

Land, Gifts and Relations among Agrarian Communities: Reciprocity, Prestige and Social Change in Rural Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows how changing socio-economic significance of land in rural Punjab goes beyond agricultural production and material value, arguing that its role among agrarian communities remains far more significant. The study relies on exchange of gift which, serves the purpose to see how social networking through relations of reciprocity navigates prestige, status and positions of actors. Particular attention is given to the claims of identity based on relationship with land and the subsequent symbolic and embodied forms of capital. The paper is grounded in ethnographic research methods as an ongoing fieldwork in Khokhran, a revenue unit in Burewala, Vehari. The study traces the process of social change to account for the reasons and ways for transformation of larger agrarian relations when historical claims and contemporary changes in socio-economic outlook of the rural Punjab are rapidly unfolding. The article proves how gift exchange can be a useful way to understand such a dynamic process of many changes within claims of historical continuity and lived realities of many ways of transformation in social structure of the society.

Keywords: Rural Punjab, agrarian communities, gift exchange, prestige, social change.

INTRODUCTION

This study shows how rural Punjab is undergoing change in its socio-economic structure with attendant impacts upon agrarian communities of the Punjab. For analytical clarity about the argument of the paper, current trends of social change are observed at a mauza (revenue unit comprising of three villages) in the Punjab. Therefore, the scheme of methodology has been devised for purposefully extending the gift exchange locally known as vartan or vartan bhanji to unlock how we can approach current web of social networking. Considering how we aim to extend the network of vartan bhanji as a repository of different spheres where social, cultural and economic intermingle, it is certainly helpful to locate how rural Punjab is being transformed as an agrarian community. This study traces its origin to the seminal study of Zekiye Eglar (2010) in a village names Mohla near Gujrat in Punjab. The study still remains one of the primary sources which help to understand how society, land and economy come together if we see focus of the discussion on vartan bhanji. The discussion started by Eglar has led to one peculiar way to see how vartan remains central to different ethnographies on rural Punjab (Alvi, 1995; Alvi, 2001; Chaudhary, 1999; Eglar, 2010; Nasir and Mielke, 2015; Mughal, 2018; Qadar and Waheed, 2023). The practice of gift exchange remains one of the central features because it is widely believed by different researchers who see the practice as a site of social networking because gift giving provides a holistic picture of Pakistani society (Lyon 2004; Qadeer, 2008). Therefore, seeing through the central role of vartan bhanji in the rural structure of Punjab, naturally takes us to the formation of the rural structure where land ownership remains central to the making of agrarian communities. Agriculture is the lifeline of Pakistan's economy with 19.5 percent of the gross domestic product, generating employment for 42.3 percent of the labour force and provision of raw material for many other value-added sectors (GoP, 2017). Considering this larger picture of Pakistan, our purpose remains to narrow the analysis to see how rural landscape in district Vehari is shaped where both the villages of study are located. One can read through government documents detailing the population figure of the Punjab province where 59.29 percent population lives in villages as compared with 40.71 percent urban population (GoP, 2023).

This tells us how despite recent trends of ballooning cities is at odds with the inherent patterns of population migration shuttling between cities and villages. For example, such an interesting fact emerges from the fieldwork when people identify themselves as people from villages of their birth places instead of their current living places within main towns of the district Vehari.

This study aims to expand the definition of the network of gift exchange keeping in mind how people express their normal flow of lifem when they talk about gift exchange. Some of the most commonly used words are like vartan, walan wassan (To live by sharing), or len den (lit. to exchange in reciprocal relations). These expressions represent sense of the social flow of an active, ongoing and encompassing web of relationships among an agrarian community. Such an engaging and socially lived realities have evolved into a complete web where people use these interchangeable expressions when their meanings make sense only in the given social significance of their use. Likewise, as the study will show through this case study that whenever these people use these words, their use is situated within complete life-cycle of the actors who work as social agents. The argument will evolve into a setting discussing the social mechanisms which show how status, prestige and position are depicted when of the use of these words bring representations of individuals and their ontological beings.

When it comes to ontological questions of personhood and self in rural Punjab, then sense of self is shaped significantly by family (kumba), lineage (nasal) and biraderi (endogamous group) (Chaudhary, 1999; Lyon, 2004a,b; Qadar, 2018). Contextualizing this sense of self and how people consider themselves within this web of social relationships, I have used the network established through vartan bhanji as pivotal element for the ritualistic management and cohesion of biraderies (Alvi, 1995). Resultantly, this study presents a contemporary display of the given understanding of biraderi considering how it remains important for contemporary relevance as the most defining social institution in rural Punjab. Same is again fundamental to the emerging changes in agrarian society in Punjab when we remain attentive to their social institutions. Thus, looking through the network of vartan bhanji is helpful to see the holistic structure of village life where change in biraderi and vartan is not only found but it is happening with far reaching consequences. The case studies of the villages of the study bring forth the shift in family structure from collective families and their references to shared ancestors to the recent changes which promote nuclear family system. The above given brief description of the main themes of the study and the resultant questions which define the structure of argument here are grounded in the following profile of the villages. The discussion provides basic demographic information while keeping need of the structural requirement of the argument in mind.

Location of the Villages: The Village as an Agrarian Community: This study is grounded in two villages of Amin Kot and Khokhran, in a revenue unit known as Khokhran in southern Punjab's Tehsil Burewala. Agrarian settings of the villages of study help us see how social, economic, and cultural aspects of the rural communities remain historically connected to agriculture, land ownership, patterns of cultivation, and resultant claims to status and prestige on the basis of relation with land. This particular relationship with the land is often remembered by the people of the villages for articulating their identity as agrarian communities who are principally related to land when its role goes beyond the material aspects. Considering how road infrastructure, commercialization like recently established Ghalla and Sabzi Mandi (Grain and Vegetable Market) near Khaadar canal within limits of the Khokhran mauza are bringing profound changes to the village economies. Moreover, other potent factors causing cumulative changes are education, mobility, mechanization and increasing digitization of every day life. However, despite such easily visible changes in socio-cultural landscape of the villages, agriculture still remains the principal source through which people derive their social identity and status. Therefore, the villages are not simply residential settlements but mainly agrarian social worlds where land, belonging, kinship and reciprocal obligations come together. The socio-economic organization of the villages of study has always been determined by the distinction between zamindars (land owners) and kammis (artisan castes).

Bothe villages of the study have been owned exclusively by zamindar families of Dhuddi Rajputs and Chishties. First village of the study, Amin Kot is exclusively owned by the Dhuddi Rajputs and second village of Khokhran is mutually shared by Dhuddies and Chishties. Another important landholding family is Salderas who are one of the many subcastes of Joyias near the Satluj river. Salderas are absentee landholders of Khokhran who have their network of patronage but they live either in Burewala city or Saldera mauza which is 7-8 kilometres from Khokhran.

Demographically, following figures will give a representation of Khokhran which is divided among families of Dhuddies and Chishties besides the artisan castes some of which have gained significant socio-economic capital now. We present an overview of basic demographic structure with the help of following chart and diagram derived from our survey.

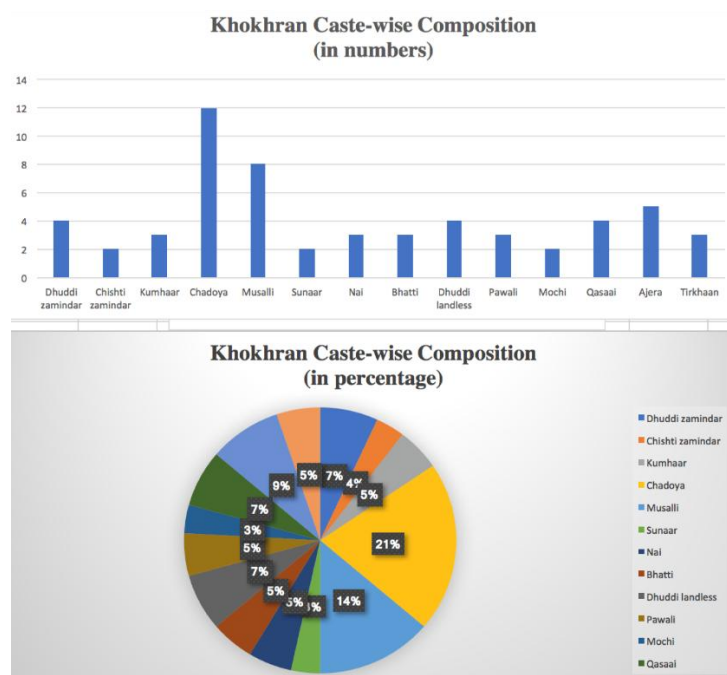


Figure 1: Demographic Composition of Khokhran

Figure 1 shows there are nearly 56-58 families who are known as tabbars (independent household). We have deliberately decided not to define the family in an arbitrary way which misses the representation given by people themselves to their family, biradery and caste. We realized with the time that it is important to keep the definition somehow loose for accounting i.e. what qualifies as a separate household and how a brother's home is marked as a separated from other siblings. After Khokhran, a brief demographic of Amin Kot as second village of the study is presented in Figure 2.

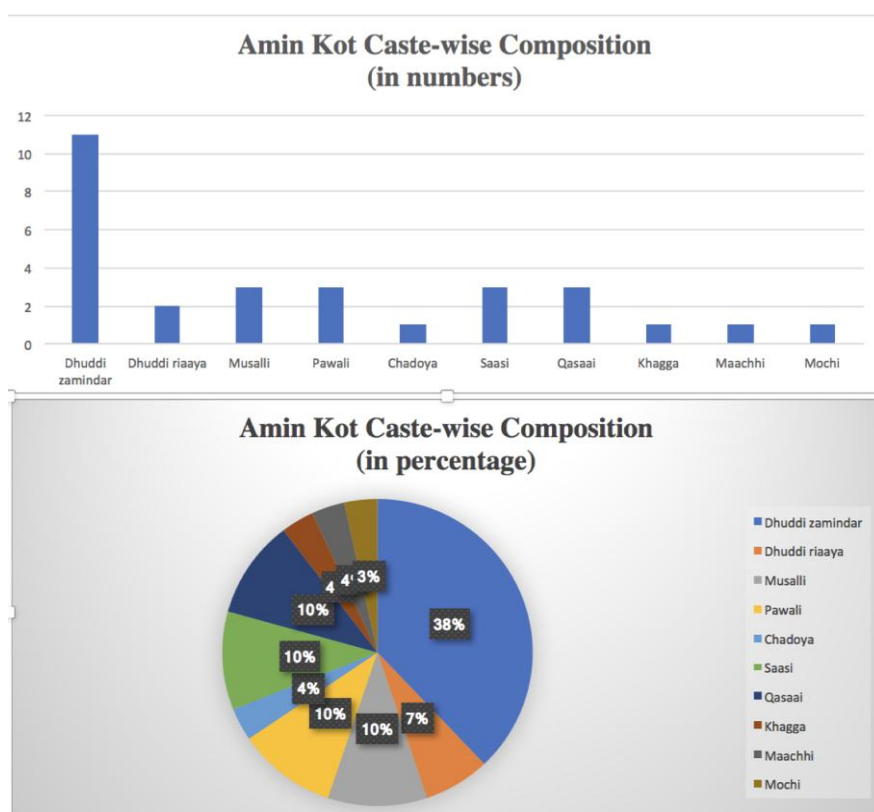


Figure 2: Demographic Composition of Amin Kot

The above given charts give a clear picture of Amin Kot which is significantly different from the demographic composition of Khokhran. Here, we can see how zamindar family has itself expanded in numbers with resultant shrinking numbers of Kammis when role of land ownership is becoming difficult after inward distribution of the family land into different houses.

Keeping basic demographic transformations in mind, we argue that socio-cultural profile of Khokhran markedly changed by rapid transformation of the agrarian communities when we see a village where different kammi biraderies have established themselves independent of zamindar patronage. Historically, category of the zamindar has been associated with landownership and ability to maintain a position of patron of kammis as the artisan groups whose services were exchanged by zamindars in kind or cash. Such a relationship between zamindars and kammis known as seyp has almost disappeared after being replaced with exchange of services in cash instead of kind. One elder from Kumhar (potter) family of Khokhran recalls how the practice of seyp is no more practiced in ways which were historically practiced till two decades back. Moreover, Changes in patterns of landholding, occupational mobility among kammis, role of education for economic mobility and access to non-agricultural employment have significantly changed the historically formed distinctions. Nevertheless, despite these widespread changes in villages, symbolic and relational significance on the basis of relationship with land is still visible in everyday life and claims about socio-economic capital.

The above given profile of the villages shows how agrarian structure of the villages is determinant of the social meaning of vartan when circulation of gifts is encircled within a community where relationship to land connects people, plays leading role in instituting kinship patterns and resultant social position is negotiated in collective events i.e. marriages, birth, circumcision festivities and death rituals. Therefore, this ethnographic research from the villages of the study observes some of the moral, economic and in-between social overtones which define vartan in the villages of the study. People will commonly associate their agrarian identity with negotiations surrounding references to morality as the cornerstone of their identity and position within networks of claims about kinship. Subsequently, an extended network of social relations is founded upon land, and its sole role which defines status and positions as agrarian communities. Overlapping notions of social, economic and moral operate within the frameworks of socio-temporal logics when people discuss how they extend and receive invitations to different events when these invitations generate a network of reciprocity as part of the social system dictating the logic and operability of the system. This sets the stage among agrarian communities of Khokhran to give meanings to their identity which often invokes relationship with land to determine one's position and subsequent ability to display the same in relation with established social standards.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is an ongoing ethnographic study of two villages of mauza Khokhran, in Burewala Tehsil of Punjab. The socio-economic and cultural analysis presented is detailed for clear understanding of the reader about how fieldwork has been planned and executed. One important commitment has been to be there with the people of the villages for giving them their voices and an inclusive process of co-production of knowledge (Kjellsdotter and Erlandson, 2025). Besides exclusive purposefully designed and well-thought-out fieldwork stays in the villages of the study, this remains as one of the ongoing fieldworks because first author of the paper is himself native of the villages of the study. We have been careful not to take nativity of the first author as a privilege and same has been discussed in detail about the same fieldwork, which problematizes self of a native Punjabi anthropologist in peculiar ways (Qadar, 2026). Formalizing such a relationship with the field makes it difficult to say how one can be precise about time spent in the fieldwork and giving details about days spent in villages of the study when such a complete separation from the field is not possible. This raises serious questions about temporality, self and politics of time in ethnographic research (Kumar, 2015). However, as part of the fieldwork during first author's doctorate and subsequent exploration of other relevant research questions, we have been engaged with the field in formal and informal ways when fieldwork can be divided into physical and non-physical time with the people and place. For first author's doctoral research, the first formal stretch of fieldwork was from 6th July 2016 to 27th February 2017 in which he familiarized himself with new identity of researcher and how it was in relation with the people of the village. Moreover, for this study, we did a social demographic survey for detailed understanding of basic information like household survey, economic structure, and patterns of mobility. Subsequent to first stretch, the first author has been able to spend more time at villages of the study for being native of the villages. Most of the textual analysis and thematic coding has been designed by both the authors through an ongoing team work. For this study, we have depended more participant observation and informal interviewing keeping in view the candidness needed to study the phenomenon at hand. Bearing in mind the above given picture of our relationship with the field, we are of the view that our relation with villages has been of a constant touch and go when we stay physically and non-physically part of the social world of the villagers. Based on rich ethnographic methods, we present following results for thorough understanding of the villages.

RESULTS

Observing the field, one can see that recent changes in socio-economic structure bring counter-narratives created through education, occupational mobility, economic success, and, crucially, the acquisition of land by families who have traditionally not been considered zamindars. The ensuing confrontations aren't always violent. Instead, they are typically reached via locally recognised kinds of accommodation. Purchasing land by a family not belonging to the zamindar class is a particularly telling place to watch this happening, since the act of buying land at the same time challenges and reproduces existing notions on agrarian status. These changes are vividly demonstrated by several cases from Khokhran and Amin Kot. Agricultural land when bought by a kammi family has to be negotiated with neighbouring zamindars or the patron because ultimately for being able to cultivate the land one needs to have good relations with neighbours who share access to water and passages. Same has been the case at Mauza Khokhran, whenever a historically landless family wanted to own a piece of land, they have always sought patronage of one of the established zamindar families. However, these purchases have largely been able to coexist with the social relations that are already in place without leading to a rejection of the existing situation. This seeming paradox of purchase of land by the landless families on the one hand and the legitimization of historical claims by the established zamindar families on the other hand are associated with the negotiation of prestige and social position. However, the capacity of zamindar families to keep or acquire all available land is limited by their financial situation. The possibility of new buyers being accommodated then becomes possible in a relational model where new landowners do not have to stay outside the network, but are made to join. Sometimes new buyers slowly end up owning not just the land, but also the social status and recognition of being a zamindar which they claim based on either ancestral references to their status as descendants of zamindars or changing caste to socially elevated groups. Landownership, therefore becomes a process of simultaneously reproducing, negotiating and transforming inherited social categories. The distinction between the zamindar and the kammi and also between the old zamindar and the new, is not fixed or inherited, but constantly renegotiated. One of the Chadoya family had purchased 5 acres of land near Khokhran from the Salderas, and when the men of the Dhuddi family made the claim of exclusive ownership of the property, Zia Ahmad Khan who is chief of the family spoke up to remind them of the practical limits of land ownership and the numerous years that the Chadoya family had served the Dhuddis. In this case, however, landownership and traditional notions of ownership and patron-client relationships intersected in order to accommodate a new landholder within the local land holding structure. Likewise, Altaf Ahmad Wahgah, who bought nearly eight acres with the support of Qamar Zaman Khan Dhuddi of Amin Kot, is a case in point that social recognition does not go hand in hand with economic progress. Altaf Ahmad Wahgah became socially censured for his behavior when he declined to give possession to his maternal uncle with whom he had purchased the land as equal partners. Moreover, his demeanour was often touted as representation of him being *nau doltiya* (nouveau riche), by his Wahgah biraderi and fellow landless families. Together, these cases illustrate that the seeming dichotomy between landowner and non-landowner biraderias becomes permeable on several fronts: when land can change the economic position of the individuals owning it; acceptance of one's new economic position by others relying on patronage, conduct and historical claims about belonging to land owning ancestry. The results also indicate that the transfer of land ownership signals a larger trend towards the acquisition of status and authority. Traditionally, these forms of authority were highly centralized within land-owning families, which derived social distinction from agrarian identity. New pathways to recognition have been opened up in recent times through education, occupational mobility, and widening scale which bring expanded social networks. But these new kinds of capital are not just a substitute for land. Instead, they overlap with it, especially when the economic and social mobility becomes real, that is, ownership of land. Therefore, Gift exchange is a vital network in which such shifting relationships are manifested. Gifts do not have the same meaning as their material worth, but rather in the relations around which they move. As land ownership becomes more socially diverse, gift-giving serves as a process by which new actors can gain entry into, sustain, and reinforce relationships with existing families. So land and gifts are both used in the production of social relations, with the land also serving as a material and symbolic basis for recognition and exchange as an instrument of transforming ownership and resources into a new social network of enduring social relations. As a case study of the above given analysis, we given a brief account of marriages which work as an institution registering land, memory and social position of the actors in gift exchange as agrarian communities when their prestige and social changes are intertwined.

Marriages, Memory and Social role of Land in Accounting for Reciprocity and Social Position: We present an account from *neondra* book, which is a book of record maintained by every family to record their reciprocal exchange of gifts and money among their network of reciprocal relationships on significant social events, particularly on marriages. We present a brief analysis here of first page of the *neondra* book from a marriage of Dhuddi family of Amin Kot, who happen to be the leading zamindar family of the village. The marriage took place in 2014 when three boys and three girls from the family were married to each other. Tellingly, entries are ordered according to the time one approaches the person who is noting down and thus should appear random, but the page still indicates the structure of the family's social world. It consists of neighbours, people of the same

biraderi, closer political associates and some riaaya families who lived and tilled the land given by the Dhuddi family. The neondra book is therefore not an only history of monetary donations, it's a record of the various relationships that make up the Dhuddi family's social status.

Indeed, money plays important role in upkeep of the social relationships but some forms of it are cherished more when they are symbolic in their nature. For example, Imam masjid (prayer leader) and riaaya of the Amin Kot zamindar family, Hafiz Sikandar was only able to contribute a symbolic amount of 200 rupees. Meanwhile, Nazir Ahmad Khan Bhatti, who happens to be one of the closest family friends, gave 2000 rupees while the Dhuddi family contributed 1500 rupees in the past at one of his son's marriage. Moreover, Nazir Ahmad Khan Bhatti is among the very few people who is invited to those family events of the Dhuddi family when their invitation is not extended outside of the biradery. Nazir Ahmad Khan is the one who will always ask the Dhuddi family of any help like providing logistics and material resources if they are needed because this corresponds to the status of both the zamindar families. This monetary difference, therefore, is not a variation in the degree of generosity or economic capacity but the exchange is a means of expressing the nature and the relative position of the actors. The neondra book thus becomes an instrument for making visible a social accounting in which relationships are remembered, measured and renewed. Consequently, neondra book reflects the broader argument of this study: material exchanges at marriage also serve as exchanges of social recognition and are through which hierarchy, equality, patronage and belonging are continuously reproduced and renegotiated.

When giving meaning to biraderi identities within a hierarchical social structure, people are attentive to the position of individuals and their biraderies. For example, when they talk about specific biraderies as good or bad, they tend to rely on taken-for-granted dispositions. These classifications, typified by the terms biraderi, qaum and zat, therefore exist not only at the individual level; they also operate at the collective level. However, within changing socio-economic structures of the villages of the study, these seemingly stable categories are constantly renegotiated in the ever-changing context of economic transformation and social positions. Such a transformation is more visible at Khokhran where a few Chishti, Saldera and Dhuddi zamindars have been selling land while some kammi families who have built up enough economic capital, have purchased land demanding a higher symbolic status by changing their caste identity.

However, in the rural Punjab, one can hardly forget the reference to one's relation with land if personhood or family recognition is point of concern. One pertinent example is of the Chadoya biradery whose 4 families have accumulated significant socio-economic capital through their jobs in different government departments i.e. education, police, excise and taxation and serving as commissioned officer in Pakistan army. Considering their elevated socio-economic capital, some families took up the name of Kharals and Bhattis. Formal social exclusion is not always a result of such transformations, but they do not obliterate previous identities as kammi. As a case in point, upon receipt of a marriage card from a family of Chadoya people who claimed the name of Kharal, some people sitting at one shop of Amin Kot expressed sarcasm, reminiscing about the past when they were called Chadoyas. It shows how people can gain economic, educational, or symbolic advantages that equip them to assert a different identity, but historically driven references to biraderi play a significant when role of claims to land ownership remains decisive.

Our results show an intricate relationship between continuity and change. The shift in land ownership does not signal the end of the previous agrarian order. Rather, it is being re-negotiated in the new mobilities and realities which are hardly in the control of agrarian communities. The modern social landscape of the villages therefore is marked by the interaction of past and current claims to status with the simultaneous recognition of new social roles. In order to understand this change, it is helpful to look both at present changes in ownership patterns and land's historical importance. We have tried to show how in the current rural Punjab's context, land is intricately tied to the notions of status, authority, ownership and social significance.

DISCUSSION

For complete understanding of the agrarian character of rural Punjab, one needs to keep in mind how above given methodological framework and results provide us with village profile which shows scale of change among rural communities in Punjab. Indeed, land still remains as it has always been the most potent factor in shaping the contours of change among communities who are basically dependent upon land. Equally important fact pertains to the role of land going beyond purely agricultural domain of the village life when role of land is remembered by the agrarian communities in relation with narration of 'shakhsiyyat' (selfhood), and nasal (racial configuration of genealogical tree). One elder from Dhuddi biraderi shared how these attributes of nasal and shakhsiyyat give meaningful representation to historical relations with land. The elder claimed how he has to take into account the fact that he belongs to a zamindar biradery despite the fact that his family does not own land at present. For him, his qualification to being nasli shakhs (genealogically elevated personhood) is marked with his hailing from a biradery of zamindars and same representation is recognized while engaging in vartan.

Theoretically, gift is not about material value only and it is considered as part of one's self which is given as part of gift (Mauss, 1969). Anthropological evidence indicates the same even in the primitive times (Sahlins, 1965).

However, an awareness of the transformation which these villages are undergoing with the new professional alternatives opens a vista of the environment that is monetizing. This necessitates a balance of purely economic and non-economic sphere of vartan bhanji practices when we need to treat commodities and gifts separately (Gregory, 1982). The combination of the economic and non-economic aspect of the practice is in itself grounded on personal and economic consideration. But, economic considerations must not be neglected, because, economic action is socially situated and it cannot be explained by reference to individual motives alone (Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992). It is, therefore, important to examine the practices of vartan bhanji and the changing modes thereof in terms of their monetisation and the re-defined articulation of biraderi among agrarian communities which claim their social positions based upon their belonging to land owning biraderies. Like Bourdieu, we have to take into account two things: family as a place of trusting and giving, not from the logic of market and material exchanges (Bourdieu, 1996); and when there is a conversion of capital, which requires a certain amount of time for economic capital to convert economic into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In these studies there is a continuing debate as to whether the economic and/or personal (non-economic) component of the gift can be separated out from the discussion of the gift. The binary dichotomy of economic/non-economic and socio-cultural embeddedness/disinterestedness is thus played out in an entangled practice of the economic goods which are also symbolic in their nature for agricultural communities who derive their material and cultural analogies primarily from relation with land. Foster rightly reminds in a familiar context when a thing representing culturally participates in a web of significances that we call culture (Foster, 1994). Similarly, we are reminded of the category of the gift and the soecificity of the object (Das and Das, 2010) that has been exchanged in order to understand the question of what kinds of relations it produces, and the effects with which such gifts are imbued.

Therefore, our findings show that shifting land ownership is linked to reconfiguration of social position, power, and inter-community relations when people act as part of network of vartan. We have argued that land remains an important part of the local image of social distinction, but no longer as exclusive as it once was. The shifting alliances of educational and economically mobile members of various biraderies suggest a continued process of negotiation among the inherited claims to agrarian superiority and the newly made claims to social recognition. An important discovery that is related to a historical difference between zamindar and kammi biraderies. Even members of recognized zamindar biraderies are still expressing the notion that they have attributes which differentiate them from the kammi groups. These assertions are often made by referring to legitimate rights to the land and the notion of ownership of agricultural land being rightfully the zamindars' domain. These claims suggest that land ownership remains something other than a means of production, it is also a part of local, familiar narratives about personhood, Respectability and social standing.

As vartan is mainstay of our the analytical framework, it is pertinent to relate contemporary figuration of personhood with practice of vartan which is limited to marriages and death rituals in this study due to practical necessities. Therefore, the paper brings forth not only the practice of vartan as a network of social relations, but the positions as occupied and performed by people are main argument of the study. This discussion adds to the theoretical and empirical possibilities by focussing on increasing need of an objectified and materialistic orientation of those objects and relations, which keep on resisting such perception while enacting same calculations.

CONCLUSION

This study has brought forward the ethnographic evidence about social role of land ownership, which defines positions of individuals and their families when they engage in network of gift exchange as agrarian communities of rural Punjab. The evidence cautions us against taking the processes of social change as a linear process. Instead of treating recent changes in social and economic structure of rural Punjab, we have argued that agrarian structure of rural Punjab remains mirrored in references and claims to antiquity. So, not only today's changes in social, economic and cultural domains of rural life are the defining features, but relation to land remains central for the agrarian communities. Therefore, socio-economic role of land, network of vartan and present forms of prestige need an updated understanding for grounded understanding of rural Punjab.

DECLARATION

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest either for the authors or about subsequent submission of this article to the journal.

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