

SECRETS IN THE 'FIELD' :  
THE ANTICS OF RESEARCHING  
RAJASTHAN'S BANDITRY

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## **Secrets in the ‘Field:’ The Antics of Researching Rajasthan’s Banditry<sup>1</sup>**

Anastasia Piliavsky

### **Into the ‘field’**

A year ago I happened to be in Jaipur drinking midday whiskeys with some Rajput families, people I like to visit periodically to keep myself abreast of current gossip. Our conversation drifted leisurely from polo ground drama to the new zinc factory inauguration party, the possible matrimonial matches to be made with the Jodhpur Rathores, and the recent kills by man-eating panthers on the Madhya Pradesh border. Having my own reasons for drinking in the particular company that afternoon, I brought up Kanjars, a community connected in the minds of many with illicit liquor production, prostitution and minor theft. Locally notorious for their extralegal activities, Kanjars are commonly referred to as the area’s toughest ‘criminal caste’—*sab se zabardast badmāsh*. At the time, I had come to frequent some Kanjars in a Jaipur slum with hopes to better understand the dynamics of their economic activity in an urban setting. To my Rajput acquaintances I mentioned, rather cautiously, that I had learned that certain landowning families maintained mutually beneficial relationships with ‘criminal castes,’ and that I wondered if the present company could help me learn more about Kanjars and other such groups. Expecting tacit suspicion at best, I held my breath, prepared to blame the midday heat and the spirits for the implied accusation of criminal involvement.

To my surprise, I encountered vociferous enthusiasm accompanied by a host of stories about the bizarre beliefs and habits of Kanjars. My Rajput informants, eager to see me fill my notebooks with Kanjar ‘ethnography,’ overwhelmed me with ‘secrets of Kanjar life.’ With a raised brow and in a lowered voice one of my informants said that Kanjars have many secret practices, the details of which he proceeded to describe. From the training of wall climbing lizards to odd wedding arrangements, Goddess worship, and ritual rooftop defecation, my company claimed to know it all. In the heat of the moment someone even suggested that there was little need for me to spend time among the Kanjars (it is after all an uncomfortable way of life) because I could learn most secrets of Kanjar life from the present party and other similarly ‘knowledgeable people,’ of whom, as I came to realize, there was never a shortage.

The experience of the following months echoed an observation made by an anthropologist of the Middle East that ‘the experience [of fieldwork is] not well described as simply “dialogue”. Nor [is] it “data collection”. It [is] more like a trade in secrets, though in a curious way. The more thriller-like the material, the less difficult to gather, to the point where one [is] constantly being

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented in a seminar at the University of Edinburgh’s Centre for South Asian Studies on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2006.

told things unfit for print' (Dresch 2000: 109-110).<sup>2</sup> Throughout my research the mention of Kanjars unfailingly generated an abundance of 'secret knowledge' and 'knowledgeable people' willing to be convinced to share such information. This paper is not a 'Kanjari ethnography' in a classical sense, but a reflection on their place in present public imagination. Because their positioning (discursive, social and legal) is to a great extent articulated by others, I am interested in the things these 'others'—local 'Kanjari experts' including police officers, minor farmers and major landholders—have to say. Their descriptions, however dissimilar, are distinct in a particular way. They present Kanjars as secrets, but paradoxically so. The Kanjars of popular imagination are a sort of 'public secret.' Most people know what they shouldn't and why they shouldn't know 'Kanjari secrets' is clear. Kanjars are *badmāsh* (criminal), dirty, immoral, different, dangerous, Other. Why everyone besides Kanjars themselves knows—or claims to know—their 'secrets,' however, needs more careful consideration.

### Special things

Soon after I made my acquaintance with the Kanjars resident in a Jaipur slum, I ran into a predicament typical of South Asian fieldwork. I was monopolized by my hosts. After some initial inquiry into the purpose of my visits (after all, suspicions of spying, when applied to an awkward white girl, are not sustainable), I was installed in one family's circle, to which, as my hosts made it clear, I was expected to keep. The neighbors in the tent to the right, they said, drank too much and the ones to the left were unacceptably quarrelsome. Each time I attempted to take a round of the *bastī* (settlement), I was either talked out of it, escorted to the tents my family deemed proper, or simply asked the disarming question: 'what is it that you want to learn from *them* that you cannot learn from *us*?' After all, was my host family insufficient authority on the *riwāz*, *sanskriti aur itihās* ('tradition, culture and history') that I said I came to study?

One realizes that by using the familiar gloss of anthropology as the study of 'customs and culture' one obscures the professional truth because 'the study of customs and culture' is not how anthropologists speak about their work among themselves. I used to describe my activities as *samājīk vīgyān* ('social science' or 'sociology'). This, however, often raised suspicion. If social science was my endeavor, why did I carry no clipboard, conduct no surveys and insisted on spending more than forty-eight hours doing my research? But how does one talk about what it is that anthropologists *really* do? Could we get 'informed consent' from our informants (to use the words of the Association of Social Anthropology's 'Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice') if we told them that what we are really looking for is the stuff beneath what we are told, and what we write about is the implied, the unmentioned and at times the unmentionable (after all, what is anthropology if not the penetration of the obvious)? Can we tell our informants that anthropology thrives on the knowledge gained in 'private spaces,' whose penetration, as the 'Ethical Guidelines' tell us, we must avoid? While people are usually more than willing to disclose the 'secrets' of others, who wants to have their inner lives put on

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<sup>2</sup> Dresch, Paul. 2000. "Wilderness of Mirrors: Truth and Vulnerability in Middle Eastern Fieldwork," in *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*. Edited by P. Dresch, Wendy James and David Parkin. Oxford: Berghahn Press.

display? To eschew the ‘invasion of privacy,’ one would have to resort to formal interviews and questionnaires, but I think most anthropologists would agree that surveys are only marginal to our research.

When the people you study are not the ones to whom you are speaking, interlocutors tend to simply assume you are studying the hidden. After all, why would you study the already known? It is precisely this insight that tends to inspire the local initiations into the ‘secrets of Kanjar life’ to be scribbled into my notebooks in the gaze of my informants’ approval. This of course made sense because people are always willing to denigrate the other. The teller always forgets, however, that he too is an informant and that while writing down the Rajput stories of bizarre Kanjar habits, I was also listening to the attitudes of the tellers, something that was in itself a teasing out of secrets, but secrets other than my hosts imagined. But whereas one expects gossip, immediate revelations come as a shock. When I first arrived, I was frequently told (glibly and in passing) the shockingly unpublishable. And to catch a glimpse of the ‘dark side’ seemed easier than to negotiate the price of mangoes. By listening to a retired sub-inspector of police elaborate on torture methods you inevitably become a tacit participant, a silent ally. And as this ‘dark side’ revealed itself, the comfort of professional innocence gave way to an uneasy feeling of entering something of which one has neither the right nor the desire to be a part.

When the secrets are of the pajama party variety, the most you risk is a few slanted glances. Other scenarios can be more chilling. As you listen to a village *chāi* shop keeper leisurely tell you that there are indeed packages of the known valuable sort that pass through his establishment, suddenly you realize that already you may know too much. As you learn more and become part of gossiping circles and partisan allegiances, things do become more dangerous. On the one hand, as an extraneous stranger, you are told about poppy husk trading routes or the geography of burgled homes—information normally restricted to the immediate family or to members of a thieving group, people with an interest in retaining the secrecy of such information. But at first you are irrelevant. And as long as the people are convinced of one’s disinterest in either policing or politicking, one can be told the otherwise unmentionable because such knowledge is relevant only in a particular context. That is why foreign fieldworkers may often thrive. And so might women who in the eyes of local beholders pose no threat—perhaps the reason for my relatively painless acquisition of criminal files, Village Crime Note Books and official police descriptions of ‘criminal tribes.’ In contrast, a fellow researcher with suspiciously nice shoes and an uncanny moustache was repeatedly denied attempts to view the more straightforward statistical tables of the State Waterworks Department.

But if one is getting anywhere with her research, one’s level of local involvement will change and so will the casual swaps of locally meaningful stories. What is easily told to you upon arrival will become restricted knowledge as the *chāi* shop keepers notice that you keep hanging around. Suspicion will replace initial trust. To use a ditty from Middle Eastern wisdom, ‘when you speak about thirty words [of Arabic] it’s *tat’kallam ‘arabi kwayyis* (you speak Arabic well), when you speak two hundred it’s *‘awiz ayy bi-zabd* (what *exactly* are you after here)?’ (ibid: 114; emphasis in original). A scenario of the sort was once described by M. N. Srinivas, who

frequented the village *chāi* shop feeling that ‘it was [his] work to pick up gossip.’ A friend, who was not a regular at the shop, soon admonished him against the visits, which he thought were becoming potentially dangerous (Srinivas 1976: 23).<sup>3</sup> Srinivas was slipping out of his and into another circle of trust. Indeed, as one enters circles of trust, one becomes subject to the distrust of those excluded from these circles.

Of course in due time, as the structure of ins and outs (the circles of trust and their boundaries), become increasingly palpable, the partisanship into which you are forced and which makes you suspicious becomes the portal into the community. In fact, it is when you become suspect, you realize that you finally matter. Suspicion, after all, is the other side of confidence. But no matter how many times you return to the field, how many weddings you attend, or how many Diwālī cards you send, you are bound to misjudge allegiances. In reflecting on his research in North Wales, Ronald Frankenberg wrote that he could never fully partake in the gossip that was shared with him as his attempts of criticism would frequently be intercepted by a ‘hey, that’s my cousin you are talking about!’ (1957: 21).<sup>4</sup> Early on in my research I mentioned to a local advocate that a former MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) was thought extraordinarily corrupt by some villagers. He quickly retorted that the people are ignorant of the benefits brought by the party to which both the MLA and, as I consequently learned, the advocate belonged. The awkward silence that ensued spoke of more than any words that could have followed. My attempt to establish trust by revealing a ‘secret’ fell through the gap between discordant partisan affiliations. I sided with the wrong circle.

This discomfiting image of fieldwork experience of course unfairly depicts the ethnographer as an invader of privacies and the manipulator of indigenous ignorance. Quite on the contrary, it is the fieldworker whose ‘privacy’ is most often on display, who is pulled into conflicting circles of trust, and who is the classic ignoramus in the field, ultimately dependent on her informants for resources, introductions and information. One need not be an anthropologist to know that hospitality can be a form of control, as many visitors of Indian families often do. Sherry Ortner, for instance, has discussed the heated politics of deference and hospitality among Sherpas in Nepal (1978: Ch.1).<sup>5</sup> This is not unique to the South Asian experience and in certain parts of the Middle East there is a similar ‘rhetoric of foreigner as guest or protégé, ideally dependent and controlled, such that fieldworkers are anomalous unless immobile or well connected’ (Dresch 2000: 115).<sup>6</sup> Of course such dependence on the hosts can be transformed to serve the researcher’s purpose, the work of Whitney Kelting and Ann Gold being examples of successful

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<sup>3</sup> Srinivas, Mysore Narasimhachar. 1976. *The Remembered Village*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Frankenberg, Ronald. 1957. *Village on the Border : A Social Study of Religion, Politics and Football in a North Wales Community*. London: Cohen & West.

<sup>5</sup> Ortner, Sherry B. 1978. *Sherpas through Their Rituals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the politics of hospitality see Shryock, Andrew. 2004. ‘The New Jordanian Hospitality: House, Host, and Guest in the Culture of Public Display.’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46/1:35-62.

adaptation to such circumstances (Kelting 2001 and Gold 2002).<sup>7</sup> In my research, however, when critical information comes from a variety of competing sources—different Kanjar families (some belonging to different ‘gangs’), policemen, politicians, advocates—confining one’s allegiances to one family or even a single community is not an option.

Having established reasonable rapport with a family, particularly in such sensitive fieldwork circumstances, I was reluctant to risk reputation for fear of losing trust. This apprehension had to do with the relationship with my jealous hosts and the expectation of mutual responsibilities that it implied. In a matter of days information was handed to me and the assumption that I would keep this knowledge within the given circle in certain ways bound me to the family. I did eventually follow the advice of a friend and fellow anthropologist, who once voiced regret about failing to risk his reputation earlier and more often, and made my way into other tents. Fortunately, as a pale foreigner I was expected to commit the worst of *faux pas* not maliciously, but out of ignorance (or stupidity, as it is locally known). I had the license to go against the will of my hosts and to visit with no grave consequences the disreputable families who drink and fight too much. Nevertheless, whenever I came back from my excursions, I was inevitably asked, ‘so you went to see *them*?’ I would stare back with concerted blankness and the misdemeanor was soon pardoned as *angrez* (‘English,’ as all pale foreigners are known in India) imbecility. If in this self-portrait I appear to be overly calculating, we must remember that in India, no less than at home, intimacies are not mutually exclusive. To bring this closer to home, one only needs to consider the nineteenth century ‘literature of manners’ to be reminded that unless one negotiates the social surroundings, she is an artless bore.<sup>8</sup>

As I made my rounds of other tents, their residents likewise assured me that it was not a good idea to visit others. The very women who huddled together to gossip by night badmouthed one another by day. Girls who shared giggle-ridden discussions of everyone and everything (doubtlessly not excluding me), in private produced accounts of their friends not to be repeated in public. What unnerved me is the realization that I was forced into circles of gossip and that by witnessing the badmouthing of others I unavoidably became a silent accomplice. Each time I built a relationship, secrets were told; but the secrets created allegiances that translated into betrayal of others in whose slander I tacitly took part. But such treacherous intimacy seemed as the standard mode of communication. Moments after relating to me in a hushed but meaningful tone that Swathi likes boys, Santosh would be leaning on Swathi’s shoulder engrossed in new yarns. Perhaps by now Santosh was aware that I too was keen on boys. The same breaching and forging of allegiances among men is the regular matter of *chai* shop conversations. Of course Christopher Bayly points out in his *Empire and Information* that in India separate, but coexisting fields of knowledge were an integral part of pre-colonial polity, and it is the dichotomy of private

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<sup>7</sup>Kelting, Mary Whitney. 2001. *Singing to the Jinas : Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.; Gold, Ann Grodzins, and Bhoju Ram Gujar. 2002. *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows : Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan*. Durham N.C. ; London: Duke University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Tandon, Bharat. 2003. *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*. London: Anthem.

(or escret) *versus* public knowledge imposed by British administration that fit so awkwardly into the scheme (1996).<sup>9</sup>

The terms used to describe such politicking naturally differ because it is both a transgression (when referred to as ‘gossip’) and a skill (when it is ‘politics’). When women do this, it is ‘gossip’ (*gapchap*), what takes place among men in *chāi* shops is ‘conversation’ (*bāitchit*) and among statesmen it is certainly ‘partisan politics.’ Of course the difference between ‘gossip’ and ‘politics’ is of degree rather than kind as both construct relationships of inclusion and excision and both assume an air of secrecy—of something shared by allies and denied to others. As Lila, a girl who became my close companion put it, ‘*Sahaliyan* (close female friends) talk about special things. If I tell you something special, then you know that I am your *sahali*; and if you don’t tell this to others, then I also know that you are my *sahali*.’

### **Hidden knowledge, shifting allegiances**

As Lila rightly observes, secrets are doubly ‘special.’ The knowledge guarded by the secret is privileged and so are the relationships that are formed. The two—the special content and the social context of secrets—are mutually sustaining. A secret is shared with some and withheld from others. It becomes ‘special’ for, as Georg Simmel put it, ‘what is denied to many must have special value’ (1950 (1908): 332).<sup>10</sup> And the ‘special value’ of this knowledge makes those who are ‘in’ on it special by association. Santosh tells me a secret about Swathi, I am let in on ‘special information,’ Santosh and I become allies, and (perhaps most curiously) I form a new relationship with Swathi. I now know something about her that I should not, something that I cannot admit to in front of her. I become an intruder (the information was not volunteered to me by Swathi herself) and hence suspect upon discovery. So, I keep my mouth shut in front of Swathi about her fancies because there is nothing like invaded intimacy to affect separation.<sup>11</sup> Most literature on the social functions of secrecy tends to emphasize the divisive nature of secrets (see for instance Simmel 1950, Mendelson 1967, Deleuze and Guattari 1988, Jenkins 1999, and Taussig 1999).<sup>12</sup> But secrets also create circles of intimacy. Those who share the special knowledge of the secret enter this circle that is maintained by mutual expectations and common knowledge of and responsibility to the secret. Of course what often matters is not whether the content of a secret is something actually hidden or in fact even ‘true,’ but the secrecy of the matter. It is essential for the keepers of secrets to maintain the exclusivity of their knowledge because the idea of something hidden, of a mystery, is what makes the ‘secret society’

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<sup>9</sup> Bayly, C. A. 1996. *Empire and Information : Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Simmel, Georg, and Kurt H. Wolff. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.

<sup>11</sup> Rape comes to mind as an appropriate analogue for this dynamic of intimacy and distance, where something that is normally desired when voluntary context becomes a powerful source of repulsion and division when forced.

<sup>12</sup> Mendelson, E. 1967. "Primitive Secret Societies," in *Secret Societies*. Edited by N. MacKenzie, pp. 20-37. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.; Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.; Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press; Jenkins, Timothy. 1999. *Religion in English Everyday Life : An Ethnographic Approach*. New York ; Oxford: Berghahn Books.; and Taussig, Michael T. 1999. *Defacement : Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

‘special.’<sup>13</sup> Perhaps that is why so many ‘Kanjars secrets’ I learned from my Rajput friends were told in a theatrical whisper and with an air of utter confidentiality. It matters little that these ‘secrets’ are often unsolicited, eagerly told and even imposed on the listener. What does matter is that they are described as ‘the unknown.’

Secrets are of course social things (remember that Robinson Crusoe had no secrets until he discovered others on his island), but to suggest, as does Michael Taussig (1999: 7-8), that the secrecy of all concealed knowledge is an invention and essentially a function of relations of power,<sup>14</sup> is to ignore the significance of certain information that may have good reasons to be hidden. The tales Santosh tells about Swathi and Rajputs tell about Kanjars are secrets of others. They are the stuff of ‘gossip.’ And while there is a pretense of disguise, they thrive not *despite*,<sup>15</sup> but on the contrary *on* their exposure. In fact, their power lies precisely in possibilities of their revelation. But there are other types of secrets—the family secrets. These secrets are not about others, but about their keepers. They contain knowledge that must be hidden. Families have honor to preserve and politicians have reputations to maintain.<sup>16</sup> These are not imaginings about others, but ‘truths’ about the self (whether individual or group ‘self’) to be watchfully guarded. The content of such secrets is significant because it tells us something about the relationships that necessitate their concealment. Unlike the secrets of gossip that construct relationships as actors want them to be, family secrets expose relationships as they of necessity are. These are family bonds, political collusions, and extralegal alliances. These secrets are fragile. They are vulnerable to revelation, which relies on the shifting interests, transitory trust and fickle fidelities.

It is of course the family secrets that anthropologists try to get at: the ‘who-thinks-whats’ and the ‘who-marries-whoms.’ They are the ‘plain stuff’ of ethnography—family relations, household economics, religious and political affinities, village disputes.<sup>17</sup> The problem, if and when you learn such secrets, is in both juggling them while in the field and writing about them

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of a close relationship between secrecy and power is neither new nor unique to Foucault’s discussions of knowledge. More than two centuries ago Marquis De Condorcet pointed out that retention of knowledge is an instrument of social control and (in accord with the concerns of his times) an impediment to human progress (Condorcet, Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat. 1955 (1795). *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.). In 1950 Georg Simmel also pointed out that secret societies are created for the purpose of retaining control and power. Mendelson (1967) and more recently Jenkins (1999) and Taussig (1999) have discussed the socially divisive nature of secrecy. But to speak of secrets in terms of ‘power’ is to obscure the complexities of secrecy with a gratuitous term.

<sup>14</sup> There is of course a dimension of power to historical uses of secrecy in South Asia. As David Washbrook (among others) has pointed out, exclusive expertise (ritual, linguistic, occupational) has been a mode of maintaining the social order (Washbrook, David. 1991. "to Each a Language of His Own": Language, Culture, and Society in Colonial India," in *Language, History and Class*. Edited by P. J. Corfield, pp. 179-203. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.).

<sup>15</sup> As Jenkins suggests (1999: 226).

<sup>16</sup> The significance of preservation of family honor in South Asia has been repeatedly highlighted. See for instance Dube, S. C. 1955. *Indian Village*. New York: Cornell University Press., Kapadia, K. M. 1955. *Marriage and Family in India*. London: G. Kumerlege Oxford University Press.; Srinivas 1976; and Roland, Alan. 1988. *In Search of Self in India and Japan : Toward a Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press., p. 211.

<sup>17</sup> Yet somehow it always seems that ‘the more mundane and empirical the published facts ... the more collecting them resemble[s] clandestine intrigue’ (Dresch 2000: 110).

afterwards because a secret is by definition that which is not to be told. Reflecting on his fieldwork in South Wales, Colin Bell recollects relating something he learned about one to another. Unsurprisingly, ‘the communicability of [his] informants began to dwindle when they realized that [he] would also talk to other people about them’ (1969: 139).<sup>18</sup> The things he was told were obviously not to be repeated as they incriminated both those who related them and those who were their subjects.

But the only way that one can learn about Kanjars from others is in secret or in a *chup chap* (hush-hush) voice because Kanjars are hidden knowledge, but paradoxically so. They are a dissonant ‘other’—social, moral, and categorical. They live on the outskirts of towns and villages and do things unsuitable for decent folk. They sell *dāṁū* to the villagers’ husbands and steal goats from their neighbors. Villagers conscious of their reputation often avoid even mentioning their name. In cities people were often shocked when I pronounced the word because Kanjars are indeed proverbially bad. It is common knowledge that Kanjars are a ‘criminal caste’ and parents commonly say to their ill-behaved children: ‘*kanjaron ki taraf mat karo!*’ (don’t be a Kanjar to me! or more literally, don’t act the Kanjar way!). They are a categorical other—the other side of propriety—described as dirty, dangerous, and morally loose (their fondness for meat and spirits—not unlike that of many Rajputs—serving as obvious proof to this). But they are also often described as valiant, truthful, and somehow supernaturally endowed. As one of my informants from the circle of Rajputs I describe in the beginning said, ‘Nobody has been able to penetrate the Kanjar community because they speak in a coded language, walk faster than others and have a martial bearing. I know everything about their secrets, but *how* I know these things, *that* I will not tell.’

But everybody does know about them and this knowledge, however fantastic, is to a certain extent rooted in their encounters with Kanjars. Certain villagers have regular interactions with Kanjars from whom they buy *dāṁū* (country liquor) and chickens at a lower price, or with whom some renegade Brahmans like to share a drink and a bite of goat masala in the privacy of Kanjar seclusion. There are others who benefit more extensively than the wayward Brahmans from Kanjar activities. Some local landowners have inherited their grandfathers’ Kanjar ‘clients.’ A young Rajput told me that a Kanjar of my acquaintance was employed by his family and has helped his father and grandfather to ‘push down others who stuck their heads up too high.’ Of course such patronage should not come as a sensation as there is plentiful evidence of historical patron-client relationships between landowners and various thieving groups.<sup>19</sup> Kanjars have also

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<sup>18</sup> Bell, Colin. 1969. *Middle Class Families : Social and Geographical Mobility*. London  
Routledge & Kegan Paul

<sup>19</sup> There is a long history of collaboration between landholders and thieving bands. The thieving groups were used both as informal police and as a way of revenue extraction. Having the support of landed authorities, they carried significant political weight. A passage from Ziauddin Bari’s *History of Firoz Shah* (written about 1356 CE)

mentions that around 1200 CE some  $\square$ hags were captured in Delhi. Curiously enough, the Sultan did not have these killed, but deported them to Lucknow where they were set free (Elliot, H. M., and John Dowson. 1952. *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians. The Muhammadan Period. The Posthumous Papers of H. M. Elliot*. Calcutta: S.

Gupta (India). v. III, p. 141). British officials have been aware of collusions between landholders and thieves. In

done well for themselves. In fact the Kanjar who helped my Rajput friend's family 'push down those who stuck their head too high' received an eighty-*bīghā*<sup>20</sup> plot of land for his services, for the cultivation of which he hires other Kanjars. Another Kanjar from Madhya Pradesh has managed to invest his earnings in a liquor factory in Pune, which he now owns. Beside the factory he is also running a government-sponsored NGO that works toward 'Kanjar upliftment.' It does not come as a surprise that leitmotifs run through various descriptions of Kanjars and that many people are well aware of their doings, although of course avertedly so. Images of Kanjars and other 'criminal communities' are not simply local projections of colonial categories, as some critics of 'Orientalism' would like to argue.<sup>21</sup> Rather, they reflect local patterns of knowledge—a combination of mythologized ignorance and disguised involvement.

The paradox of the 'Kanjar secret' lies in the breach between the 'common knowledge' of Kanjars and the idea that 'Kanjar' is a moral and categorical error. Kanjars are a part of local lives not only as intruders, but also as partners. For the villagers, the Kanjars exist, but faultily so. Not only they, but perhaps more significantly their own contacts with them, is what shouldn't be. But when that which shouldn't be is, it becomes a particular kind of secret—a *public secret*. It is knowledge that is somehow shameful and hence must be disguised, must be a secret. It is a kind

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1774 Warren Hastings referred to *zamīndārs* as the 'nursing mothers' of criminal groups (O'Malley, Lewis Sydney Steward. 1925. *History of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa under British Rule*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot., pp. 305-6)

and in 1843 William Sleeman observed of the politics in Madhya Pradesh: 'There is hardly a single Hindoo military

clan in Bundelkhand or Gwalior which does not keep a gang of robbers of some kind or the other and consider it as a very valuable and legitimate source of revenue' (Sleeman, W. H., and Vincent Arthur Smith. 1893. *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*. Westminster: A. Constable and Company.) In explaining the difficulties faced by the Thuggee and Dacoity department, one officer noted that 'the connivance of the local landlords ... made detection difficult. The local zamindars and officials protected the Thugs in return for a share of the proceeds' (OIOC. Indian Police Collection: Subject Files. B. R. E. La Bouchardiere. 'A Note on the Thuggee and Dacoity Department 1829-1904'. To 1904. Mss Eur/F161/172). Colonial legislature designed to deal with 'criminal communities' reflected colonial anxieties about the collusion of landlords and criminals. The earliest example, regulation XXII of 1793, obliged *zamīndārs* to prevent traffic in stolen property and to assist the police in its recovery of suspects. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (and the series of amended acts that followed) not only made provisions for landholder participation in policing of the 'criminal tribes,' but also made their non-collaboration punishable by fines and imprisonment. For more references to the history of relationships between village elites, landed authorities and thieving groups, see Gordon, Stewart N. 1969. 'Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and Sate-Formation in 18th Century Malwa.' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 6/4:403-429.; Nigam, Sanjay. 1990a. 'Disciplining and Policing the 'Criminals by Birth', Part 1: The Making of a Colonial Stereotype--the Criminal Tribes and Castes of North India' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27/2:131-164.; Nigam, Sanjay. 1990b. 'Disciplining and Policing the 'Criminals by Birth', Part 2: The Development of a Disciplinary System, 1871-1900.' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27/3:257-287.; Radhakrishna, Meena. 1992. 'Surveillance and Settlement under the Criminal Tribes Act in Madras.' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 29/2:171-198.; and Singha, Radhika. 1993. "Providential Circumstances': The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation' *Modern Asian Studies* 27/1:83-146. More recently, a sociologist working on group crime in Madhya Pradesh observed that 'the ruthless gangs of brigands' are supported by landholders and other village authorities (Khan, M. Z. 1973. *Salient Aspects of the Problems of Dacoity in Chambal Valley*, University of Sagar., cited in Jatar, D. P., and M. Z. Khan. 1980. *The Problem of Dacoity in Bundelkhand and the Chambal Valley*. New Delhi: S. Chand.)

<sup>20</sup> A measure of land equaling 5/8 of an acre.

<sup>21</sup> For this view see activists of the Orientalist critique such as Inden, Ronald B. 1990. *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. and Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001. *Castes of Mind : Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press., among many others.

of collective ‘family secret’—something that its keepers have in common, but have a shared interest in protecting from exposure. Yet at the same time this secret can be projected publicly, but only fantastically so. Public representations of Kanjars—the ‘Kanjars secrets’ so willingly offered to me—are of course phantasmagorias, for the unwanted must be distorted. They are nevertheless an integral part of a shared discourse not just about Kanjars, criminality or otherness, but perhaps more importantly about the self.

In a strange way Kanjars are much like the Greek plate smashing practice described by Michael Herzfeld. While a source of external embarrassment (in front of the more ‘properly civilized’ Germans, for instance), it provides insiders with what Herzfeld calls ‘cultural intimacy’—an internal commonality (1997: 3).<sup>22</sup> Kanjars—not just what they denote, but how they are involved with others—are indeed an embarrassment, something that is either swept under the carpet or dramatized in the popular discourse. Bayly has rightly suggested that distortions and exaggerations are not necessarily Orientalist fantasies about the Other. They are often reflections of ignorance coupled with a degree of involvement. Here I will add that it is not only ignorance, but a degree of knowledge that can produce distorted images of the Other. Just think of ethnic stereotypes, which rise from a combination of contact and ignorance. And if there is indeed such a thing as a ‘family secret’—knowledge both held in common and left unsaid, it becomes easier to imagine that Kanjars may be much more integral to local life than locals, colonial officials, and critics of colonialism would like to admit.<sup>23</sup>

### Secrets revealed

Popular imagery of Kanjars as ‘the toughest criminals’ penetrate the official discourse no less thoroughly than did the notion of the ‘criminal tribe’ under the British, although less obviously so. However, the Kanjars’ nominal ‘de-notification’ from their previous status of a ‘criminal tribe’ has created a legal vacuum, which is filled from the lower administrative levels with stereotypes cast as expertise and consequently as official knowledge. Legally, Kanjars (along with other ‘ex-criminal castes’) are a non-entity described in negative terms as an ‘ex-criminal,’ ‘denotified’ or (better even) *vimuktu* (‘liberated’) caste. While local monographs on the ‘ex-criminal castes’ call for their ‘upliftment,’<sup>24</sup> administrative descriptions of Kanjars reinforce the idea of their criminality through locally defined modes of empirical knowledge.

The ‘criminal tribe’—the people and the term—have become a legal artifact. The notion of hereditary criminality attached to the label ‘criminal tribe’ has been formally exorcised from the

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<sup>22</sup> Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York ; London: Routledge.

<sup>23</sup> Meena Radhakrishna and others writing about ‘ex-criminal tribes’ as ‘the other India,’ in terms however concertedly opposed to the colonial, continue the categorical distinctions between tribal/villager, nomadic/settled, prince/marauder.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Bhargava, Bhawani Shanker. 1949. *The Criminal Tribes: A Socio-Economic Study of the Principal Criminal Tribes and Castes in Northern India*. Lucknow: Published for the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society United Provinces by the Universal Publishers.; Garg, R. P. 1965. *Dacoit Problem in Chambal Valley; a Sociological Study*. Varanasi: Gandhian Institute of Studies.; Kapadia, K. M. 1952. ‘The Criminal Tribes of India.’ *Sociological Bulletin* 1.; and Shah, Popatlal Govendlal. 1967. *Vimuktu Jatis: Denotified Communities in Western India*. Bombay: Gujarat Research Society.

legal discourse, as a colonial ghost that, as a chief justice of the Madras High Court, M. V. Subba Rao declared, ‘offend[s] the conscience of progressive India ... [and] ... disgraces our statute book’ (D’Souza 2001: 57).<sup>25</sup> In the constructions of independent India the idea of a criminal tribe was seen as an assault on the legal and ideological foundations of the new nation-state. In 1936 in a speech given in Nellore, Jawaharlal Nehru said: ‘I am aware that the monstrous provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act [of 1871] ... constitute a negation of civil liberty ... [A]n attempt [should] be made to have the Act removed from the statute book. No tribe [can] be classed as criminal as such and the whole principle [is] out of consonance with all civilized principles of criminal justice and treatment of offenders’ (ibid). The legal consciousness and the ‘statute book’ had to be purged of the memory a century of systematic repression of criminalized communities.

In 1952 the term ‘criminal tribe’ was removed from the statute book and the Criminal Tribes Act was replaced by the Habitual Offenders’ Act. Of course the provisions of the new act virtually reproduce those of the Criminal Tribes Act and today most registered ‘habitual offenders’ are those previously identified as ‘criminal tribes.’ What’s even more interesting is that the new act echoes both the stipulations and the language of the Habitual Criminals’ Bill, which was passed in England in 1869 and served as the original template for the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act in India. But what’s to be done when police records routinely refer to communities like Kanjars, Sansis or Pardhis as ‘criminal castes’? In 1998 the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh lamented in regards to Pardhis, a ‘denotified tribe,’ that the state’s educational programs had little effect on ‘their *criminal instincts*’ (*The Telegraph*, 31 July 1998; emphasis mine)? The *Compendium Concerning the Kanjar Gangs Resident in Chittaurgarh District*,<sup>26</sup> a kind of Kanjar ethnography kept on file in the district police office, opens with characteristic blitheness:

*The Kanjar caste is a criminal caste. From ancient times these people have roamed about committing group crime [including] theft, roadside burglary, looting, and dacoity [gang robbery]. They are a caste that is addicted to crime. They are very difficult to find because they can run very fast and when they commit a robbery, they disappear into the jungle or cross over the [state] border.*

*The Compendium* proceeds to describe the deities worshipped, garb worn and foods consumed by Kanjars, who, as the document claims, are hopelessly ‘addicted to crime.’ It goes on to mention miraculous bone setting practices, which involve an overnight immersion of the patient in a barrel of cow manure and describes a practice of rearing lizards, used in wall-climbing burglary. A segment entitled *riwāz aur ādat* (‘customs and habits’) states that a Kanjar youth is considered unmarried until he partakes in a minimum of two burglaries.

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<sup>25</sup> D’Souza, Dilip. 2001. *Branded by Law : Looking at India's Denotified Tribes*. New Delhi ;: Penguin Books.

<sup>26</sup> *Jila chittaurgarh mein rahane wale Kanjar gaing sambandhi kampendiyam*. [*Compendium Concerning the Kanjar Gangs Resident in Chittaurgarh District*]. The *Compendium* is compiled and updated by the district police office staff by the order of the District Superintendent of Police. As the police clerk explained, its contents combines information collected from Kanjar informants by officers designated as ‘Kanjar experts’ and ‘common knowledge’ about Kanjars gathered by junior officers during their raids of and excursions to Kanjar settlements.

The same images ran as leitmotifs through the ‘secrets’ related to me by others—landowners, advocates, farmers. It hardly matters that on the rare occasions when Kanjars do catch lizards, they boil rather than breed them, and that cow dung is used exclusively to plaster walls rather than set bones. The consistency of terms and images: the recurrence of lizards, ‘addiction to crime,’ supernatural healing techniques, and supernatural endowment in descriptions of Kanjars by farmers, state ministers, local ethnographers, and the police is remarkable. Glimpses into the process of collecting such information are illuminating of the ways popular projections about Kanjars reinforce themselves through local forms of empirical knowledge.

Village Crime Note Books, (known in police circles as VCNBs) provide a curious record of the methodologies of police ‘ethnographies.’ A characteristic section of one VCNB reads as follows:

*August 9, 1995*

*Today I came to village N to investigate case # 264, 265/95 and I inspected the area. The village people believe that X associates himself with Kanjars and takes their stolen goods. This will be investigated. The entries are complete and correct.  
Signed, A, the SHO (Senior House Officer) of N thānā (police station).*

*October 12, 1996*

*We raided the area together with the SHO of M village. Establishment of a police chauki [outpost] is most essential. The entries are complete and correct.  
Signed, B, the SHO of N thānā.*

*December 17, 1996*

*SHO Z checked the area during his patrolling session and blocked off all passable roads for the inspection. The entries are complete and correct.  
Signed, SHO C, N thānā.*

*September 12, 1997*

*Today the Kanjar settlement was raided for the arrest of Y. He was not found. Most Kanjars run away upon the approach of the police. The entries are complete and correct.  
Signed, SHO C, N thānā.*

*December 16, 1998*

*Together with the police force SHO C came in search of the criminal Z in relation to case # 273/98 with accusation under IPC section 379. He raided the settlement and made the arrest. He checked for the presence of the criminal X, who was found to be present in the village. But we heard that visited town N. The entries are complete and correct.  
Signed, SHO C, N thānā.*

*August 13, 1999*

*Today we made an inspection round of this village. People of all castes live here and there are 2 Kanjar settlements near the village. Kanjars are mainly involved in property-*

*related crime. Two constables from the police station have been temporarily deputed here by the order of the Chittaurgarh SP [Superintendent of Police]. Villagers are instructed to make patrol rounds together with the police at night. The entries are complete and correct. Signed, SHO C, N thānā.*

*May 11, 2000*

*Today we made a patrolling round of the village, talked to the village people and collected information from reliable sources. The entries are complete and correct.*

*Signed, SHO C, N thānā.*

The primary sources for the contents of this chronicle are the stories villagers tell about the Kanjars. The constables inevitably ‘hear that so and so visited town N,’ ‘the village people believe that so and so associates with the Kanjars’ and so on. Of course the information is always gathered from ‘reliable sources’ and the entries are invariably ‘complete and correct.’ This particular VCNB (which documents thirty-four years of patrolling one village) records a single instance of actual interaction with the Kanjar community. A particularly earnest SHO reported speaking to the Kanjar community about the evils of theft and alcohol consumption. Otherwise, the standard mode of interaction with Kanjars, as implied in the VCNB, is via patrolling rounds and raids, upon which the settlement quite naturally scatters.

The majority of rural police staff in Rajasthan comes from the communities of their employment (*Statistical Abstract, Rajasthan 2002: 304*).<sup>27</sup> These are typically men of the dominant village castes. In the case of this particular village all but one head officer was a Rajput. The policemen gather ‘Kanjar knowledge’ from ‘reliable sources’—typically people of their own circle, not unlike my earlier mentioned whisky drinking friends. An interesting twist to this methodology adds the involvement of villagers in policing, which creates a system of informants that turns individual grievances into official truths.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that the record of village complaints contains as many objections to others conspiring with Kanjars as direct accusations of Kanjars themselves. Such testimonies reveal the depth of Kanjar involvement in local politics and economics. But perhaps even more evocative are the official silences about such matters.

### **The silences**

The VCNBs of villages that border Kanjar settlements unambiguously read as records of Kanjar crime only. Listen to this description of a village in another VCNB:

*This area belonged to the jagīrdār of the X □ hikānā. The jagīrdār used to live here. He used to collect land revenue (lagān). But after the jagīrdārī system was abolished, the lagān*

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<sup>27</sup> Anon. 2002. *Statistical Abstract, Rajasthan*. Jaipur: Directorate of Economics and Statistics.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the problems of understaffing and corruption in the IPS, see for instance Verma, Arvind. 1999. ‘Cultural Roots of Police Corruption in India.’ *Policing: The International Review of Police Development and Management*. 22/3: 264-278, or Bayley, David H. 1983. ‘The Police and Political Order in India.’ *Asian Survey* 23/4:484-496.

*was collected by the tahasildār (village revenue collector). This area is 300 years old. People of the following castes reside in this area: Rājput, Brahman, Bālāi, Regar, Rebāri, Dhakar, Sutār [goldsmith], Nāi, and Kanjar. The Kanjars live in the southern and western corners of the village. These people are involved in burglary and cattle theft. They kill and steal goats. In the village there is a primary school, the panchāyat (village council) headquarters, a patwāri (accountant) office, and other government offices. Agriculture is the local people's main occupation. Kanjars are involved in crime.*

Other crime is represented by the anonymous IPC/case numbers that are scribbled into the charts in the backs of the VCNBs. Needless to say, other crime that is beyond goat theft does happen. In fact, the village described above, is locally notorious for illicit poppy growth and distribution. But whereas Kanjar criminality is proverbial—it is common public knowledge, farmer crimes are family secrets not meant for mention.

At four o'clock in the morning on March 13, 1991, a mob of almost five thousand local farmers, enraged by regular petty theft, attacked a nearby Kanjar settlement. Five houses were burnt and eleven people were clubbed to death. A major scandal ensued, resulting in a personal visit by Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi, to whom it was reported that 'dālits were attacked by members of upper castes.' Families of victims were allotted compensation in a public gathering that was organized in the village. 'Justice' was restored, village sins of 'dālīt abuse' atoned, and Kanjar votes secured by the Congress Party. The first entry that appears in the VCNB following the incident is dated April 27 (more than a month later). The affair is mentioned, but the murderers remain anonymous. Instead, the notebook observes that a Kanjar X (former leader of the settlement 'gang') is recovering quickly from the paralysis that resulted from the injuries. Over the following decade and a half his criminal record is replete with notes on the progress of his speedy recovery and speculations about his continued criminal activity. As the Note Book relates, although he can barely leave his bed, he is known to 'entice other Kanjars to continue committing crime and arranges their thieving excursions through his connections.' Fifteen years later, the case appeal is still in the court and the assassins belonging to a dominant farmer caste, some of whom are related to the local MLA, continue to plow their fields of poppies.

While the constables diligently collect public expertise on Kanjar life, sub-inspectors and Senior House Officers omit other sensitive information. As I discovered, the chronologies placed at the front of Village Crime Notebooks were often heavily expurgated versions of 'field notes' collected by the constables. In the back of the VCNB, from which I quote earlier, I found the unexpurgated version of the Note Book. One set of such notes consisted of the testimony of a village landholder who pointed out another's collusion with local Kanjars.<sup>29</sup> The exclusion of this testimony from the official record made me follow the lead. It turned out that the Senior House Officer bought a plot of land from the landowner reported to be in collusion with Kanjars shortly before the testimony was collected. Naturally, one never wants to be rash with such information

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<sup>29</sup> The note was dated September 11, 1997, the day preceding the laconic official entry in the Notebook, which reads: 'Today the Kanjar settlement was raided for the arrest of Y. He was not found. Most Kanjars run away upon the approach of the police. The entries are complete and correct.'

because these are secrets that offend too many people who matter meant to remain in the family circle. Court records contain more secrets of the sort: testimonies of farmers and landholders accusing others of dealings with Kanjars and evidence given by Rajputs and *sonārs* (goldsmiths) attesting to the ‘good character’ of their Kanjar neighbors.

There are also other important personages involved the Kanjar drama. These are ‘Kanjar Experts’ (as they are known among the police) that are scattered throughout rural *thānās* and *chaukis*. They are policemen of varying rank, but usually with extended experience in the service, who are responsible for providing help in collecting information about Kanjar activities. The Kanjar Experts are a sort of modern-day William Sleemans—resourceful and well respected by colleagues for their valor and wit. The standard procedure of acquiring expertise consists primarily of ‘convincing’ (as one sub-inspector put it) some Kanjars to be informants for the police. To make sure that I understood what he meant by ‘convincing,’ the sub-inspector pointed to a whip that hung on his bedroom wall. ‘Hunter,’ he said, the first English word I had heard that evening. The best informants are of course those most heavily involved in criminal activity—active thieves or better even, gang leaders. This system is patterned on the system of *hag* approvers established by Sleeman in early-19<sup>th</sup> century under the scheme of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, which made ‘use of informers who turned state’s evidence’ (Cohn 2004: 10)<sup>30</sup> for the Thuggee and Dacoity Department. The curious thing about the institution of ‘Kanjar experts’ is that it places Kanjars into a field of expertise, that is specialized knowledge—something akin to Sanskrit texts or academic jargon.

How one learns about such systems of informants, the methods of ‘persuasion,’ and the oblique harboring of crime through a systematic dismissal of offenders and haphazard accusations of others is a secret itself, much like the rest of fieldwork ‘methodology.’ For it is the family secrets: unsorted records piled in the local accounting offices, notes tucked into the backs of Village Crime Note Books, and things mentioned only within circles of trust (or complete estrangement), that anthropologists write about. The question here is not in whether to write about these things—because we inadvertently do—but in how to write about them? Indeed, the secrets brought from in the field can be disarming. With an uneasy feeling of research blurring into betrayal, one replaces names with Xs and Ys, abstains from indicating villages, and protects the dissertation with passwords and ‘by permission only’ notes. There is of course no easy answer to this and the ‘ethical anxieties’ in anthropology reflect the dilemma. Perhaps what ultimately distinguishes ethnography from sensationalist muckraking journalism is the idea that the larger project lies not in breaking a sensation, but on the contrary, in blurring the contrasts in what appears to be sensational and revealing the opaquely mundane in the secrets, mysteries and conspiracies that seem to fill our worlds.

## **They’re there**

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<sup>30</sup> Cohn, Bernard S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge : The British in India*. Princeton ; Chichester: Princeton University Press.

The current positioning of Kanjars and other communities known to be ‘criminal,’ is strangely echoed by George W. Bush, who in a rather prophetic speech given some five years ago said: ‘[before] it was a dangerous world, and you knew exactly who they were. It was us versus them, and it was clear who “them” was. Today, we are not so sure who they are, but we know they’re there’ (cited in Beckley 2002: 3).<sup>31</sup> Since their legal ‘liberation,’ public apprehensions of Kanjars have moved from a kind of Cold War paranoia where everyone ‘knew exactly who *they* were’ to its modern variant where ‘they’ are still most certainly ‘there,’ but how to define ‘them’ is no longer so clear.

As I hope to have shown, Kanjars have been and remain an integral part of rural life in certain places in Rajasthan. And the local people are aware of their presence. Yet whereas before it was clear who ‘they’ were—a ‘criminal tribe’ as defined in colonial law, today Kanjars have become legally invisible. They are described in opposition to what they were known as previously. They are no longer notified, but denotified; not criminal, but ex-criminal or liberated. Strangely enough, such erasure of their status as a ‘criminal tribe’ has made them vulnerable in a new way. Whereas before their persecution as a ‘criminal tribe’ was openly conducted and, however atrocious, was subject to public critique, today, the abuses continue, but they can no longer be openly opposed. Although erased from the statute book, the ‘criminal tribe’ or the *zabardast badmāsh* exists in locally valid ‘truths.’ As I have tried to show, these truths are closely tied to the discourse that is explicit and public. Of course that which becomes public is always selected knowledge—one that sensationalizes the matter and excites the press. Most surface ‘secrets’ is what makes the newspapers and enlivens drinking conversations. But to dismiss public distortions as private cultural fantasies is to ignore the actual insights that lie beneath this body of knowledge.

The production of identities meant to be public, that have publicity as part of their function,’ writes Andrew Shryock,

*create, of necessity, a special terrain of things, relations, and activities that cannot themselves be public but are essential aspects of whatever reality and value public things might possess. This terrain is the “off stage” area in which the explicitly public is made...it can include entire national communities, ethnoracial minorities, socioeconomic classes, religious movements, and global diasporas of almost any kind—this terrain can never be fully transparent, and it is often a site of social intimacy. The gaps and screens that make this terrain apart from contexts of public display make it hard to represent, ethnographically, aesthetically, and politically*  
(Shryock 2004: 3).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Beckley, Pedr. 2002. *Mission in a Conspiracy Culture*. Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd.

<sup>32</sup> Shryock, Andrew. 2004. “Other Conscious/Self Aware: First Thoughts on Cultural Intimacy and Mass Mediation,” in *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*. Edited by Shryock, A. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

With the Kanjars it is still a situation of ‘us versus them,’ of ‘good farmers versus bad bandits,’ but before everyone knew who they were—criminals. Theft was their occupation and services that they provided, however disreputable (and not unlike those provided by *chamārs* or *bhangīs*), were a part of life. Today the official image is no longer so clear. What everyone does know, is that these ambiguous others—ex-criminal, scheduled, liberated, denotified—continue to be out there, and no less surely so.

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