives of most of the illiterate, day-wage workers who were our research subjects, reserved entry to competitive government employment or the reserved quota for university students and posts – the two main arenas that the national-level 'reservation system' is mainly concerned with – are irrelevant. Only in so far as it legitimizes local practice that effectively excludes them from citizenship rights does the official classification have an effect on these peoples' lives. As we shall see in more detail below, official classifications filter into local realities, reshaping the complex relations of 'nomadic' camp-dwellers with their settled neighbours, who view them with great suspicion.

The general suspicion and outright exclusion of nomads by their settled neighbours has a long history in India. In the colonial period the British defined mobile groups as 'born criminals' in a legislative measure known as the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. After independence, the Government of India repealed the Act and, in 1952, announced that more than 200 such communities had been 'de-notified', only to reintroduce a new offensive legal act in 1959 that redefined nomads as 'habitual offenders'. The Indian

³ See <http://savageminds.org/2008/05/31/gujjars-obc-st-sc-or-dnt/>

⁴ For example, the Banjara are officially recognized as ST in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, while in Karnataka they are listed as SC.

⁵ The ongoing struggles of groups like the Gujjars and Mina are reported in <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/the-obc-of-rajasthans-caste-quota-politics/66226-3.html>, consulted 10 March 2011.

police routinely use the 1959 Habitual Offenders Act against members of nomadic and ‘denotified’ communities to this day (Kasturi 2007, D’Souza 2001). The DNT special commission, established in 2005, has had only a very limited visible impact on the plight of DNTs and their maltreatment.⁶ The general suspicion of, direct aggression towards and absence of any legal protection for these communities are still the rule in the 21st century. In 2007, one Indian reporter wrote: ‘Their being branded as “criminals” during the long period of British rule, and the absence of rehabilitation following Independence, has left a mark on the way most Indians continue to view nomadic communities’ (Kasturi 2007). Following a report of a lynching in September 2007 of ten members of a Banjara nomadic group who walked into a village in Behar and were blamed for being thieves, the reporter lamented:

They live as outcasts, outside villages; their children are not allowed into schools; they are denied steady jobs. Villagers and even administration officials consider them criminals, and they remain easy targets for the police.

The social stigma that renders these groups outcasts and victims of public lynching has not been reduced by the official DNT classification and the Commission established to defend their civic rights. On the contrary, some scholars suggest that the increased homogeneity being brought about by the nation state might actually have increased the objectification of the position of peripatetic peoples, who are becoming more visible targets of hostility because they are seen as undesirable strangers (Berland and Rao 2004: 14). Mobility, writes Caroline Dyer, whose work explores the exclusion of mobile people, mainly pastoralists, from the Indian educational system, ‘continues to be viewed predominantly through the lens of deficit’ (2010: 302). But in speaking of mobility and the exclusion it brings about, one should refer to the common distinction drawn in the academic literature on ‘nomadic people’ between ‘pastoral’ and ‘non-pastoral’ nomadic populations (Rao 1987, Misra 1986). While pastoralists move with their herds to an alternative residence in a seasonal pattern in order to maximize successful herd

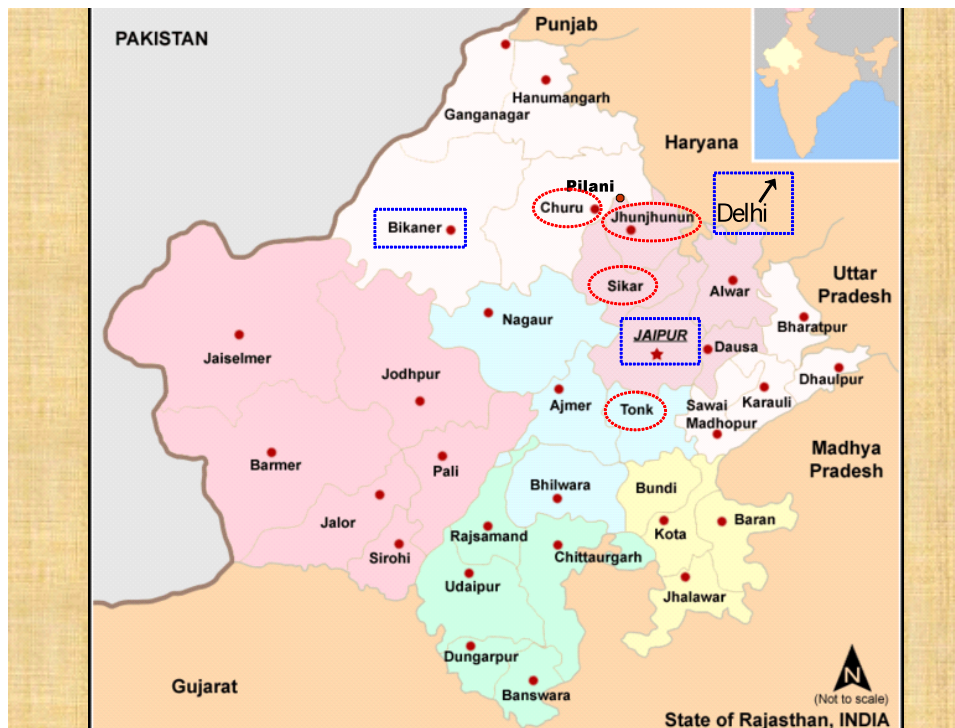
⁶ In 2005 the Government of India established a National Commission for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic tribes to investigate the ‘development’ of the people belonging to this category. See the official site of the commission, <http://ncdnsnt.gov.in/> consulted 5 March 2011. The Wikipedia entry under the Commission’s name specifies that there are 313 Nomadic Tribes and 198 Denotified Tribes that together number about 60 million people in India.

production, 'non-pastoral' nomads have for generations been known for making a living by offering specific services to the settled population. Peripatetic groups vary in the patterns of mobility they exhibit, their social composition and the different livelihood strategies they employ (Casimir 1986, 2004; Berland 2003). Thus, for example, named groups such as the Lohar are known for their iron-working, the Calbelia for their dancing and singing, and the Banjara for their long-distance caravans, as well as the sale of rare items such as salt or spices.

In recent decades, service nomads have lost their unique livelihood niches because of far-reaching changes in systems of transport, production, entertainment and distribution (Joshi 1998, Nagda 2004). Environmental degradation, industrialization and the opening up of markets has resulted in the loss of their traditional ways of making a livelihood, leading to dramatic changes in the fabric of life of these diverse communities (Jagori Resource Center 2003, Singh 1987, Layamia et al. 1998). In this process, a new set of problems has emerged for the nomads: deteriorating health, including the highest rates of mother and infant and child mortality, and extremely high records of HIV-AIDS (Chatterjee 2006), prostitution and severe impoverishment (Mathur et al. 2006, Singh 1987, Surendra et al. 2004).

The populations surveyed in this study reside in more than twenty marginalized camps, whose population is composed mainly of impoverished settled and semi-settled service nomads who have lost their traditional ways of making a living and survive today through the sale of their unskilled labour power. However, unlike their poor sedentary neighbours, camp residents suffer from added social, political and economic vulnerability. Because they are stigmatized as unworthy, shifting Others, they are often denied voting power and are thus not granted the public relief that their sedentary co-citizens receive. They are regularly evicted from their residence in such camps. One of the key issues in Rajasthan has been ambiguity over the citizenship rights of populations known as 'nomadic peoples' (UNDP Rajasthan Development Report 2002, Sule 2006).

Map of Rajasthan showing research sites



Research methodology and research setting

This study used two main research methods: ethnographic fieldwork and survey work. The ethnography was carried out by the author in the course of two major periods: in winter 2008, and more recently between December 2009 and April 2010.⁷ The purpose of the first period of fieldwork was to prepare the ground for the planned survey work and understand its social and pragmatic logistics. In the course of the first period of fieldwork, sixteen camps and residential sites of nomadic people were visited in three regions in north-eastern Rajasthan.⁸ With the help of local interpreters, I recorded the local history of each camp⁹ and the current composition of its population. I asked the

⁷ I visited India for the first time at the invitation of Professor Nirupama Prakash as a guest speaker in a workshop she organized on 'Consultation and experience sharing on safe motherhood: looking ahead', held at BITS University, Pilani, on 8-9 September 2006. Our collaborative work was further developed when Prof. Prakash came to Israel the following year for a ten-day intensive period of grant proposal writing. The proposal, entitled 'Safe motherhood and access to resources among nomadic populations in desert regions in Rajasthan, India, and the Negev, Israel, was eventually funded by the Indian Social Science Research Council. I wish to thank Professor Prakash for her hospitality and her kind and sharp comments on this and my earlier published work based on our collaboration.

⁸ The sixteen camps visited were in Shekhawati and Tonk regions. Among the sixteen camps, members of the following named nomadic communities were encountered: seven Hindu Banjara, one Muslim Banjara, six Lohar, one Rav and one Kumhar.

⁹ Hindi is widely spoken in these regions. Among the nomads, and especially among the women, only Marwari, a local language spoken in Rajasthan, is understood. The knowledge of both languages was

camp-dwellers about their ways of making a living and explored in particular the local availability of the health and educational facilities offered by the state and the nomads' specific patterns of use of these services. I also interviewed local officials and asked them about the nomadic peoples in their areas of jurisdiction.¹⁰ The insights gained in this first period of ethnographic exploratory work were extremely helpful in developing a comprehensive questionnaire that was subsequently distributed by a Hindi- and Marwari-speaking research fellow in 22 camps, polling 1096 respondents.¹¹ The questionnaire used a five-module outline to record the socio-economic realities of each camp, the specific backgrounds and family histories of respondents, respondents' access to public education and health facilities, and the specific parameters that reflected the gendered structure of access to resources and decision-making within the family and the larger communal setting. The analysis of the quantified results of the survey, as well as the narrative comments and observations made by the research fellow, will be presented and discussed in the following sections. It is important to emphasise at this point the close relationships between the two periods of ethnographic research and the survey research they bracketed. As noted already, the first period of fieldwork provided the necessary grassroots understanding and larger critical framework for the construction of the questionnaire distributed in the survey. It is also important to note that the research fellow who carried out most of the survey was encouraged to articulate her observations in a narrative way, along with narrative summaries based on the quantifiable data. Such openings for both narrative and quantified databases yielded a rich record that opened up a space for the formulation of key questions for further research in the second phase of ethnographic research. For example, the survey provided large-scale quantitative data to support the anecdotal ethnographic observations provided by informants in the first

critical for our interpreters. Our initial efforts to employ an interpreter who spoke only Hindi produced an impossible two-step process whereby our subjects spoke Marwari, which was in turn translated into Hindi and then again into English.

¹⁰ A detailed report on the first period of ethnographic research has been prepared for the *Indian Journal of Social Science*. An analysis of the survey as a social event, exploring the interesting tension between the recorded data and the narrative comments made by the research associate, was presented to a special seminar held at the International Gender Studies (IGS) centre of the University of Oxford on 10 November 2009.

¹¹ Dr Bandana Sanchev was a research affiliate of the project directly supervised by my colleague and research associate Prof. Nirupama Prakash, head of the Gender and Humanistic Department in BITS University in Pilani. The survey research was funded by the Indian Social Science Council. The 540-page final report was submitted to the granting agency in September 2009.

period of ethnographic research, when they insisted on their prolonged residence in the camps. Similarly, the exclusion of marginalized camp-dwellers from access to civic rights due to their presumed fleeting, non-permanent existence – disputed by the camp-dwellers themselves – received quantitative evidence in the survey. The survey had firmly established that, although camp-dwellers were keenly aware of the existence of public health and education services in the vicinity of their places of residence, they opted to avoid utilizing them.

These survey data led to a more intensive exploration during fieldwork in 2009-10. I was particularly interested in understanding the tension surrounding struggles over land and the meanings of nomadic or camp dwelling collective identities in such struggles. The second leg of the ethnographic research followed the manner in which the rights to a range of basic resources, including claims to residential land, access to welfare aid, the right to vote and access to public health and education facilities, were fiercely debated in each setting. The nature of the transient or nomadic mode of existence of camp-dwellers and the emerging subjectivities it gave rise to became the main issues in the second period of ethnographic research. Between December 2009 and March 2010 I studied residence as a key issue and explored how it was manipulated and employed in different, often contradictory ways by bureaucrats, the local beneficiaries of state resources and the most disempowered and weakest ‘nomadic’ and ‘post-nomadic’ camp-dwellers.

More specifically, the 2009-10 research expanded beyond the 2008 research, which was carried out mainly in Shekhawati and Tonk districts (see map). In 2009-10 five additional Rajasthani urban and semi-urban centres were surveyed. I visited and conducted interviews in Pushkar, Jaipur, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Udaipur, where I documented a range of residential forms in nomadic and post-nomadic settlements. I also conducted scheduled interviews with university professors, state-level government officials, one forestry department regional officer, two museum curators, one journalist and several

NGO activists.¹² The weaving together of some of this varied ethnographic work with statistical data based on survey work is central to the following analysis.

The contemporary political field

Deprived of their traditional ways of making a living, most ‘service nomads’ today live from daily or seasonal work arrangements with local employers, who discriminate against them because they view them as transient outsiders. Hired as casual, unskilled labourers on construction sites, in stone quarries and for short-term seasonal agricultural labour, former ‘service nomads’ are defenceless, unprotected labourers who reside in makeshift camps that vary in size and social composition. The location, size and composition of these camps depend on the changing demands of the local labour market and the specific socio-cultural and historical circumstances that define the relations of camp-dwellers with their settled neighbours. Thus, for example, the Lohar, who were known as ironsmiths offering their services to farmers and town dwellers, tended to create small camps by locating their familiar wagons *within* the village boundary. Although very few of them still make a living from offering the traditional iron-working services that mark their group, Lohar camps are still rather small, containing just one or two extended family groups. Among the six Lohar camps visited, only one (outside Birre, a few kilometres north of Jhunjunu) had documents that attest to their legal right to stay on the land where they resided. In this unique case, legal status was granted to them in 1952 according to what one Lohar informant described as ‘a special permit from Indira Gandhi’. In all the other small Lohar camps, people stated that they reside on government land and are painfully aware that they could be evicted at any time.

The size and location of the Banjara camps is very different from those of the Lohar camps. Known as traders in salt and other rare items needed by settled populations, and historically as organizing the long-distance caravans that carried such goods, the Banjara today are predominantly casual workers who reside in their large camps, always on the edge of settled communities. Another example of such links between the social

¹² Most of these interviews were filmed, as were many of the ethnographic encounters I had on that research trip. I wish to thank my son for acting as cameraman and research assistant in this leg of my research in Rajasthan.

organization of the nomadic group and its contemporary camp structure are the Khumhars. These former makers of clay pots have readapted their traditional skills to the new market demands and are now producing white clay figurines and colourfully painted garden statues, which they sell from the roadside camps where they live in small clusters of a few family groups.

Aside from these single-group camps, we also recorded the existence of large camps where members of several named nomadic peoples reside next to each other. Most of the people enumerated in our survey came from such large, multi-group camps, the populations of which ranged from a few hundred residents to several thousands. I will say more about the social organization of these multi-group camps below.

Camp-dwellers in these camps were not under the jurisdiction of the village or urban community next to which they were located. As the head of one *panchayat*, an administrative unit composed of several local villages, told us in 2008: ‘I cannot give these people even one banana’, a reference to the exclusion of camp-dwellers from the welfare program he is in charge of. Without any official documents (the *parichay patra*), such as a voting card or a below the poverty line (BPL) card, camp-dwellers are not eligible for the benefits of these welfare plans, despite their extreme poverty.

This exclusion from access to state resources is particularly meaningful when one considers the official policy of affirmative action in India that explicitly recognizes the need to promote the ‘weaker sections’ of the population. As noted above, the inclusion of nomadic populations in the ST, SC and OBC categories varies from state to state in India and from one named nomadic group to another. The research results reported in the next section suggest that the population of the camps in Rajasthan are often denied access to state resources and are not touched by the affirmative action policies. The social stigma associated with a ‘nomadic’ identity, the failure to achieve security of income and the absence of political representation combine to reproduce camp-dwellers’ exclusion.

Survey results

The social and economic reality of camp life

The survey was conducted in twenty-two camps in Jhunjhunu region and included 1061 respondents. Almost 90% of the respondents defined their collective identity in terms of one of the known named groups of service nomads.¹³

The camps that were surveyed had almost no infra-structure. Fewer than 20% of the camp-dwellers had access to piped water, only 15% had electricity and less than 2% regular access to cooking fuel. The camps had no public services of any sort. The large camps were located at the edge of a village, often next to the railway line. The smaller camps were found next to a major building site or a quarry where the camp-dwellers, both men and women, were employed.

Camp-dwellers were employed on a daily basis. Fewer than 10% reported that they had worked a full month, 25% reported they had worked an average of fifteen days per month, and 10% stated that they could secure work for about a week to two weeks each month. More than half the respondents (55%) were unemployed or could secure only a few days and up to seven days of paid daily work per month. About half the employed camp-dwellers, both men and women, worked in road construction or as stone masons. The rest were involved in petty sales of goods or simply begged.

This general poverty and the extreme insecurity of employment were shared by members of all the distinct named nomadic groups, regardless of their former traditional service occupations. Still, the distinctions between groups were marked in space. The camps were organized in group-based segments or quarters, for example, all the Banjara were clustered in one part of the camp and were distinguished from other named nomadic group members, who lived in their own areas of the camp. Because the camps were considered extra-territorial spaces the local police and local authorities did not enter the camp space, and disputes were resolved internally. The working of such internal

¹³ There were very few pastoral nomads in these camps (about 1%) and about 9% of the camp residents insisted that they are NOT nomadic but reside in these camps because they have no other housing.

mechanisms to deal with both inter- and intra-group conflicts is an interesting issue that has not yet been studied and will need to be documented in future work.

The state makes its presence known in the camp only when it seeks to appropriate the land occupied by the camp-dwellers for the use of private owners or when it raids a camp periodically in order to remove potential local claims to the land it occupies. The need to secure a title to the land they occupy is thus paramount in camp-dwellers' discourses.

Establishing permanence of residence

Contrary to what their settled neighbours report, most camp-dwellers (66%) insisted that they had lived in the camp for between twenty and forty years. Twenty-two percent stated they had lived in the camp for as long as two decades or less. Only 10% reported that they had lived in the camp for less than one year. Less than 1% declared they were temporary residents of the camp who were 'moving on'. The latter were said to be pastoral nomads who came with their herds for a brief period before moving on to better pasture lands. This account of the prolonged residence of camp-dwellers stands in stark contrast to the view articulated again and again by local officials and the sedentary neighbours we interviewed. When we announced that we were interested in visiting the nomads in their near-by camps, we were often informed that this would be a quite impossible task because the camp site we had heard about might have relocated since it was last heard of. 'These people move around', one local village headman in Chirawa village, a few kilometres from Pilani, told us: 'Today they are here, tomorrow they are gone', he added emphatically. Villagers who were asked to direct us to the camps giggled in embarrassment and waved away our efforts as hopeless: 'Who knows where these people are?' Our research assistants and local translators admitted that, although they lived only a few kilometres from the camp we visited, they had never 'seen' it or were unaware of its existence before our research began.

Most camps were built on state lands, but a few were spread over private, unclaimed lots. The camp-dwellers were keenly aware that the land they had occupied, even for as long as four or five decades, was not legally their own and that they were in constant danger of

being evicted from it. In one camp, a smiling resident answered our question, ‘Whose land is this?’ with ‘It’s God’s land, it belongs to everybody.’ Without legal title to their residential land, camp-dwellers were often expelled if and when the private owners of the land wished to do so and were routinely harassed by the government agents of the Forestry Department. In one camp in Churu District we recorded the expulsion of all camp residents after more than forty years of continuous residence when the state land on which the camp stood was purchased by a private company. Similar scenarios of the removal of camps were recorded for Lakshamangarh and Neem ka *thanas* in Sikar District.

In Fatepur, the regional Range Forest Officer told us that he is required to evict nomadic people who ‘encroach on’ government or state land on regular basis. Referring to the nomads as ‘very smart people’, he described an on-going game in which the nomads reappear a few days after being chased away by his rangers. He explained that the nomads are aware that the legal system cannot stop what he defines as ‘encroaching on’ state lands, for two reasons. First, the legal process often takes many years and will probably become stuck in court. Secondly, politicians who need the votes of nomadic people tend to protect them and work against such legal procedures to evict them.

However, the people we interviewed in the camps presented a different picture from that given by the Range Forest Officer. They spoke to us about their present occupation of land by drawing a distinction between the two terms *kagjat* and *kabza*. *Kagjat* is the proper, legal status in which one holds a title for the land (*kagej* is a paper, a document). One can be granted such a title by the government (a status we recorded in a few cases of settled post-nomadic camps and neighbourhoods). One can also gain access to land through *kharidna* or simple purchase. But most people defined their current land tenure in the camp in terms of *kabza*. ‘If you don’t have any money, you are forced to *kabza* (literally to occupy in practice) your land’. ‘You have no choice’, explained one informant in a large camp outside Fatepur in January 2010. ‘But still,’ he added emphatically, ‘this is my *kabza*, it is *my land*, even if I don’t own it.’ This distinction in the nature of the relationship to land came to life early one morning in late January 2010

when we accompanied the friendly Range Forest Officer of Sikar District to two Banjara camps outside Fatepur, the district administrative headquarters.

The first camp was located near the railway line. A cluster of about ten *pakka* houses made of cement and red brick was occupied by the large families of three brothers. They reported that their father had established this camp about forty years ago and that they had lived there ever since, working on construction sites and in petty selling. One of the brothers owned a small shop in the local bazaar. In rural Rajasthan, the construction of a *pakka* house is contrasted with the temporary and less valued *kacha* construction made of mud, sand, tin or building refuse, and it stands for permanence and relative affluence. The older brother we interviewed, who introduced himself as the head of the camp, was proud to state that they all send their children to the local school and that the most educated child in the extended family had recently completed elementary school and might be admitted to a local high school. When asked if this was ‘their land’, the local headman looked at the Range Forest Officer who accompanied us and stated boldly: ‘This is *my* land. It is my *kabza* land. We are *permanent* here.’ He used the English term *permanent* in the midst of his flow of Marwari speech. Thus challenged, the Range Forest Officer smiled and insisted softly: ‘I know, I know. You say this is your land. But I say it is not. You know this is government land. You only *kabza* it.’ And turning to me, he added in English: ‘They only *encroach* on this land. But we cannot expel them from here. They say they are permanent. They really are not.’

A few kilometres away and a few minutes ride on a deep sandy road, we arrived at a small camp made of about a dozen huts constructed from thorns and bent tree branches. The place was home to about 120 men, women and children of Banjara origin who had left their original home in Jodhpur, a large town some twelve hours truck-ride away, only two years earlier. They came to this place, they told us, following a big dispute with another segment of their family in Jodhpur. They heard that they could purchase some land in this place. ‘We had no choice’, we were told by the elderly man, who was one of the few people left on the almost deserted site that windy morning when all the men and women had gone to work. They sold everything they owned in order to pay for the trip

and were currently working off the loan they took to buy this land from a Brahman businessman. ‘Were they granted voting cards or BPL cards?’ I asked the man. ‘No’, he answered, puzzled. ‘They need to be here many years, and maybe then they can get these cards’, explained our Range Forest Officer host. And then he felt it necessary to add: ‘Yes. These people have purchased the land, but they are very very poor.’

What the Range Forest Officer was expressing in this contradictory statement is that, despite the legal status gained through direct purchase in this case, the social status of these migrant people had not yet been established. Their entry into the community at large was still in question. Their extreme poverty was raised to mark their continued exclusion, poverty here being shorthand for continued social and political exclusion. In a significant way, holding a voting card and securing a BPL card signalled more than the material resources it promised – it was a sign of social inclusion for its holders. The local politics of gaining access to these two documents is a complex issue.

BPL and voting cards

Our survey revealed that 62% of our respondents reported that they had at one point held a voting card. But as we saw in the case outlined above, this did not guarantee any political leverage for the marginalized community. Our research affiliate, who carried out the survey work, made this point explicitly, arguing that: ‘Nomads were given voting cards by the elected representatives or head of village, with the sole purpose of garnering votes. As soon as the election was over such people took all the voting cards from them so that they could not claim anything’ (ISSR 2009: 500).

Having a BPL card carried with it more substantial material and social significance, as it promised a periodic distribution of provisions such as sugar, kerosene and wheat.

According to our census, 46% of our respondents reported holding such cards. This was documented in only seven of the 22 camps that were surveyed, a fact that reflects the general status of the camp. In most camps no BPL cards had been issued. Still, even in the seven locations in which BPL cards had been issued, the resident population

complained bitterly of being cheated in the distribution of the provisions the cards promised to their holders. Our research affiliate (ISSR 2009: 500) observed:

...food articles and other consumable items that were supplied by government agencies meant to be distributed through BPL cards were not delivered to such card holders. Many of them had no idea that government agencies were giving flour, rice, oil to those who had BPL cards at a subsidized rate.

In interviews with local officials, we learned that camp-dwellers, even if they could show BPL cards, were not perceived as part of the deserving population for limited state welfare resources. 'They are not *my* people', said one headman; 'they are here today and tomorrow they are gone'. Another village headman reminded us that, according to state law, in order to be eligible for government emergency relief programs, camp-dwellers must demonstrate that they have been residing in the camp continually for at least ten years. 'If they move all the time,' he insisted, 'government can do nothing for them.' When confronted with the argument that many camp-dwellers who held proper BPL cards and were long-term residents of the camp should be eligible by law for such benefits, he replied: 'Let them go to where they were given those cards.'

Aware of the need to demonstrate continued and long-term residence if they are to engage with the official discourse of rights, camp residents were eager to establish visible signs of such prolonged residence. In every camp we visited, people insisted that we photograph them next to tall trees they proudly stated they had planted themselves since they had moved to the camp, thus making the size of the tree an indication of the length of their residence. Another sign of prolonged attachment to the land was the construction of the cement shrines that were scattered around the camp. These shrines (known as *mandeer*) were more elaborate in the larger and more established camps, boasting several interconnected dome-like rooms and a range of colourful statues of deities.

Fluidity of camp composition

The survey was effective in documenting the prolonged residence of the 22 camps polled, at least as reflected in the responses of the camp-dwellers themselves. What the survey did not depict is the fluidity and malleability of the composition of the camps. In interviews and two follow-up visits to the same camps, it became evident that family members moved in and out of several camp and family dwellings. In other words, while dwellings were indeed stable and had been occupied by specific families for decades, the internal composition of each family dwelling was constantly in flux. Members of the family moved in and out of the camp for different purposes and at different moments in their lives. Take, for example, the case of Santosh, a 38-year-old mother of five whom we met on my first visit in December 2008 in a small camp outside Pilani village in Shekawati region. When I first interviewed Santosh, she was living in a small mud and thorn hut at the edge of the camp. She shared her yard with her daughter-in-law and the latter's two small children. A year later, in December 2009, Santosh had moved out of her small dwelling in the camp and was said to be in a small camp next to a quarry some five kilometres away. Her own mother-in-law now occupied the space Santosh had left behind. Santosh's own daughter-in-law had moved north with her two young children to join her husband at his place of work. Santosh had moved out, we were told by her elderly mother-in-law, because she had to look for new employment. When we met her in 2008 she was pregnant and was working. But when her baby died a few days after being born she moved out in search of new employment. Santosh was also moving away from the place where she had given birth and her painful experience of losing a child. Domestic politics and emotional needs are inserted here into a larger rural political economy that pays meagre daily wages for the labour of nomadic women. Santosh's decision to move away from her hut in one camp and take on available labour in a quarry made the space she had occupied available for the use of another member of her extended family. The space within the camp is thus maintained as a home, and locally recognized claims to such space are acknowledged, even if the camp as a whole does not have state-sanctioned legal status.

There are two important implications of this story. First, it describes a complicated pattern of residence and movement that sends different members of a household to different camp sites without their losing their claims to continued residence in each such site. This pattern attests to multiple forms of domesticity that stretch family and conjugal relationships in an effort to find creative and flexible modes of making a living. Such adaptive spatial strategies are effective ways of maximizing access to limited resources while maintaining claims to several residential sites. The second insight that stems from Santosh's story, especially when it is read in light of the Range Forest Officer's interview discussed earlier, points to the creative ways in which nomads engage with the state's policies. 'Permanency of residency' as defined by the state promises access to a few welfare resources that are never secure and cannot be relied on in the dire reality of insecure employment for the camp-dwellers. In order to survive, people like Santosh need to develop new hybrid ways of living which are transient and permanent, settled and on the move at the same time. Santosh has claims to a space in one camp, which she leaves behind when her life circumstances demand she moves to a new site, next to a new temporary employment. Home and fluidity are thus generated at the same time.

Having discussed the complex dynamics of settlement and mobility that characterizes the interaction between camp-dwellers and one set of state legal codes and policies, the next sections move to examine the ways in which camp-dwellers articulate their agency in two other major arenas through which the state makes itself present in their lives: public education and health care.

The universal provision of formal education (Jha and Jhingran 2002) and free health care (Chatterjee 2006) are widely viewed as critical in the process of uplifting disadvantaged groups and facilitating their social, political and economic inclusion. However, as recent scholarship had pointed out, the mere expansion of education and health services has not solved the problem of the exclusion and injustice experienced by marginalized groups, who continue to be discriminated against and disempowered (Dyer 2006, Hickey and Du Toit 2007). Our survey results support this general observation that the issue was *not* the

mere availability of such services. Indeed, about half our respondents reported that government schools were in fact available not too far from their camps, and 70% reported that government hospitals were 'not far away' from them. Moreover, more than a third of our respondents (340 out of the total of 1061) reported that they were *aware* that education and health-care services were *free of charge* in these government schools and hospitals. Still, only 9% of respondents (both men and women) opted to use the government health service, and less than 1% sent their children to government schools.

The question we pose in the next two sections is why is this case? In other words, why, despite the fact that camp-dwellers are aware of the availability of free public services not far from their places of residence, do so few of them actually make use of such services? More critically, how much of this reality of the limited use of public services is defined by the active *choice* made by the camp-dwellers themselves?

The selective use of government health-care centres

The question of the absence of camp-dwellers from government health centres received direct probing in the survey. Most of the nomadic women delivered their babies at home. Among the women in our survey, fewer than 1% turned to biomedical health centres for child delivery. This is in comparison to the 14.8% nationwide average record of women in India who had their babies delivered at a public health facility. These survey results support our ethnographic data, from which we also learned that those few who made use of biomedical health-care centres for child delivery had paid up to 5000 Indian rupees (about 100 days of labour, or a total of US \$100) for private health care. People told us they needed to borrow heavily in order to meet these child delivery costs, which they used only in emergencies. Commenting on these survey data, our research affiliate explained (ISSR 2009: 37):

We had found that a majority of nomads preferred to visit private hospitals rather than government hospitals due to the shabby treatment that they used to get from doctors and other staff members of government hospitals. To add to their woes, doctors of government hospitals prescribed costly and numerous medicines, whereas in private hospitals doctors treated them well and doctors prescribed affordable and few medicines.

Why do impoverished camp-dwellers shun free public health facilities and opt to visit *and pay for* private health providers? Do they exercise a ‘choice’ in this well-documented pattern of behaviour? Before we turn to these complex questions, we need to gain a better understanding of the health status of nomadic and post-nomadic peoples in India, including Rajasthan.

Public health care in India and the exclusion of ‘nomadic populations’

Since independence, considerable efforts have been made by the Indian state to provide ‘health for all’ by strengthening and expanding the health-care system, especially in rural areas. The overall record is impressive: life expectancy increased from 46.8 years in 1961 to about 61 years in 1991. Death and birth rates have declined; epidemic and communicable diseases have also been controlled to a great extent. The national records for the decline in illiteracy rates over the past decade are similarly impressive. The 2001 census indicated a 1991-2001 decadal literacy growth of 12.63%, which is the fastest ever on record.¹⁴

But these success stories hide significant disparities. Rural populations, women and members of marginalized groups have been largely neglected. The record is also geographically uneven (Datta et al. 1980, Bose 1991). Within these nationwide records that list health and educational levels, the large, semi-arid state of Rajasthan in north-west India seems to hold the bottom rank. The record for infant and child mortality rates, often used as key indicators for measuring the development and socio-economic well-being of a given population, are significantly lower for Rajasthan as a whole in comparison with the national average. According to a 2001 UN study,¹⁵ the overall national Indian IMR was 67 per thousand live births (53 in urban areas, 87 in rural areas), compared with an IMR for the state of Rajasthan of 90 per thousand live births. Similarly, mothers’ mortality rates (MMR) for Rajasthan are 445 per hundred thousand compared with a

¹⁴ Literates and Literacy Rates, 2001 Census (Provisional), at http://www.nlm.nic.in/literacy01_nlm.htm. However, this high record can also be criticized when absolute numbers are quoted. After all, India still has the largest number of illiterate people in the world. See ‘India has a third of world’s illiterates’, *Times of India*, 2004-11-09, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-has-a-third-of-worlds-illiterates/articleshow/916814.cms>.

¹⁵ The latest census estimates on maternal and infant mortality rates show that there has been little improvement in such records since the 2001 census. See Chandrakant 2009.

national average of 301.¹⁶ The disparity within the state of Rajasthan is another significant factor hidden in the national records. A 2007 study reports that the highest MMR and IMR in Rajasthan are among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who are among the lowest tiers of Indian society. Bhasin and Nag (2007) suggest that these marginalized communities exhibit the lowest educational records and the highest rates of child and mother mortality rates. There is no official record that documents the MMR and IMR among nomadic populations in Rajasthan. One indicator of the health status of these populations is the prevalence of under-nutrition among children aged one to five years among the nomadic population. These are recorded as significantly higher (72%) among the nomads than the 48% that was reported for the State of Rajasthan as a whole (Rao K.M. et al. 2006).

When one turns to link literacy and health, the following records are enlightening. The state-wide literacy level in Rajasthan stands at 39 percent (compared to the India nationwide record of 52 percent for 1991), the record of literacy for the state-wide Scheduled Tribe population is a dismal 14 percent. There also seems to be a great gap between the literacy rate of 6.4 percent among Scheduled Tribe women and the 22.2 percent recorded for the men. Literacy rates among nomads in Rajasthan are the lowest in India, and among women in nomadic communities the rate stands at less than 2% (Nagda 2004: 3).

Numerous studies have recorded the correlation between illiteracy, lower age at marriage, the under-nutrition of mothers and poor access to modern health-care systems as the key factors that explain the higher mortality rates among marginalized populations (Rao K. B. et al. 1993, Bedi et al. 2001). The cumulative effect of endemic malnutrition, severe poverty, illiteracy, unhygienic living conditions and unregulated fertility are often cited as the cause of low rates of MMR and IMR (UNESCO 1998, Claeson et al. 2000).¹⁷ But

¹⁶ Records are from official Rajasthan state records cited at <http://mohfw.nic.in/NRHM/State%20Files/raj.htm> consulted 2 December 2010. For the Kerala records I consulted <http://ekikrat.in/Health-Indicator-India>.

¹⁷ The fact that nomadic people in Rajasthan score highest in all these parameters is not unique. Reviewing the literature on health status among nomadic populations in Africa, Abdikarim and Velema (1999) show

there are other social and cultural factors that account for the dismal health status of nomadic men and women. A 2006 study of the health status of migrants in India (Chatterjee 2006) notes that internal migrants¹⁸ are often excluded from the public health-care system. Nomadic and mobile populations suffer from similar exclusion due to their social stigmatization as unworthy Others by their settled neighbours. Gender, it seems, is yet another critical factor in structuring access to the health and educational services provided by the state.¹⁹

While the nomadic population as a whole seems to suffer from limited access to public health services and thus also from ill health, the women in these communities tend to be worse off than their male counterparts. Living in patriarchal families, nomadic women tend to delay visiting medical service centres, and when they do go there they tend to approach private and informal institutions where the qualifications of the medical staff are inferior. Many opt to utilize self-trained healers and seek treatment from traditional doctors (Soman n.d., Bhat 2003).

Making choices

Very little research has been carried out on the kinds of choices made by nomadic women in seeking medical care and on the ways in which such choices are structured by the nature of their nomadic existence. In her work on Rajasthan's pastoral nomadic Raika, Robbins (2004) reports the marginal utilization of primary health-care networks among them, noting that when they do seek treatment nomadic women in this group tend to opt for private non-biomedical health services. In her 2003 study, Delhi University anthropologist Veena Bhasin disputes the view that 'traditional medicine' is a barrier that explains the limited choice of biomedical services among marginalized people in India.

that infant mortality is significantly higher among nomadic populations everywhere in Africa than among their settled neighbours.

¹⁸ Internal migrants is a general category that includes people displaced due to economic hardship, natural disasters or political conflicts. The specific category of 'nomadic people' is unique within this overall phenomenon of what one of our interviewees, Professor Mohnot of Jodpur, called 'calamity-induced nomadism'. The emic definition of a migrant lifestyle seems to mark these people even when they settle or are forced to settle. For an insightful analysis of such lingering cultural nomadic elements in the settlement patterns of Roma groups in Europe, see Hoare 2002.

¹⁹ Soman (n.d.) has argued that the state of health and burden of ill health is always higher among women as compared to men across socio-economic strata.

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In her work among ‘tribal people’ in Rajasthan, a marginalized social category that is distinguished from the ‘nomadic groups’ category mainly due to its collective claims to land, Bhasin argues that both systems are used at the same time. Mukherjee (2003), who worked among impoverished tribals in Maharashtra, states: ‘They are fully aware of the scientific idea about other causes of disease, like infection, bacteria, virus and through impure drinking water.’ Mukherjee emphasizes the informed choices made by marginalized tribal people and proposes examining the limited access to economic resources as a way of explaining the choice of health service.

Anthropologist Maya Unnithan Kumar, who worked among poor slum residents of different caste origins in northern Rajasthan, records that these poor women seem systematically to avoid state-provided health-care centres. She writes: ‘The nearest public hospital was rarely mentioned as a destination by women witnessing pregnancy complications’ (2003: 18).

Drawing on this literature, I wish to argue here that the choices made by nomadic women camp-dwellers regarding the kind of health care they utilize must be understood within a larger framework that takes into consideration the interlinked nature of the social, political and economic marginalization of these populations. Experience of discrimination, social distance and the feeling of alienation produce social alienation and economic vulnerability. The room for informed choices is no doubt very limited in such circumstances. Yet it does exist. Like the poor low-caste women that Unnithan Kumar depicts in her study (2003), the fear of sterilization seems to be the most critical factor that kept poor camp-dwellers in our study away from government health centres. Our data show that the few women who reported they had entered government health centres were women who had already had six children or more and were openly seeking sterilization.

When asked if they were aware that delivery at a government hospital should, by law, be free of charge and the mother be paid 1700 rupees, respondents (both men and women) reported that they were aware of the law but insisted they were seldom granted this

benefit. The mere 17.2% of respondents who actually made use of government health centres declared that they had received only a portion of the legal sum of compensation for child delivery due to them by law.

Pulling these data together, we note that the use of biomedical services among the impoverished camp-dwelling population is very low, even in comparison to the rather low national average. Our data also show that camp-dwelling women systematically avoid government health services and turn to private care, despite the high cost of the private centres. The few women who make use of government health centres know that they will be treated badly, that their bodily integrity is in danger and that they will most likely not be given the financial benefits due to them by law. Aware of all these inhibiting factors, they opt to pay for the care they need and attend government centres only if they wish to undergo sterilization. Our study suggests that the women are fully aware of their options, know that they are being discriminated against in accessing what should be their civic rights, and make an informed choice to avoid such settings and pay the full price for the services they need.

Access to education

The survey recorded a staggering lack of formal education among camp-dwellers. Of the 1061 people who were polled only thirteen males had some primary education, and none of the women in our survey had ever been to school.

Carolyn Dyer (2010) argues that education in India acts as a ‘gate-keeping operation’ that perpetuates rather than challenges the discrimination of children who belong to nomadic communities because it fails to ensure that schooling is accessible to these children, does not work to eliminate discrimination against them and offers schools that seldom meet basic quality standards (2010: 303). The camp-dwellers in our study have experienced educational exclusion along all the parameters listed by Dyer. In several schools we visited, we learned that camp children are explicitly excluded from school. In most reports by camp residents and other observers, camp-dwellers’ children were not welcome in such schools and were often humiliated by the local teachers. In the words of

our survey research affiliate (ISSR 2009: 34), ‘It was reported that government school teachers badly treat nomads’ children’. In our visits to two schools, which had in fact admitted children belonging to nomadic communities (one outside Jodhpur and another school in Jasrapur in Jhunjhunu region in northern Rajasthan) we noticed not only the glaringly low quality of the basic school facilities, but also the open ridicule and stigmatization meted out to camp-dwelling children. It is not surprising that most camp-dwellers reported that they did not wish to send their children to school.

In one brief but telling scene we were interviewing a Banjara man, a *riksha* driver and father of five, who told us he did not send any of his children to the nearby government school because, as he put it, he was ‘too poor’. The Muslim *riksha* driver who had brought us to the camp was listening to the interview while waiting to take us back. Upon hearing the Banjara father’s statement he challenged him: ‘Why don’t you send these kids to school? Look at me, I have three children and I am as poor as you are. We are both *riksha* drivers, and I send my children to school.’ We kept out of the scene and listened²⁰ to the exchange between the two men, realizing that the Banjara father was not referring to his material poverty but to his sense of Otherness, of not belonging to the category of people who go to school.

Our interpreter and research assistant, who repeatedly encountered statements by camp-dwellers that they were ‘too poor’ to send their children to school, insisted at one point that the problem was merely their ‘lack of awareness’. ‘They are not *aware* of the facts, that education is free’, she argued with great conviction. We thus inserted a question in the survey that inquired whether camp-dwellers were *aware* of the free education offered in such schools, or that the government of India encourages female education and provides free education up to college level for girls. The survey confirmed that camp-dwellers were in fact aware of the existence of these schools but kept their children away from them.

²⁰ The scene was captured on film.

It is worth noting at this juncture²¹ that a very different attitude to formal education was observed in the few camps that had secure legal residency status. In these sites, and contrary to the vehement refusal to attend government schools reported by the survey, we noted an open eagerness to enrol in government schooling. It seems that these settled, formerly nomadic people viewed formal education as a means of ending their social exclusion. Parents in these camps did complain, however, that the quality of the schools in their neighbourhoods was particularly low and that the schoolteachers treated their children badly.

Discussion: mobility, exclusion, and the (limited) space for agency

Faced with conflicting messages emanating from different state structures, and having to survive in a complex economic and social environment that does not enable them to use their traditional skills, contemporary nomadic people who settle in marginalized camps exhibit extremely adaptable and socially flexible forms of behaviour. They also develop new ‘discourses of permanency’ in order to fit within the state’s discourses of rights. They establish new signs of residence to reject the view of the contingent and shifting nature of their modes of life (e.g. insisting on prolonged residence, planting trees and constructing Hindu shrines within their camps). Knowing all too well that they cannot make a stable living in one fixed locality and that they need to move on when the local source of employment dries up, they maintain several ‘home sites’ in various camps, where they establish occupancy rights. In the context of entrenched prejudice and dire poverty, they struggle to gain legal access to their residential land, yet systematically avoid schools and take advantage of government health centres only in a selective manner.

I suggest that, in tracing this detailed case study of the manner in which those classified as ‘nomadic people’ have dealt with a range of definitions that structure the rewards and

²¹ This issue is the subject of my fourth field trip to Rajasthan.

penalties offered to them by the state, we can learn about the resourcefulness of these people and their ability to practice their choices, albeit in very restrictive circumstances. I have shown that they play creatively with the limited resources available in their lives, struggling to gain access to some state resources while effectively avoiding other state services that seem less appropriate to their needs and life-styles.

Comparative work has documented that spatial movement enables the maximization of economic opportunities and often gives rise to a flexible, effective way of survival in extremely marginalized social and economic contexts (Chatty 2007; Casimir et al. 1999). Studies have also shown that such recurrent mobility shapes and reshapes individual social identities and generates new subjectivities (Ahmed 1982, Spooner 1972, Weissleder 1978) to examine nomadic life not only economically and strategically, but also as socially and symbolically structured (e.g., Gmelch 1986, Hoare 2002, Okely 1983).

In other words, what is proposed here is an extended analytical framework that focuses on the generative power of such encounters between centrist powers and subjugated peoples. For when they struggle to enter partially into the discourse of rights based on permanency of residence, the nomads transform the very definition of their nomadic way of life. They insist that they have occupied the same camp for decades and proceed to develop and invest in visible signs to support such claims. Yet in the process of establishing such claims, a new, in-between, hybrid kind of life-style has emerged whereby movement continues to be enacted, but within newly delineated borders. Not completely 'mobile', yet still not 'settled', the new subjects are engaged in maintaining 'ownership' claims to a settled home in several camps. Their agency, limited as it is, has the power to alter centrist policies and reshape the impact of such forces on their lives.

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