CHAPTER TWO

THE GUJARS OF THE UPPER DOAB

Geographically, the focus of this book is on the Upper Doab, the region between Ganga and Yamuna upstream from Aligarh that would be administered by the British for most of the nineteenth century as the districts of Dehra Dun, Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Meerut and Bulandshahr. Before the British conquest of 1803, the Upper Doab was contained in one single district, that of Saharanpur, also called the Baoni, or 52 paraganas. Part of the Mughal empire for centuries, it was controlled by a series of regionally dominant communities that had a great influence on the politics of the nearby Delhi court. The Barha Saiyids of Saharanpur were around for centuries and already managed a large number of paraganas in the area when they took control of the Delhi throne around 1720. It is true that they were kicked out of the capital again a few years later, but in Saharanpur several of the families into which they had split up remained influential and locally dominant. And then there were the Afghans. The Rohilla (or Afghan) leader Najib Khan, later styled Najib ud-Daula, was the local big man since 1753. He had begun his career as a jamadār, a commander of a war band and ended his life in 1770 as master of the Upper Doab and principle nobleman at the Delhi court. In 1772, Zabita Khan, Najib Khan’s son and successor, was defeated by Mirza Najaf Khan, the talented regent of Delhi. Though Zabita Khan was soon reinstated at Saharanpur, since then the power of the Rohillas in the Upper Doab was only a shadow of what it had been in the 1760s. Locally, however, they continued important as zamindārs of many clusters of villages. Zabita Khan died in 1784/5 and was succeeded by his son Ghulam Qadir Khan, whose name became a curse when he blinded Shah Alam, the Mughal emperor at Delhi. Ghulam Qadir was put to death in 1789, after which the Marathas under Maharaja Shinde established their authority in the Upper Doab. The Company conquered the region in 1803/4.

After the British occupation and throughout the nineteenth century, Saiyids and Afghans would maintain an important presence in the Upper Doab. As far as direct agrarian management was concerned,
however, most conspicuous and characteristic were the Gujars, a mili-
tant group of semi-pastoralists staunchly loyal to each other, whose
physical prowess and forceful presence at the village level had helped
them to entrench themselves in the Saharanpur countryside. In at least
a dozen parganas, their influence was such that anyone at Delhi who
intended to try and raise an income from the region would have to
work through them.

It was later said that the Gujars were originally from the other side
of the Yamuna, whence they had moved east from the second half
of the seventeenth century onwards. They were “a bold and hardy
race…more attached to arms and plundering than to the cultivation
of the soil” and that was why they were in demand in the small vil-
lages as chaukidārs and guards to protect them from the attacks of the
more powerful villages in their neighbourhood. In time, the rulers of
the region, finding them “a hardy and useful body of men”, employed
them for the purposes of police and revenue collection. Gaining
strength and confidence from their increasingly successful control of
the military labour market of the region, the Gujars settled on depopu-
lated sites and made themselves the masters of some villages. Their
leader Nahar Singh and his father before him in the beginning of the
eighteenth century gradually increased their power and wealth by
inviting Gujars from all quarters, employing them as horsemen and
piyādaḥs and settling them in a large number of villages under their
sway. Nahar Singh’s son and successor Ram Dayal Singh likewise was
a great agrarian entrepreneur.

The Rohillas at Saharanpur seem initially to have striven for a bal-
ance of power between two rival Gujar chiefs and to have set up a
kind of moiety structure. In about 1760, a tāluqa consisting of 91 vil-
lages was made over to Nahar Singh and his relations to keep up their
troops and establishments, whereas another 91 villages were entrusted
to Ranjit Singh a rival, but related Gujar leader. Under the Marathas
in the early 1790s, Ranjit Singh lost his tāluqa to the sword of his
rival Ram Dayal Singh. His estate broke up and the Marathas then
acquiesced in Ram Dayal Singh’s near-monopoly of Gujar power. He
was given the title of Raja, paid a light, permanently fixed (istimrār)
revenue and had the uncontrolled internal management of the north-
eastern parganas. He created a number of small Gujar tāluqaḥs, the
chiefs of which were members of his clan, remained dependent on him
and paid their revenue through him. After the British conquest, he at
first, if anything, increased his grip on the region, taking many villages