

Vartan bhanji-exchange practices
and social (im-)mobility:
Exploring the coping strategies of
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***Vartan bhanji*-exchange practices and social (im-)mobility:**

Exploring the coping strategies of low-income households of different *biraderis* in rural Punjab

Aftab Nasir & Katja Mielke¹

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Abstract

This paper assesses whether *vartan bhanji* exchange practices are a boon or a burden, an enabling or disabling factor, a pass or an impasse for social mobility of the poor households of *biraderis* living in rural areas of Pakistan. *Vartan bhanji* is an umbrella term that comprises highly obligatory, unfailingly regular and reciprocal social exchange practices in the forms of gifts that are performed over various life-cycle occasions, such as marriage, death, birth, and circumcision ceremonies among *biraderi* members. *Biraderi* groups can be conceptualized as a figuration of interdependence. The results of the current study establish that the poor households perceive *vartan bhanji* more as a necessary evil; a system that they cannot go without, but also the one that they cannot afford to live without either. Even though this very institution restricts their movement in society in subtle ways, it also provides them identity, support, and protection that is essentially needed for their survival and mobility within their social networks. This paper shows that the social mobility of an individual is rather a function of and is restricted to his/her positionality within a *biraderi*. The limits of one's exchanges, via *vartan bhanji*, mark the limit of one's social (im-)mobility in society as well.

Keywords: *biraderi*, *vartan bhanji*, social exchange practices, figuration, positionality, social mobility, immobility, Punjab, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Not everything and everybody moves. Even though geographic and spatial mobility across political borders, in and between multiple trans-local spaces - and across various cultural spheres - invokes the image of restless individuals who fluidly navigate an interconnected world, it would be wrong to assume a corresponding weakening of political borders and social boundaries.² Instead, what can be observed is rather a shift in the ontological nature of borders/boundaries themselves and the acknowledgement of their social constructedness.

Thus, despite a high degree of geographic mobility, state borders are a highly pertinent phenomenon and they constitute sites where movements are often selectively constrained. The highly plural and diverse societies³ in most of the world, including those investigated in the Crossroads Asia project, often feature a high degree of cross-border, regional and domestic physical-spatial mobility. However, this was not accompanied by a similarly significant degree of general social mobility in recent years. Neither did it spawn significant processes of social transformation in the sense of upward social mobility and increased prosperity at national levels (Crossroads Asia Working Group Conflict 2012/2014). The processes underlying social mobility and immobility are largely unexplored.

This paper investigates social exchange practices of two kinship groups (*biraderis*) in Punjab's rural society and the implications of these for *biraderi* members' social (im-)mobility. It is assumed that the social exchange processes have potentially integrative or disintegrative effects and thus result in boundary-weakening or -maintaining processes for the separate groups; that is, they might enable or inhibit social mobility. In particular, the members of a *biraderi* engage in a special type of reciprocal gift exchange practice called *vartan bhanji*, which is performed at the ceremonies of marriage, death, birth and circumcision. By focusing on *vartan bhanji* practices performed at marriage ceremonies, the study investigates the ability to fulfill the obligations of gift-giving and the implications thereof.⁴ The ability to exchange gifts is directly proportional to a household's socio-economic status, social position within the *biraderi*, and, its influence among *biraderi* members.

The working paper consists of two main parts: The first part (Ch. 2) provides the necessary conceptual underpinnings of the analysis. It includes a clarification of the meaning and understanding of *biraderi*, of *vartan bhanji* exchange practices, and discusses whether and how a heuristic value can

² Social cultural boundaries, which can revolve around various types of socio-cultural phenomena like language, ethnicity, religious belonging, socio-economic status-group belonging (class, caste, etc.) and other identity-based factors, are negotiated at an everyday level of interaction. These kinds of boundaries, their creation, reaffirmation and perpetuation, are closely linked to dynamics of social (im-)mobility.

³ In this paper we follow Michal Mann's (1990) conceptualization of society as consisting of multiple overlapping interaction networks, which share manifold linkages and take on a 'confederal' character (in contrast to the conventional construct of nation-state societies). Despite his view of societies as nets of multi-dimensionally overlapping social networks that are never fully or even sufficiently institutionalized, Mann assigned relatively fixed spatial boundaries to them (Mann 1990: 15). Thus, it is appropriate to think of societies in the plural and assume that they exist and operate in specific geographic/spatial frames ('scales') of interaction (ibid.: 58).

⁴ The reason for focusing on marriage ceremonies is that social exchange practices are most extended, economically bigger in amount, and socially more rigorous than the practices performed at other ceremonies. Moreover, weddings are the only social occasion for which a written record regarding gifts is kept.

be established by viewing *biraderi/s* as a figuration (Elias 1978), thereby arguing for a conceptual link between social (im-)mobility and interdependence. The second part (Ch. 3) of this paper takes an empirical look at *vartan bhanji* practices at marriage ceremonies and informs about how the reciprocation mechanisms are enacted and which coping strategies rural low-income households apply to meet the pressure of reciprocity in gift-exchange practices. In the last section it will be discussed to what extent this reciprocal gift exchange enables or inhibits *biraderi* members' social mobility.

2. Background: *biraderis*, exchange, and social (im-)mobility

The *biraderi* phenomenon is highly heterogeneous and escapes easy conceptualization. That is why the first section (2.1) gives an overview of the different notions of *biraderi* as they are commonly found and distinguished in the literature as well as on a practical level in everyday life. After introducing the reciprocal exchange practices of *vartan bhanji* in the second section (2.2), *biraderis*⁵ will be discussed in a figurational perspective for the purpose of this paper and thereby linked with mobility in the last section (2.3).

2.1 How to understand *biraderi*?

As a major organizing social principle, *biraderis* constitute a widespread, deeply embedded social institution⁶ in Pakistani society. The term *biraderi* has historic roots that come from the socio-religious history of the land. In its etymology, the word *biraderi* originates in Persian language and is a derivative of the word *birader* [*beradar*] meaning brother. Thus, in the literal sense, *biraderi* alludes to the meaning of brotherhood, a kinship system. Ahmed (2011: 46) defines *biraderi* as “a rigid social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained generation after generation”. Another definition of *biraderi* is given by Eglar (1960: 90): “Biraderi is a patrilineage. All the men who can trace their relationship to a common ancestor, no matter how remote, belong to the same biraderi”. Similarly, Alavi who extensively worked on the *biraderi* phenomenon, states that *biraderi* is “a kinship group in which all the members originate from the same ancestor no matter how many generations back the link may exist. All the households originating from such common ancestor consider themselves as members of the same biraderi. Thus, the biraderi, in this sense, is indefinite in size” (Alavi 1972: 2).

In practice, the phenomenon of *biraderi* is much more complex than outlined above, transcending kinship based on patrilineal descent and lineage endogamy.⁷ *Biraderi* belonging includes legal, economic, and ceremonial functions, and *biraderis* can be traced to different origins, which not

⁵ Note on writing: As with other vernacular terms, the singular word *biraderi* is used with an English plural -s to simplify reading. However, proper names of *biraderis*, e.g. Jatt, Arain etc. are not pluralized. Moreover, *biraderi* is written in italic and without capital letter if the concept is signified; otherwise it is written with capital letter, not italic as part of a local *biraderi*-name, as for example Kamboh Biraderi, Rehmani Biraderi (see Ch.3).

⁶ The term institution hereby serves as an umbrella term for a set of practices needing further explanation (see below). Since the paper does not rely on a narrow institutional analysis, further conceptualization is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ The belief in blood purity plays a tremendous role in defining the boundaries of the in-group (Lefebvre 1999: 46). That is also why the preferred marriage choice is conventional within-family, secondary within-*biraderi* and wider *biraderi*-ties.

seldom intersect and overlap, such as tribal and/or regional belonging in the past (Baloch, Pathan, Rajput, Kashmiri), a professional 'caste'-belonging related to occupational activities (e.g. for low castes: Nai [hairdresser], Mochi [shoemaker], Mirasi [musician]; for higher castes: Jat [landowner/farmer]), religious affiliation (Hindu Biraderi, Masih [Christian] Biraderi). Divine origin of *biraderis* is claimed to invoke respect and authority (Sayed, Qureshi)⁸ (Mielke/Schetter/Abbas 2011). One effect of this complexity is the plurality of terms that are commonly used to indicate social group belonging. Examples are *zaat*, *biraderi*, *qaum*, and tribe.⁹ Leaving aside these differences in terminology and meaning among these diverse group categories, it is furthermore common to distinguish hierarchical layers among and within *biraderis*. The colonial administrators of British India and later Pakistani administrators emphasized the social group ('class') boundaries between landowners (*zamindar*), cultivators without property, non-agricultural so-called service castes, and inferior castes. The social boundaries between these (then so-defined) classes and castes were very rigid and restrictive, with boundary crossings (e.g. by marriage) usually out of the question. In rural contexts, for the majority of the people, *biraderi*-belonging is an identity acquired by birth; often it is taken for granted and becomes internalized. In kinship terms, the layers comprise several families which form the nucleus of the endogenous kinship units (*zaat*) organized based on patrilineage in one locality at the most basic level. This is superseded by larger and hierarchically inclusive (higher) *biraderi*-entities.

In non-kinship terms but on a functional level, the *biraderi* of indefinite size, which intersects and spans across national society while being represented in many places and locations, can be broken down and manifests itself in two additional layers of relationships. One is the '*biraderi* of recognition' which exists within a *biraderi*. The boundaries of this group of recognition are determined by the mutual knowledge of the actual links to the common descent which members of a *biraderi* can trace. The second layer is comprised of those households within a '*biraderi* of recognition' that actually participate in a ritualistic exchange of presents or gifts (*vartan bhanji*). They form a '*biraderi* of participation'. The unfailingly regular and completely reciprocal mode of interaction among the households of a '*biraderi* of participation' provides group solidarity, support and cohesion to its members (Alavi 1972).

Several researchers speak of the term '*biraderi* system' (Ghani in Jalal 2012: 75; Alavi 1972). In doing so they do not explicitly allude to system theory; however, they implicitly assume the system to be constituted by subsystems – single *biraderis* – which form a greater whole. Implicit is also the presumption that the system is just the sum of its parts. On the contrary, this paper conceptualizes *biraderi* as a figuration, in order to take into account the existing interdependencies between its members (see Ch. 2.3). Although *biraderi* is evaluated to be a system of establishing goodwill among

⁸ The Sayed, a social identity group that can be found across the Islamic world, claim to be and are recognized as direct descendants of the Prophet; the Qureshi believe that they originate from the tribe of the prophet. For this reason their *biraderi* are regarded as superior segments of society.

⁹ Today, *zaat* is commonly used for caste and signifies the nucleus of an endogenous family. Traditional so-called service castes which comprise several crafts such as bakers, blacksmiths, tinkers, carpenters or weavers each form a separate *biraderi* with its own name, and include certain *zaat*. The fluidity of social belonging and its labelling was intercepted when British administrators fixed social group categories by including them in legal documents, such as the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900. It classified rural society into castes and tribes of 'cultivators' vs. 'non-cultivators' in order to impede the transfer of land from the former to the latter. As a result, non-cultivator castes became systematically excluded from farmland ownership, as well as effectively barred from residential property. *Qaum* and *biraderi* are often used interchangeably in the vernacular, for example in large parts of southern Punjab (Mielke/Schetter/Abbas 2011).

members (Eglar 1960: 107), it nevertheless also becomes the source of contention and confrontation. For example, Alavi (1970: 16) argues that *biraderi* underlies the evolution of conflicts and at times the termination of the very relationships with those households that refuse to conform to *biraderi* norms. A critical study by Gazdar (2007) problematizes the question of goodwill theory and investigates *biraderi* as another veil covering up social oppression, strict hierarchies and furthering the marginalization of certain castes. Wakil (1970) has elaborated on the dynamics of generational conflict in his work. He explains that "*the main ethic in the biraderi is not 'to keep up with the Joneses' but 'to keep the Joneses down'; not only in the exchange of gifts but in actual fact, attempts may be made to impede any processes that might raise either absolutely or relatively the social or economic level of the member of one's effective biraderi*" (Wakil *ibid*: 703).¹⁰ Both Wakil and Alavi argue that although a fierce and intense competition exists within a *biraderi*, this vanishes as soon as a *biraderi* is in competition with any other *biraderi* and as long as such inter-*biraderi* competition dominates.

Biraderi networks play a vital role in both, rural and urban areas of Pakistan. Pakistani politics is greatly influenced by the *biraderi* logic, because it structures voting behavior; votes can be mobilized according to the *biraderi*-belonging of a candidate (Ahmed 2011, Chaudhary 1999, Wilder 1999). The domination of few *biraderis* in Punjab, such as the Jat, Rajput, Arain, Gujar, Sayed, and Baloch¹¹ is reflected in their disproportionate share of seats in the national and provincial assemblies as compared to members of other *biraderis*. In addition, the heads of district government in Punjab, which are mostly considered highly important positions, are from these few major *biraderis*. In comparison, other *biraderis* are politically marginalized. In urban contexts, *biraderi* belonging gradually loses its vitality and symbolic value as it becomes detached from the land property question and traditional professional group identities. City dwellers use *biraderi* names as their surnames but do not match the connotations as closely and rigorously as their rural counterparts.¹²

Existing inter-*biraderi* hierarchies can predominantly be traced to socio-economic assets and status of the majority of the households belonging to the different separate *biraderis*. Thus, it is obvious that *biraderis* owning more land or valuable assets also dominate politically and are therefore socio-economically mobile. However, the Sayed constitute one example, where – put simply – social status overrules economic endowment. Due to their claim of divine descent, Sayed are considered the most prestigious and socially highest of the *biraderis*. Thus, even if a Sayed is poor, he will be esteemed as most respectful as compared to any big landowner of any other *biraderi*. Differentiations and distinctions within one *biraderi* tend to correspond directly with socio-economic status of the households belonging to the particular *biraderi*. For example, the rich household of any *biraderi* is

¹⁰ What this quote hints upon is the perception that *biraderi* members meet not only to create goodwill but also compete fiercely. It is always closely observed, in detail recorded, checked and levelled, how other relatives are moving within society, so that by knowing the trajectories of social mobility within *biraderi*, one can react and – assuming one is able to mobilize the necessary motility factors (see below) – to act strategically.

¹¹ In northern Punjab, the Rajput *Biraderi* is said to dominate; Jat constitute the majority in central and southern Punjab. Arain are dominant in central Punjab while Baloch are present in southern Punjab (Ahmed/Naseem 2011).

¹² Many well-off people in cities possess the resources to invest in *biraderi* networks but choose not to do so and often render *biraderi* belongings obsolete and as shackles of the past. However, it is pertinent to note that even if the rich urban *biraderi* members will abstain from investing heavily both in terms of time and money in such networks, they cannot afford to cut ties with everyone by not participating in *vartan bhanji* altogether.

more respected than a poor household of the same *biraderi*. However, for the poor households the *biraderi* belonging can also constitute a material resource and support base in times of need (Mohmand/Gazdar 2007: 14).

2.2 The glue: *vartan bhanji* as reciprocal social exchange

As a kind of glue and manifestation of existing interdependencies, *vartan bhanji* binds and integrates all layers of a *biraderi* – the *biraderi* of participation, the *biraderi* of recognition, and the one encompassing the entire descent group. It includes both social and economic exchange between members and determines and structures mutual expectations and a respective degree of certainty among them.

In Punjab province of Pakistan, *vartan* literally means ‘dealing’ and *bhanji* are ‘sweets’; thus *vartan bhanji* literally signifies the exchange of sweets.¹³ Symbolically, it refers to the exchange of different forms of gifts among members of a *biraderi* at various ceremonies, such as marriage, birth, circumcision and death (Alavi 1972, Gazdar 2007, Zaman 2008).¹⁴ According to Eglar’s anthropological study in Punjabi villages, *vartan bhanji* takes place in the framework of life cycle rituals among relatives, friends, and members of same *biraderi*, with members of different *biraderis* belonging to the same village or a few neighboring villages (Eglar 1960: 130). Given the close relation of these life-cycle rituals with reproduction, marriage and other family matters, Eglar found that the elder woman of the household usually holds a distinct role, because she has the full knowledge of all the transactions that took place or ought to take place under the obligation of *vartan bhanji*. As this paper is about wedding ceremonies, it must be noted that marriages within a *biraderi* are highly popular throughout Punjab. It is considered a shame if one cannot marry one’s daughter or son within one’s own *biraderi*.¹⁵

An essential feature of *vartan bhanji* is the obligation of reciprocation. Reciprocation means the mutual obligation and rights towards services rendered in exchange between individuals or in-groups

¹³ *Vartan bhanji* is performed in Punjabi culture on both sides of the border, i.e. in Pakistan and India. Literature shows that *vartan bhanji* holds its background in Hindu caste (*jati*) system, and has become embedded in Muslim communities of the subcontinent as a residue of Hindu ancestry (Saher/Mayrhofer 2014: 1885; Eglar 1960).

¹⁴ Traditions of reciprocal gift exchanging have long been practiced in many cultures around the world. There is a significant literature on the mechanism of local social networks of exchange in various cultures, like *Guanxi* in China (Yan 1996, Kipnis 1996), *Wasta* in the Middle East, *Blat* in Russia (Ledeneva 1998), and *Compadsrazgo* in Chili and *Sociolismo* in Cuba (Saher/Mayrhofer 2014). Furthermore, Johnson (1977) investigated the influence of reciprocity and exchange systems on Japanese-American kinship relations.

¹⁵ The practice of cousin-marriages, also known as intra-*biraderi* marriages, within country and/or abroad, is common in all *biraderis* and strengthens the extended patriarchies established by such marriages. This trend prevails not only in Punjab, but even among Punjabi families in the diaspora. Shaw (2001: 323) reported in her study that a vast majority of second generational Pakistanis living in England, around 87% of her sample, opted for within-family, within-*biraderi* marriages. Exchange marriages, called *watta-satta*, are a popular arrangement throughout Punjab. In such cases, a pair of son and daughter is married to another corresponding pair of another family within the *biraderi* (Zaman 2008). The exchange marriages are perceived as security networks organized for providing protection and livelihood security in the absence of resources, means and any social welfare provision by the state. The *watta-satta* exchange marriages are highly risk prone in terms of sustainability of relationships in the long run because the interdependence can become highly problematic if one of the marriages is not successful. In this case the unhappy partner in one of the married couples usually avoids a divorce, because of fear of consequences for the other couple/s in the *watta-satta* arrangement.

(Elwert 1991: 169).¹⁶ Practically, it refers to the future repayments of gifts, money, goods, and so on (Cialdini 2001). However, it is more than a mere exchange, because a return present never offsets an obligation; instead, it always brings a new obligation, which can create pressure and perpetuates power imbalances (Elwert 1991: 166, 170).¹⁷ Both Eglar and Alavi showed that the amount exchanged in *vartan bhanji* never equals the amount received because equal reciprocation would imply the end of a relationship. The reciprocal amount given should always be in excess to previous amount that was received under the obligation of *vartan bhanji*.

Every household is supposed to engage in this exchange of 'gifts', even if such obligation may put the household under financial pressure. Failure to comply with such obligations renders individual households alienated and helpless within a *biraderi*, that is why they try to conform to the social pressures even if they cannot afford to do so. Thus, the question arises of how low-income households cope with this pressure to reciprocate (see Ch. 3.2). Social exchange theory (Homans 1958) establishes that exchange processes determine all social behavior and interaction in society.¹⁸ That means that actors consider the potential benefits and risks of social relationships; the purpose of this exchange is to increase benefits and reduce costs. If risks outweigh rewards, people will terminate or abandon a relationship (Emerson 1976). Costs involve things that are seen as negatives to the individual, such as having to put money, time and effort into a relationship. The benefits are the things that the individual gets out of the relationship, such as fun, friendship, companionship and social support. Positive relationships are those in which the benefits outweigh the costs, while negative relationships occur when the costs are greater than the benefits. Social exchange theory suggests that individuals weigh the benefits against costs in order to determine how much a relationship is worth (ibid.: 341).

Related to *vartan bhanji*, it is thus one aim of this study to see if people can and do terminate relations when costs outweighs rewards, or if there is some mediatory factor like *biraderi* ties that is interlinked with both benefits and costs. Alavi (1972) highlighted the conflict potential in *biraderis* and indicated how they can lead to social exclusion when households are unable to stay involved in reciprocation, because relationships are subsequently terminated. Given the prospect of social exclusion, the hypothesis that poor households conform to the social norm of *vartan bhanji* not only because they have to but also because they want to, as the *biraderi* provides them the social support and protection they need in order to live gracefully in the society, comes under scrutiny.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the terms gift, exchange, and reciprocity, and the latter's analytical subdivision into specific and general reciprocity, see Elwert (1991). His discussion on reciprocity basically follows Thurnwald (1916) and Sahlins (1974).

¹⁷ Thus, *vartan bhanji* not only symbolizes the collective relationships of all the households belonging to the *biraderi* of participation (Alavi 1972), but it is also a manifestation of power relationships in society. As such it can be described as the social glue in *biraderi* collectives.

¹⁸ In his classical study on the patterns of gift exchanges in Samoan customs, Marcel Mauss (1960) described a rigorous ritual system performed among males, females, and children of different clans in Polynesia. These rituals include strict and obligatory exchanges of decorated mats between chiefs of different clans on their marriages. However, the exchanges are not limited to marriages, but are also performed at childbirth, circumcision, sickness, girls' puberty, funeral ceremonies and trade. The exchanges among members are perceived to be obligatory and permanent in nature and "*returns are made through the system of rights which compel them*" (ibid.: 7).

2.3 *Biraderi* as figuration

It is common to depict *biraderis* as networks in which individual members form nodes that are linked by social relations, such as various gift exchange practices, *vartan bhanji* being one of them. Following Steenberg (2014) in his critique of the contemporary bias in favor of a network perspective, the community aspects of *biraderi* as a social institution shall be summarized briefly. Only a combination of both community and network perspectives allows for the analysis of bilateral relations between actors on the one hand and their links with the greater social whole on the other hand (ibid.: 19). The moral obligation inherent in the practice of *vartan bhanji*, that is, the disproportionate reciprocal exchange, the preference for intra-*biraderi* marriages, and the existence of mutual support in the form of material assistance for the disadvantaged in times of need, indicate the members' consciousness of belonging to one particular *biraderi*. Both aim at the upkeep of social relations; and in-group marriages form a third factor that is constitutive for efforts at group maintenance. Thus, all three aspects symbolize an orientation towards a greater social whole.¹⁹ In addition, the above mentioned role of *biraderis* in mobilization processes in rural and urban politics, the phenomena of collective voting behavior and of the temporary dissolution of intra-*biraderi* conflicts as soon as inter-*biraderi* rivalries occur, point at community characteristics. They illustrate how *biraderi* ties function as in-group, i.e. social identity, markers and provide people the demarcations of 'us vs. them' and the re-enacting of respective boundaries by members of one *biraderi* affiliating themselves as a totality against another or more *biraderi*/s.

Thus, *biraderis* are constituted by both network and community aspects. To emphasize the multi-level dependency-relations implied in the latter, it is valid to signify the representation of a *biraderi* system²⁰ as a (meta-)figuration, which entails a web of interdependencies and relationships among individual members, between individuals and different internal collectivities, such as the *biraderi* of recognition and the *biraderi* of participation, but also between different *biraderis*. As the previous sections (Chs. 2.1, 2.2) already indicated, a *biraderi* can be categorized as one (closed) network, but also can consist of smaller networks, thus deconstructing the totality of a kinship group into rather bounded sub-groups. This distinction is one of scale, based on differences in the number of members from indefinite size in imagined communities of common descent, to reasonably small numbers of individuals and households participating in rituals at a bounded geographic/local scale in face-to-face societies, for example a village-setting. Unlike in networks that are open to new connections and do not have well-defined boundaries, *biraderi* ties are rigid and their boundaries are very well defined and, for example, reaffirmed by the moral obligations of gift exchanges. However, *vartan bhanji* can also be practiced to initiate new networks of participation with newly married households of the same network.

¹⁹ Moreover, the differentiation of *biraderi* of recognition (based on patrilineage and mutual knowledge) and *biraderi* of participation (in gift-exchange practices) adds an interesting qualification to the dichotomous network vs. community lens because it introduces two types of greater social wholes beyond the level of bilateral social relations. Despite their qualitative and quantitative distinctiveness, both types of *biraderi* complement each other in the community dimension.

²⁰ In the words of Elias (1978: 130), a figuration is the changing pattern or moving target that constitutive individuals create "as a whole – not only by their intellects but by their whole selves, the totality of their dealings in their relationships with each other." This starting point enables figuration researchers to conceptualize humans as being part of multiple figurations with different obligations and benefits, depending on the activated dispositions and situated positionalities within the entanglements.

Elias conceptualizes a figuration as “a generic term used to represent the web of interdependencies formed among human beings [...], a structure of mutually oriented and dependent persons” (Elias 1990: 249, as quoted in Quintaneiro 2005). Figuration thus implies not only the dependence of an individual upon social institutions and norms, but also the human interdependencies underlying such bonds. Given the multiplicity (in terms of quantity as well as diversity) of *biraderis*, the depiction of one *biraderi* as a figuration remains merely descriptive if it is viewed as homogeneous social totality, network, community, or single unit as part of a meta-figuration.

The consideration of socio-economic and power differences, that is, differences in social and economic status and wealth within individual *biraderis*, suggests that the figurational approach in its application of the established-outsider paradigm (Elias/Scotson 1993) could be applied with some analytical value. An established-outsider figuration revolves around power imbalances that derive from the differentiated availability of material and relational assets (ibid.: 11). Taking these as dispositional imbalances, the entering of the (social) mobility perspective and mobility/immobility as lens enables us to conceptually link social and economic inequalities (in this case of individual *biraderi* members/households) with potential social transformation, i.e. upward or downward social mobility and change, from a figurational perspective.

Social mobility can be grasped as a transformation in the distribution of resources or a change in social positions (read dispositions) of individuals, families or groups within a given social structure or network (Kaufmann/Bergman/Joye 2004). Thus, social mobility or immobility corresponds with the outcomes of imbalances in social inequality in a given society and is greatly amplified by the characteristics of the analysed group. Members of a group or a society move within their group by making use of the available resources, and the capital/s they possess, be it physical or social (Jensen 2011).

It is assumed that each individual aspires to improve his own status, i.e. members of a *biraderi* strive to potentially achieve social upward mobility in terms of changing status within society and with regard to position/scale in the existing social hierarchy (Hannam/Sheller/Urry 2006: 13). In addition, striving to improve one’s life chances (Appadurai 2013) is closely interlinked with imagined mobility, independent of its chances of realization, which would ultimately require opportunities for mobilization and successful enactment. That being said, mobility not only entails the crossing of spatial and temporal boundaries, but also of social boundaries.

The social situatedness of *biraderi* members or how they are positioned with respect to one another in social space/time can be understood as their positionality (Manderscheid 2009: 14). Positionality as set of dispositions is closely linked to the idea of capitals (Bourdieu 1998) that defines one’s social situatedness and network capital. In the terminology of the mobility paradigm (Urry 2007, Sheller/Urry 2006, Kaufmann et al. 2004) and in an effort to escape the terminological bias toward networks, the network capital could also be conceptualized as motility capital because its quantity, quality – as well as related performativity and enactment – determine the individual’s ability to move (i.e. improve one’s social status and socio-economic position in relation to others).²¹ With reference to the case study, this means that the individual is free to move within the *biraderi* limits,

²¹ Motility (Kaufmann et al. 2004) – the ability to move, both in social and geographical terms (Jensen 2011: 256) – is stratified and stratifies (Manderscheid 2009: 18), mainly due to the factors underlying or determining it. If, conceptually, motility is understood as being generated at the interface of structural conditions and practices mediated by a *habitus*, socio-cultural boundaries and socio-psychological factors underlying the *habitus* deserve scholarly attention.

but his or her position is nevertheless defined in a subtle way by, for example, the socioeconomic status and social capital s/he possesses in his/her given *biraderi*.

Underlying and part of the individual's set of dispositions is a certain *habitus* (Bourdieu 1987) that "generates typical and socially relational patterns of attitudes and social practices" (Manderscheid 2007: 14). Willems (2010: 258) speaks of figurations as a *habitus* generator and regenerator, thereby hinting at the fact that a figuration orients its members into behaving in certain ways and performing certain obligations (like *vartan bhanji*, see below), which on the flipside constantly facilitates and strengthens the underlying interdependencies. Elias & Scotson (1993: 267) have demonstrated that figurations exert influence over their constituent (human individuals) parts. It is against this backdrop that single *biraderis* can be meaningfully analyzed with a figurational approach. Thus, with the idea of stratifying and stratified motility in mind, it is particularly interesting to see how poor households within different *biraderis* go about complying with the necessities to contribute to *vartan bhanji* exchange practices, as well as which strategies they employ to cope with the resulting pressure. At its core the paper aims to establish a link between *biraderi* dynamics and social mobility and investigate whether such social networks prove to be boon or burden for their members.

3. Case study: The practice of *vartan bhanji* at marriage ceremonies

The field work for this analysis²² was conducted in Kot Pindi Das (KPD), a large village of central Punjab and, in its physical layout as well as social structure, prototypical of most Punjabi villages in Pakistan. KPD is home to many *biraderis* of different size and social status; those chosen for the analysis in this research are the two most populous *biraderis*, Kamboh Biraderi and Rehmani Biraderi. Around 90 percent of the members of Kamboh Biraderi who currently live in KPD are descendants of migrants who had left different villages of Karnal District in Indian Punjab at the time of partition in 1947. Rehmani *Biraderi* is the second most populous *biraderi* in KPD after Kamboh Biraderi, and members of this *biraderi* also migrated at the time of partition from India to Pakistan. Before, KPD village was home to Sikh and Hindu people who moved to India in 1947. As a result of this population 'exchange', the homes, shops, and fields of Hindus and Sikhs were occupied by Muslim settlers, in KPD the Kamboh and Rehmani.

The data was collected with qualitative methods, such as participant observation at different weddings in KPD, semi-structured interviewing, and participatory rural appraisal techniques like genealogy mapping and marriage network mapping. The houses where participant observation during two weddings took place belonged to the Kamboh Biraderi²³ and both of them arranged a

²² Field work for this paper was conducted over a period of two months part of an MPhil research at the Department of Psychology, Government College University (GCU), Lahore, in the academic year 2011-12. The research took place in the framework of the German-Pakistani Research Collaboration & Academic Capacity Building Programme between ZEF and GCU (2011-13), funded by the German Foreign Office through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

²³ Since at the time of fieldwork, the only two households where marriages were taking place belonged to Kamboh Biraderi, the data collected by participant observation in marriages is verily restricted to *vartan bhanji* dynamics that are particular to this *biraderi*. This, however, does not imply that these trends are not generalizable to other *biraderis* living in KPD or elsewhere. As a matter of fact, it is very little that is particular to Kamboh Biraderi with regards to the *vartan bhanji* rituals. Mostly what is followed in *vartan bhanji* is pre-

combined wedding of one daughter and one son at the same time. Although both weddings were performed within the Kamboh Biraderi, the respondent families belonged to different socio-economic classes and enabled a within-*biraderi* comparison of two households of Kamboh Biraderi. Both the households were associated with each other as members of '*biraderi* of recognition', but not as '*biraderi* of participation'. One family was relatively rich and well-known in KPD, i.e. Mohsin Nambardar's family, and the other family was poor, i.e. Aqeel Kamboh's family. Mohsin Nambardar is a former public official (*nambardar*). At the time of fieldwork he was one of the key figures of the Kamboh Biraderi of KPD, whereas Aqeel was a tailor by profession and an orphan.

3.1 Reciprocation of congratulatory money and non-equilibrium exchange

Congratulatory money, locally called *salami*, *neondra* or *neota*, is given to the bride and groom by his or her parents, siblings, relatives and friends at the time of their wedding.²⁴ In the following, selective empirical examples are presented to show how this monetary exchange is practiced, and what role it plays in establishing or disturbing equilibrium in reciprocation among *biraderi* members.

Aqeel, the son of a widow, got married with the help of his maternal uncles (*mamus*) and maternal grandfather (*nana*); hence the 'contribution of maternal side' was emphasized strongly. It is obligatory, regardless of one's socio-economic status and the financial ability to perform it. The wedding day started with a breakfast that was served to all the wedding guests. By noon, Aqeel sat down with a few relatives on a stage and a ritual called *Sehra Bandi* was performed. At this time, all the members greeted him and gave him congratulatory money. The exact amounts were promptly noted down in a register by a literate relative who sat next to the groom. This register (*bahi/wahi*) can be a simple notebook. Once all the transactions made by *biraderi* members are recorded, it is kept as a family record to be preserved and always consulted when the groom reciprocates in future weddings of his relatives. There is a strict format in which the amounts given as congratulatory money are noted. Firstly the name of the guest is written, followed by his/her father's name, then his/her home address/city name and then the amount given to the groom. This amount is very important as this is the amount, against which the groom has to reciprocate, with his own addition, at the future weddings of these relatives/friends. It is important to mention here that the relatives/friends give congratulatory money to the groom according to what they had already received from groom's side earlier at their weddings, hence maintaining and reinforcing the norm of reciprocity. The actors involved in this ritual included all the relatives from the maternal and paternal families of the groom, the married sisters of the groom, and their in-laws, neighbors, and friends. When asked what happens if someone cannot contribute, the groom's mother said that the host, generally, insists on the participation of all the relatives. It is rather considered offensive if someone does not participate even if he/she cannot contribute. She said that the invited guest has to come to the wedding to honor the invitation, regardless of contributing something or not. This indicates that the focus is on participation of all the members of a *biraderi* in the wedding, independent of financial contributions.

dominantly agreed upon practices across *biraderis*, with a very little or no particular rituals related to one single *biraderi*.

²⁴ This tradition of congratulatory money has also been seen in the Chinese culture, where clothes and money are given at marriage ceremonies to the bride and groom and their respective families (Kipnis 1996). Congratulatory gifts are given by friends to the groom and bride and by parents to their children's in-laws. On the day of marriage or engagement, all the fellow villagers give gift money to the head of the house (*ibid.*).

However, this contradicts a certain pressure and perceived obligation to contribute, which is also noted by the groom's mother: "At times, some rich relatives give congratulatory money out of their own pockets to their poor relatives so that they could have something written under their name in the record book in order to save the embarrassment of not contributing to the wedding, and also so that nobody could say that a particular person did not contribute anything at the wedding".²⁵ She also mentioned that she herself got money from her brothers on many occasions to contribute in her name. According to her knowledge, the households of rural areas rely on the institution of congratulatory money to meet the wedding expenses.

Vartan bhanji exchange practices include but are not limited to congratulatory money. The latter is rather one of the many items that are exchanged among families as part of *vartan bhanji* practices. Other gift items include, for example, clothes, sweets, and dowry items. The following figure captures the essence of most of the exchanges that take place at any given wedding among *biraderi* members.

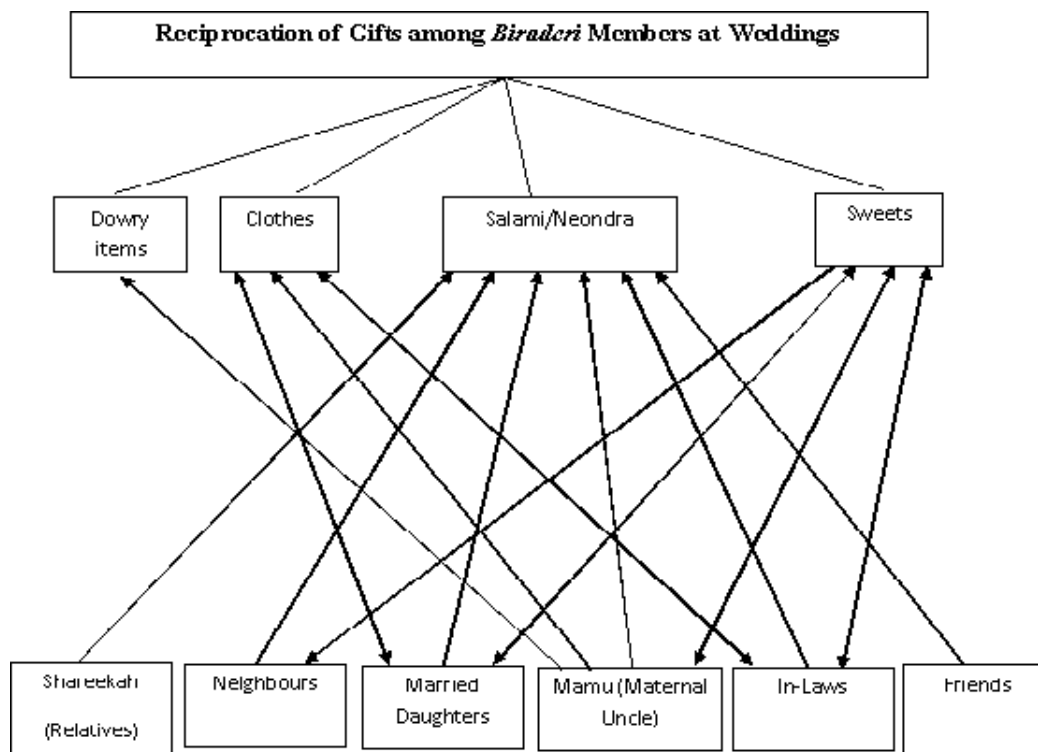


Figure 1: Gifts exchanged and actors involved in the exchange of gifts at weddings of different *biraderis* in KPD²⁶

Figure 1 shows the different items that are exchanged among various people at wedding occasions. The actors involved in such exchanges range from close relatives to friends, and the number of items exchanged speaks of and depends on the closeness of the relationship with various *biraderi* members. Most of the items are given to and taken from the married daughters, in-laws and maternal uncles who thus form the center of the exchange network. Neighbors only give

²⁵ Interview, 25 April 2012.

²⁶ The direction of the arrow indicates the items exchanged by the corresponding actors. One way arrow means the actors simply give the gifts to the host, whereas, two way arrows indicate that the actors also receive the gifts from the host at the weddings.

congratulatory money, but they do not give clothes or sweets; therefore, they do not receive clothes, but they qualify to receive sweets by virtue of being neighbors. The members, who are only distantly related as well as friends that are at the periphery and thus only contribute congratulatory money, do not receive anything in return.

As mentioned in the explications of *vartan bhanji* as reciprocal exchange practice (section 2.2), the most important feature of the reciprocation of congratulatory money at weddings is the norm of non-equilibrium. Each household that contributes to the wedding and engages in *vartan bhanji* gives more than what it received at its wedding. The return of an equal amount means that no further invitation will be sent to the household that gave equal congratulatory money. *“It is self-explanatory that if someone is giving equal salami, he is telling us that he does not want to have vartan bhanji with us in future”*, said Aqeel’s elder brother.²⁷ This unwritten rule was corroborated by several respondents at the time of fieldwork and there was no difference of opinion among representatives of different socio-economic backgrounds. For example, the female respondents at Mohsin Nambardar’s house – the rich household of the key figure of Kamboh Biraderi in KPD – reacted to the question whether the amount of *vartan bhanji* can be equal or higher: *“It cannot be equal at all. It must be higher, as the additional amount serves as the debt for further reciprocation”*. An old brick-kiln worker from Kamboh Biraderi stated, *“The neondra amount cannot be equal. What I get at my wedding, I have to give higher than that, and the addition to vartan bhanji amount solely depends on the financial capacity of the person. I can give 200 Rupees more, or even 500, and even 1000 Rupees more if I can afford it”*.²⁸

Similarly, a respondent from a relatively better off household of the Rehmani Biraderi, who is the owner of two brick kilns in KPD, confirmed the peculiar nature of reciprocation in *vartan bhanji* arrangements and with the following example he added a further dimension of extravagance when describing the extraordinary disproportion of reciprocation:

“A friend of my uncle who lives in Saudi Arabia participated in my wedding two years ago, and gave me 10,000 Rupees as salami. I did not take the amount in the first place but the person insisted so much that I could not refuse, and this year I participated in the weddings of a niece of this friend of my uncle, and gave 50,000 Rupees as vartan bhanji in reciprocation. Had he not given such big amount on my wedding, I would not have reciprocated so much at his wedding. But since he did contribute extravagantly on mine, I had to do the same on his wedding”.²⁹

In this case, the socio-economic capacity allowed the household to contribute fivefold the amount it had received previously and with the certainty that the Rs. 40,000 which was given in addition will be reciprocated in future exchange with another addition from the other party. This example also indicates that *vartan bhanji* in rich families is a way to strengthen ties not only with *biraderi* relatives but also with their friends, who can also be from other *biraderis*. Consequently, exchange in *vartan bhanji* arrangements can also stretch beyond the boundaries of one *biraderi* if the socio-economic status of a family allows affording the necessary costs. In contrast, if a household is poor, the exchange circle shrinks to very few members with whom one reciprocates in *vartan bhanji*.

²⁷ Interview, 25 April 2012.

²⁸ Interview, 2 May 2012.

²⁹ Interview, 21 April 2012.

It can be concluded that the socio-economic conditions delimit the social sphere of a particular household. *Vartan bhanji* is a significant indicator of one's social mobility within *biraderi*. The richer the household is, the more the connections it has, both formal and informal, and the bigger the social sphere becomes over time, and vice versa. This also explains how such informal networks influence the very formal social makeup of society in general. For example, it has been documented in the literature that voting behavior is influenced by *biraderi* ties (Ahmed 2011, Chaudhary 1999, Wilder 1999). Mostly the rich person of a certain *biraderi* participates in political affairs and exploits his *biraderi* connections for getting votes in the name of *biraderi* ties that he maintains with several households by performing rituals like *vartan bhanji*, among others. It is here that one can detect the seamlessly invisible link between the formal and informal spheres of power within society.

In contrast, a less well-endowed member of Rehmani Biraderi worked as a hawker with daily earnings of Rs. 200-300 by selling seasonal fruits in the village on his bicycle. He had married his daughter three years ago and spent Rs. 300,000 on her wedding while the total amount of congratulatory money that he received from his relatives was only Rs. 20,000. This huge gap between his spending and collections was filled by disbursed money allocations from casting committees (see below). This gap, however, is indicative of the patterns of *vartan bhanji* his household performed with his relatives. The hawker mentioned that none of his brothers assisted him with the marriage expenses and that they also contributed only small amounts as *vartan bhanji* because he had previously only been able to contribute very little on their marriages. In short, socio-economic status plays a vital role in extending or shrinking the circle of *biraderi* members with whom one reciprocates in the rituals of *vartan bhanji*. It is, however, noteworthy that regardless of whether the circle of relatives is small or large, reciprocation is a must and has to be greater than the previous amount.

There is a certain gender dimension to *vartan bhanji* (Eglar 1960) because even though the political matters of the exchange and how to manage it financially are left ultimately to the males of a household, it is the females who decide with whom such exchanges are to be performed and to what extent. In family-related matters, females are traditionally in charge in Punjabi society. It is the oldest female of the household that makes the decision of accepting or rejecting to participate in *vartan bhanji* with other *biraderi* members. Moreover, males are never seen or even don't like to be involved in such exchanges directly. For example, in the two weddings observed during the time of fieldwork, men handed over the congratulatory money at the weddings whereas all the other items shown in Figure 1, such as clothes, sweets, and dowry items, were offered by the females of the guest family to the host family. Usually the oldest woman of the family keeps record of what her family contributed to the weddings of the households they were invited for earlier, how they had reciprocated earlier and which reciprocation would be needed at the new invitation. Her accurate knowledge of the non-monetary amounts received and thus to be returned in such exchanges points at her vital role for taking care of establishing, strengthening or weakening the *biraderi* ties with different households. It is usually the males of the household who exchange congratulatory money, but it is always the females who engage with the non-monetary exchange items, such as clothes, sweets, and dowry items (see Figure 1). Again, the key factor that matters in this reciprocation is non-equilibrium as the women keep record not only of the amount contributed or the gifts exchanged but also of the addition made by the guest family to the original amount paid by the host family earlier.

On another note and concerning the gender dimension, fieldwork revealed that whenever a neutral question of marriage, either within-*biraderi* or outside *biraderi*, was asked during the interviews, the respondents immediately started talking about the marriage of their daughters. Particularly for poor

households the marriage of a daughter is a burden and huge strain, because the father has to take care of a daughter’s wedding whereas a son is expected to take care of his marriage on his own. Given the need for *biraderi* support in financing weddings, particularly for poor households, daughters are highly significant – a finding that could be interpreted as adding on the community aspect of *biraderi* groups. Moreover, this study thus confirms the observations Eglar made more than 50 years ago, that the institution of *vartan bhanji* seems to rotate around the daughters of the house, be it mother, sister, or bride.

3.2 Coping strategies to meet social pressures of *vartan bhanji*

The empirical examples from the poor *biraderi* households in the previous section instantly raise the question how huge finance gaps at weddings can be dealt with or avoided altogether. In an overview, Figure 2 summarizes the dominant coping strategies poor households of KPD adopted for meeting the obligations of *vartan bhanji*. Three types of strategies can be analytically distinguished. However, in practice these strategies are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are interlinked and may be used in parallel by one individual or household to meet the required needs. In other words, respondents stated that they practice many of the economic, social and psychological coping strategies simultaneously.

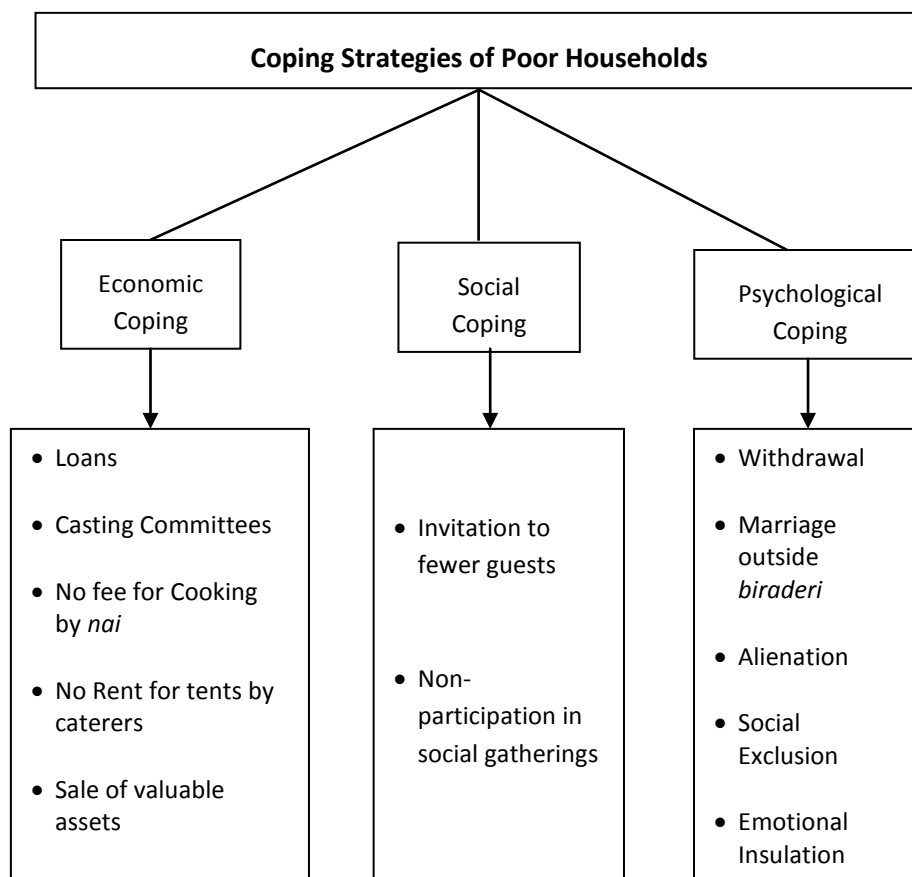


Figure 2: Coping Strategies adopted by poor households for dealing with obligations of *vartan bhanji*

The different types of coping strategies are discussed for poor households in the following. The discussion is guided by the assumption that poor households lack many resources and thus also the economic capacity that is usually required for the exchange of different types of gifts. All insights were gained during fieldwork and refer to wedding ceremonies as opposed to other life-cycle rituals.

1) ECONOMIC COPING

Taking loans is one of the most common coping strategies for KPD's poor households that attempt to deal with the financial pressures of *vartan bhanji*. Accordingly, a wedding of a relative is preceded by taking up a loan in order to be able to give congratulatory money or to purchase dowry-items that are handed over by the females in kind. Mostly, households take loans informally from their relatives or from the rich members of the *biraderi*. In this regard, many respondents stated that they perceive *vartan bhanji* as a system of indebtedness. For example, the local barber (*nai*) – member of a professional but low-status group usually in charge of cooking and preparation arrangements in weddings – stated, “*Vartan bhanji is Qarz-e-Hasna*”,³⁰ which refers to a debt that has to be returned, but without any time limit for returning it.

Most widespread in the informal realm, however, is the practice of ‘casting committees’, locally called ‘*committee dalna*’. It involves a group of people who agree to give a certain amount of money to a particular person, with the recipient rotating every month. The total amount thus collected from all members is then given to one member at a time and this continues until at the end all the members got their amounts back in lump sum. For example, if a person contributes in this practice and gives Rs. 3,000 per month to a specific person whereas the overall group size of committee members is 30 who pay the exact same amount to that person, the lump sum amount for one month thus becomes Rs. 90,000. This amount is then given to one of the contributing members so that he or she can meet any major need. In follow-up rounds, the turn keeps switching until all the members get their amounts paid back when they need it. This collective pooling practice enables ordinary members of local society to plan for and meet extraordinary expenses. It is easier for anyone to take a relatively small Rupees-amount – in this example Rs. 3,000 – out from their income every month than saving at home alone or over a longer term in a bank account. The benefit is likewise much greater and comes with a high degree of predictability. Of course, the overall amount that can be received – in the example the total of Rs. 90,000 – always depends on the monthly inputs and the number of committee members. The turns for getting this amount keep switching and the sequence is generally agreed upon by all members at the time the committee is initiated. In case any member faces a serious emergency, the sequence can be changed, though.

This type of arrangement is preferred among socio-economically disadvantaged households in KPD. Weddings are anticipated by the timely casting of a committee, either as a member or even as an initiator. A respondent from Kamboh Biraderi who had already married his daughter with the amount of money he got as a result of participating in a committee, stated that, newly, “*I have casted one committee for my daughter and will marry her as soon as I get my committee out*”.³¹ The interviews revealed that many people in KPD take loans when in need and also participate in casting committees which are regularly used to pay back the instant-received loans. Another respondent reported that he took a loan on his daughter's marriage three years earlier and also purchased goods on debt for her dowry. In order to pay the debt back, the father has been participating in different committees over the three years since.

The social practice of casting committees works at many levels in Pakistan. Most of the housewives engage in it and nominate one of the ladies as the trustworthy person to whom everyone is

³⁰ Interview, 8 May 2012.

³¹ Interview, 14 May 2012.

supposed to give money. Likewise, many shopkeepers engage among themselves in these saving circles, faculty members of education institutes, and employees in many banks in the provincial capital Lahore are known to practice casting committees. This shows that it is an urban as well as a rural phenomenon. The prime benefit of such pooling is that it is interest free, and a rather flexible finance support system that caters to the needs of the pooling members. Mostly, the boundaries of casting committees transcend the *biraderi* ties. It is common to find people of different *biraderis* pooling together in this ritual. However, the boundaries of socio-economic 'classes' remain intact, as mostly people from a similar if not the same socio-economic background tend to trust each other for casting committees. In a nutshell, debt repayment, wedding planning and support as well as financing daughters' marriages constitute the main purposes of casting committees.

In one special case encountered during fieldwork for this study, the respondent was not only poor but also partially disabled, with vision impairment in one eye. Consequently none of the household heads of his *biraderi* was willing to marry his daughter to him during the late 1980s. Thus, he took the chance to use the Rs. 22,000 disbursement from his turn in the committee to marry a Bengali woman in Karachi via paying Rs. 17,000.³² Once married, the previously rejected *biraderi* member with his blind eye was expected to engage in *vartan bhanji* exchanges at all the *biraderi* households' wedding events. In another case, a partly paralyzed shepherd who was also among the few very poor households of KPD, reported the following:³³

"I married a girl who has eight sisters and no brother. One of my sisters-in-law got married last week and I had to give money to my father-in-law because he does not possess any resource to marry his daughters. My father-in-law asked all his sons-in-law to give him Rs. 5,000 each so that he could marry this daughter. So I also gave Rs. 5,000. In order to arrange that money I had to sell two of my sheep for much lesser value. I sold my sheep for Rs. 2,500 each. I had planned to save them for the Eid season when I would have received a good value. But since I had to meet this obligation, I had no choice but to sell two of them. I also gifted another Rs. 200 as congratulatory money to my father-in-law".³⁴

Both cases reflect the importance assigned by *biraderi* members to contributions, which are expected to be made even if one is poor and disabled. The quoted respondent could not escape this obligation of contributing at his sister-in-law's wedding. Because his father-in-law has no son, the interviewee and the other sons-in-law stand as real sons of whom it is expected that they come together to help their father-in-law marrying his remaining daughters. It is noteworthy to see that the shepherd only managed to give Rs. 200 as congratulatory money, as this is the recorded amount that will then be reciprocated at his own children's weddings. The small value of the contribution speaks of the shepherd's poor economic situation, but not contributing was not an option because it would mean to end the relationship altogether. So he gave into the situation and sold two of his

³² The Bengali wife had been smuggled from Bangladesh to Karachi by traffickers on the promise of a laboring job in India. The marriage saved her from ending up in a brothel or being sold to somebody else. The contact with the poor disabled man from KPD was made by his cousin who lived in Karachi at that time. He had come to know about these girls and suggested his cousin to 'buy' the women from the middle man.

³³ Interview, 12 May 2012.

³⁴ Eid-ul-Adha is the time when Muslims sacrifice cattle, sheep and goats in the name of God. At that time, the shepherds can get fairly good amounts for their cattle.

sheep, commenting: *“It is for such emergency purposes also that I keep the sheep. I can sell them whenever such urgent situation arises.”*³⁵

2) SOCIAL COPING

Vartan bhanji is not only the economic exchange people of a *biraderi* perform among themselves; it is equally a social exchange and as such was depicted also as part of the community dimension of *biraderi* (section 2.3). People get together at different ceremonies and re-strengthen the cohesive bond of the relationships they hold with each other through reciprocal exchange practices. Moreover, a functioning social support network helps in coping with stress factors, pressure and stressful situations by extending material help or advice and support. Underlying this is the assumption that individuals belong to networks of mutual caring and that social and emotional support helps those affected by stress in coping with the situation (Feldman 2011). In KPD, several practices of local social coping among poor households with the aim to upkeep their status as *biraderi* members could be observed.

A poor 70-year old kiln worker, who was worried about marrying his daughters because he lacked the financial means to do so, stated that he would therefore refrain from inviting many guests. He said,

*“What can I do? I cannot afford to marry my daughter. So I will just call few relatives from the groom’s side and will serve them with drinks and a meal and will marry my daughter simplistically. The relatives know that I cannot afford to marry my daughter so they will understand. I have participated in a committee and am waiting for my turn. I will marry my daughter as soon as I get my committee.”*³⁶

This plan contradicts the common norms that are to be observed for continuing *vartan bhanji*; for example it is considered very offensive if someone is not invited to the wedding of a relative. However, this extraordinary measure was justified with a defiant argument of necessity. In similar cases, only one member from the other *biraderi* households – usually the head of the house – is invited for the wedding, not the whole family. This drastically decreases the number of guests the host has to entertain, thereby decreasing the cost of the marriage. Adopting this strategy is a compromise for poor households wanting to marry their children without incurring expenses beyond their means. The embarrassment of not inviting whole families is greater than that of inviting only selected *biraderi* members in the wedding. The trade-off does not involve a loss of money in the future, because if even only one member of a household is invited, the amount to be reciprocated has to be the same as if the whole family was invited. The reciprocation obligation and expectation is a function of the invitation, no matter if one member or the whole family is invited.

Another important and relevant strategy emerged out of the interviews with the barber (*nai*) and the tent lessor at different occasions. They reported having waived their charges in cases where households could not otherwise afford a daughter’s wedding. The barbers’ and caterers’ fees are two major expenses in the financial planning of a poor household, and being relieved of the charges makes a substantial difference. One barber mentioned that in the wedding season when fieldwork

³⁵ Interview, 12 May 2012.

³⁶ Interview, 2 May 2012.

was conducted, he arranged two weddings with the tent lessor free of charge. He stated, “*When the daughter of a poor household reaches the age of marriage, the neighbours of that house get together and support the wedding by pooling in the money. I don’t charge the fee for cooking for the wedding meals, and the caterer does not charge for setting up the tents for marriage*”.³⁷

3) PSYCHOLOGICAL COPING

Linked with economic and social coping are the psychological coping strategies. The research found that themes like “withdrawal”, “social exclusion”, and “social insulation” are common among poor households of different *biraderis* in KPD. The most evident and common strategy was withdrawal. To different extents, the poor members of Jolaha Biraderi, Rehmani Biraderi, and Kamboh Biraderi all try to avoid situations where they have to attend weddings and contribute. In the case of the one-eyed blind man who married a woman from Bangladesh in Karachi, his disability in addition to his poverty kept him from participating in any social gatherings. Hence, his avoidance strategy was that he sent the required money for *vartan bhanji* with his wife and kids. He decided not to participate in person in the wedding of his sister-in-law. Alienation was observed as a consequence of this type of withdrawal. It resulted in awkward situations for the affected, for example, the same person reported, “*Two of my brothers live next door to me, we share the same wall, but they do not get along with me as they are well-off and I am poor*.”³⁸ Marginalization within his own *biraderi* increased his vulnerability. The withdrawal, which cannot be said to be voluntary only, pushes his existence to the fringes of the *biraderi* because he cannot afford to leave the *biraderi* and cannot engage properly either. In another case, the perceived alienation and social exclusion of one poor member of Rehmani Biraderi was caused and off-set by a sequence of outside-family and within-family marriages of a daughter and son. Even though the respondent indicated that he would generally prefer within-family marriages, he married his daughter outside-family three years ago because at that time none of the *biraderi* members wanted to marry his daughter. At the time of fieldwork he was confident of getting back into the family network because he planned marrying his son within-family to his sister’s daughter.

Several cases illustrated that when a person does not find enough support from within a *biraderi* for his own wedding or the wedding of own daughters, he seeks it from outside the *biraderi*. Nevertheless, they cannot quit their *biraderi* belonging and continue to be part of their *biraderis* by participating in obligatory rituals of *vartan bhanji* at marriage, death, birth and circumcision ceremonies. The spiral of withdrawal, emotional isolation, and social exclusion affects poor *biraderi* members in the way that they and the following generations face further problems, such as lower turnout of relatives on their children’s weddings, lower contributions by their *biraderi* members in *vartan bhanji*, and so on. The analysis showed that a mere participation in social ceremonies and even a very small contribution, as low as Rs. 200, can save them much trouble since such participation keeps them in the loop, even though marginalized and vulnerable. If they do not fail to participate at the social gatherings of their *biraderi* members, their fellow *biraderi* members still follow the obligation to contribute towards them, even when they might have contributed very little.

³⁷ Interview, 8 May 2012.

³⁸ Interview, 12 May 2012.

3.3 *Vartan bhanji* as social mobility impasse for the low-income households?

To better assess the significance of *vartan bhanji* exchange practices for social mobility beyond the perspective at the time of the fieldwork, oral history and biographical interviews were also conducted, in order to capture the trajectory of *vartan bhanji*-patterns over time.

One 85-year old man described the patterns of inter-family marriages since his great great grandfather's time. Accordingly, his great grandfather started within-family marriage in 1876 and, ever since, weddings have been conducted among the members of only two families. This resulted in a highly complex and entrenched family network. The genealogy mapping for this family highlighted the imprints of partition in the family history. It showed that because more or less the whole village migrated from India in 1947, all families were similarly deprived of resources and thus intra-family marriages became respectable. Asked about *vartan bhanji* at his own wedding, the old man said, "*I gave nothing and took nothing for the bride as I came from India and lost everything either back in India or on the way to Pakistan*". He was married to his maternal uncle's daughter shortly after the families' arrival in Pakistan upon the request of his mother. The case indicates that intra-family marriages increased right after partition because the environment was completely uncertain and misery dominated at that time. Thus, people started marrying within-family more rigorously as compared to marrying outside the family where they would have to contribute when they had nothing to contribute as such. What is further obvious is the central role of the maternal uncle in these marriages and of brothers in their sisters' lives in general, even after marriage. This is a striking feature in all *biraderis*, across socio-economic statuses, and across generations.

Although the rituals of *vartan bhanji* were not performed at the respondent's own wedding, they were generally practiced among those families who could afford it. The interviewee explained,

"Although congratulatory money was not given at my wedding as I had nothing, the ritual was practiced back then. People used to contribute as per their capacity, be it four anna,³⁹ eight anna, or maybe one Rupee. People would not take any monetary contribution from a married daughter back then. It was customary to assume that once the daughter is married, she should not give any congratulatory money. Instead, she would bring clothes for her groom-brother".⁴⁰

He went on stating, "*People used to give only five utensils of immediate use, one cart, two mattresses, and one prayer mat. [...] What people give today to their daughters ends nowhere and includes items like fridges, blankets, ten to twenty mattresses, and what not.*" The old man complained that such excess has caused trouble for the poor because no one takes their daughter as they cannot afford to give these expensive items as dowry presents. His critique which stems from long-term observation of the increasing culmination of *vartan bhanji* practices in overly indulgent exchange, such as excessive dowries at weddings, amplifies the impression derived from the contemporary weddings that *vartan bhanji* puts increased pressure on low-income households and thus acts as an impasse for these households' social mobility. It has become almost impossible for the poor households to meet the demands of the groom's side of giving more and more to the bride as dowry.⁴¹ The persisting obligation to obey to the identified overly excessive social exchange

³⁹ *Anna* was a currency functional in the 1960s that is now obsolete. Sixteen *Anna* were equal to one *Rupee*.

⁴⁰ Interview, 11 May 2012.

⁴¹ These patterns and the related pressures on the poor have increased with urbanization and an increased flow of money among middle classes. Lower middle classes in urban areas are likewise facing more and more

practices and its underlying seeming irrational logic could be explained with the habitus concept (Bourdieu 1987). Accordingly, the socialization and the habitual way of doing things impacts on the life-long behavior, in this case the obligation of poor households to engage in *vartan bhanji* practices regardless of their lack of resources.

It is unclear, to what extent this leads in all cases to marked social downward mobility of the low-income households, although the psychological, social and economic consequences have been shown to be significant and closely entangled. An improvement of a low income household's status by adhering to *vartan bhanji*-related obligations is certainly unlikely and at an aggregate level, generalizing the situation of low-income *biraderi* members' households, *vartan bhanji* can be said to restrict social mobility. The gap between what the members are supposed to do and what they can actually do keeps widening. The described coping strategies help the households to bridge the gap between their given resources and the social expectations surrounding them. This however merely helps them survive and sustain their position within the network, without leaving much room for social mobility and status improvements. It is pertinent to mention that the government has taken steps to rid the poor households off these pressures. However, the measures, such as a law that restricts the number of dishes at weddings and limits the marriage functions to end by 10pm or 12pm in many cities, have not taken effect.

The evidence provided in this paper so far suggests general low social mobility and hardly any options to escape the boundaries of one's own *biraderi*. Fieldwork also showed that there are rare exceptions to this static view, however. For example, name-changes – often accompanied with geographic movement to a different locale – can enable individual *biraderi* members to elevate their socio-economic status and position in the inter-*biraderi* hierarchy. One such case recorded in KPD was that of a kiln-owning family of Rehmani Biraderi, which was one of the wealthiest at the time of fieldwork. In the distant past, Rehmani Biraderi was categorized and perceived as a lower *biraderi* that carried out menial tasks within a village community. In Ibbetson's report on the Punjab Census in the late 19th century, Rehmani Biraderi was designated with the name Kumhar (Ibbetson 2004). It categorized the Kumhar Biraderi as belonging to the 'vagrant, menial and artisan castes'. Accordingly, they were the potters and brick makers, who are numerous in the Punjab owing to the almost universal use of the Persian wheel with its numerous little earthen pots to raise water for irrigation purposes (ibid.: 309). With increasing wealth, the members of the younger generation of the Kumhar Biraderi shunned away from the term Kuhmaar or Kamyaar (in Punjabi) and made efforts to change their *biraderi* name to Rehmani. None of the contemporary Rehmanis in KPD was very comfortable with admitting their background as potters. The 85-year old man mentioned that his elders used to make pots back in India before partition, but because he did not know the skill, he could not continue in his family's occupational tradition after they had moved to Pakistan. This shows, for this particular case, that on the one hand the professional reorientation caused a gap between *biraderi* identity derived from the occupational niche and the respective name. Thus, the subsequent later name change was likely not only informed by the desire to escape the Kumhar-related stereotypes. On the other hand, the adoption of a new identity was probably aided by the large-scale displacement related to partition. Claiming a new identity in a new place and social environment is more likely to succeed and to lead to the desired social mobility than at the place of origin in the familiar social

pressure to meet related demands. What was once functioning as informal support network has become a nightmare for the masses.

neighborhood. Thus, this exception in social mobility can be disregarded as part of the broader pattern and hence it can be understood to prove the rule.

In another variation of this exception, there are many cases where people try to change names of their *biraderis* to escape stigmatization as members of a lower *biraderi* at the time when they settle in urban centers. In many instances, new arrivals to the larger cities tend to choose names that are derivatives of but different from their original low status-*biraderi* names. Both the change of location and the increase of available resources facilitate social mobility and this strongly indicates a link between spatial and social mobility. However, as far as this research could establish, the effects are not felt in rural areas. If change occurs, it does so over a long period of time and often particularly the status of the poorest members of society is not affected. Name changes are more difficult to put in place in villages where people will know the origin of one's *biraderi* names and have a past record of living together in one village and more or less close interdependence.

4. Concluding remarks

The aim of the study was to problematize the role of *vartan bhanji* among the low-income households of different *biraderi*, to investigate the differential positioning of people within their *biraderis*, and to trace the social (im-)mobility trajectories established within and among various *biraderis* via *vartan bhanji* practices. To do this, the underlying practice of *vartan bhanji* was analyzed in greater detail. Furthermore, the role and impact of *vartan bhanji* on the lives, identities, and social mobility of poor households within their respective *biraderis* was investigated. Based on the empirical data, it can be concluded that *vartan bhanji* is the thread which binds the *biraderi* members in one cohesive interdependent unit – a figuration – across socio-economic group boundaries and generations. By exchanging gifts with each other via *vartan bhanji*, the members constantly reconfirm their *biraderi* belonging and perpetuate their mutual ties. Such exchanges, however, are not optional, free of choice and irregular; rather, they follow a very formal, highly reciprocal pattern determined by obligation. Future research should investigate the underlying explanations. In this paper we have suggested that one factor that contributes to the perception of obligation to take part in *vartan bhanji* practices is the internalized and unreflected upon habitus.

The institution of *vartan bhanji*, of exchanging gifts at various ceremonies, is not just a mere economic exchange, but rather a social one where a person contributes and abides by the *biraderi* norms and in return gets support and protection. This follows the logic of social exchange theory where households weigh the costs of participating against the social benefits of protection and support provided by *biraderi* members. People perceive *vartan bhanji* as a reciprocal exchange, but also as debt. They know whatever they contribute in *vartan bhanji* will come back later on their weddings with some addition. This predictability might relieve households from the concerns of saving larger amounts in order to conduct their marriages. They also rely on *vartan bhanji* to pay back the loans they may take for arranging marriages. This flexibility aspect of *vartan bhanji* seems to be supportive of the poor, but it also renders them socially immobile. The disadvantaged members of any single *biraderi*, in particular the physically disabled and the lowest-income households often end up being marginalized socially. Their vulnerability translates into alienation and in many cases results in large-scale social exclusion. However, the overview of coping strategies also showed that poor households adopt innovative strategies allowing them to compromise between expenses and

participation. Where this is achieved, the *biraderi* will continue to provide them support, protection, and thus identity.

This allows the conclusion that *vartan bhanji* is a strategy to strengthen the *biraderi* ties, but it also restricts one's movement within society by impairing exchanges and network relations. Existing social boundaries are thus perpetuated. *Vartan bhanji* serves as concrete indicator of one's mobility or immobility in a *biraderi*. However, such practices do not exist in isolation and are heavily impaired by socio-economic realities altogether. What one can contribute in one's *biraderi* is verily dependent on what one can afford in terms of monetary value, which in turn expands or restricts one's interactions/transactions within *biraderi*, thereby marking the limits of one's social mobility in society. Hence, the socio-economic status determines and is determined by the social positions of all the households within their *biraderi*. Daughters have often been characterized by the respondents as nothing but liabilities that have to be taken care of and require significant sacrifices.

Finally, the question whether *vartan bhanji* is a boon or a burden cannot be answered in an either/or manner. It is definitely a reciprocal relationship that the members of a *biraderi* cannot get away from but at the same time cannot afford to live without. It is more of a necessary evil for the poor households within respective *biraderis*. What is important is the mutual, social and economic exchange that transcends the boundaries of profit and loss. This means that the answer to the question whether *biraderi* is a boon or a burden depends on who one talks to. People who are situated better and higher in the social hierarchy see it more as a unifying factor that enables them to identify with other *biraderi* members and mobilize collective support. In contrast, the lower income households perceive *biraderi*-norms and obligations also as an impasse that perpetuates existing and deeply entrenched social inequalities. It goes largely unreflected by the people who are affected, but traditions like *vartan bhanji* have kept such identities alive, for better or worse, as people usually see both the advantages of their *biraderi* ties and also the disadvantages they have to face when complying with the related social pressures. Further research should be conducted on *vartan bhanji* exchanges in other ceremonies than marriages, such as death ceremonies, birth ceremonies and circumcision ceremonies to solidify the insights on *vartan bhanji* and how it determines low-income households' social (im-)mobility.

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Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group "Conflict" will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group "Migration" aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the "Development"-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.

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