very much a draft

Tasteless profits and vexed moralities in rural Rajasthan

Ann Grodzins Gold[1]

> This was the great industrial revelation: that in the world's richest societies, the subjective experience of lack increases in proportion to the objective output of wealth. Encompassed in an international division of labor, individual needs were seemingly inexhaustible. Felt, moreover, as physiological pangs, as deprivations like hunger and thirst, these needs seem to come from within, as dispositions of the body.
> [*Marshall Sahlins*, "Sadness of Sweetness," 2000: 539]

> There was less cultivated land [in the past], but we were very happy; now there is more land [under the plow] but people are not so happy. . . . There are more people, and people's desires have increased. Everyone wants twenty *bighas*; *trisa* (thirst, desire, longing) has increased.[2]
> [*Damodar Sharma Gujarati,* interview, Ghatiyali, 1993]

My title condenses two concurrent and overlapping commentaries on the present prevalent in rural Rajasthan. The first of these, "tasteless profits," echoes a pervasive discourse among farmers which says that, in order to increase their earnings, they have deliberately and willingly sacrificed the delicious flavors and nourishing qualities which they consistently attribute to indigenous species of grains and vegetables they no longer cultivate. Today's more profit-driven and more productive agriculture, many farmers told me, required them to use commercially produced seeds and chemical fertilizers resulting in flavorless crops, but more of them, destined for the market. Profits are unequivocally desirable; few were of a mind to forego them. If a number of older persons expressed disinterest in consumer goods or social

---

[1]Thanks to Daniel Gold and Ron Herring for thoughtful readings and helpful suggestions. I have yet to incorporate Ron's critique of the language of "profit" which he believes may be inappropriate in the context of small farmers who are squeezed by circumstances in their "game against nature." Perhaps they must work harder and sacrifice pleasure not to earn but merely to survive; all the more interesting that they speak of this compulsion in terms of desire, rather than necessity. I presented earlier versions of this paper in Jane Marie Law's "Religion and Ecology" class in October and Cornell University's South Asia Seminar in November, receiving encouraging and useful feedback, and many affirmations that similar interpretations of the present exist throughout South Asia; thanks particularly to Alaka Basu for pointing me to findings from Bangladesh.

[2]One *bigha* is 5/8 of an acre, so this hypothetical desired landholding would be approximately twelve acres, huge by village standards.

advancement (eminent twin fruits of profits) for themselves, even they generally wished to obtain these benefits for their children.

Desire itself has increased, as Damodar Gujarati states, and this leads to "vexed moralities" -- my second theme -- in multiple ways and at multiple levels. Problematic moral behaviors include less courtesy and respect within families; less neighborliness; less sense of community and reduced participation in community-wide rituals; and more violence perpetuated by humans against other living beings, both human and non-human. A number of persons interviewed describe the present as *kamzor* (weak) or *halki* -- literally "light-weight," but implying inferior, trashy, or shallow.

Still in a formative stage, this paper is my attempt to wring from unprocessed field notes and recorded conversations something critical about Rajasthani farmers' religious or moral discomfort with conditions of rural livelihoods in the present, and to understand the contrasts they draw with the past. My main sources are extensive interviews conducted in Ajmer and Bhilwara districts of Rajasthan, together with ethnographic observations and oral traditions from the same area. Interviews were most often done in collaboration with a local resident, my research collaborator and co-author Bhoju Ram Gujar. Bhoju is headmaster of a government middle school, and has worked with me intermittently since 1980. His sensibilities are acute and his interview strategies are brilliantly effective if at times heavy-handed.

In an era of rapidly accelerating change, our interviews dating from three separate fieldwork periods -- 1993, 1997 and 2003 -- themselves may reveal some subtle shifts. However, by and large the late twentieth-century critique of the present remains recognizable in the twenty-first century. The discourse I present thus reaches back well over a decade. I found general agreement on present circumstances among adults, even those of different generations. However, responses to these circumstances varied considerably, largely according to age but also to community and source of livelihood. In spite of these variations I could generalize that many people are existentially worried. Why are they worried and what, if anything, do their worries imply about the future? How, if at all, do moral qualms elicited in interviews affect practices and choices? These are some of my questions, but I shall hardly answer them fully.

At a micro level and in a single locality that I know well, I am of course exploring an overworked topic. What more could possibly be said about the transformation from (moral) subsistence economy to (amoral) market economy or its associations with the transformation from need to desire or longing?[3] The modest contributions this paper proposes are threefold. I list them in descending order from broad to particular (not an order of appearance):

1) I am able to present some thoughtful reflections from persons experiencing this transformation.[4] These persons are unaware of how thoroughly the processes they identify and critique have been discussed by social theorists. I find it striking how closely Marshall Sahlins and Damodar Sharma, authors of my two epigraphs, are in accord with one another -- particularly in that both speak of insatiable thirst.[5]

2) I examine distinctive ways this process of increasing involvement in global economies, which much of the world once experienced or is now experiencing, engages with a Hindu or South Asian world view. In the commentary I encountered in Rajasthan, the accumulation of money and consumer goods is strongly associated with the loss of pleasure, the rendering of everything as tasteless.[6] In other social and cultural contexts, similar shedding of "traditional" values in still more market-driven societies might be judged or experienced as a kind of wanton hedonism, enhancing individual pleasures and at least temporarily or cyclically satiating individual desires. Thus the dulling of enjoyment is a local theme to which I attend, although whether or not the pursuit of profit as experienced in rural Rajasthan actually yokes men and

---

[3]Much of this literature is of course centrally concerned not with folklore or religion but with politics and economics and at this stage I do not attempt to survey it. On Polyani's "great transformation" in a South Asian context see Herring 2001. For anthropological discussions of the ways cultural variables affect "moral confusion" resulting from impinging capitalist markets see Parry and Bloch, ed. 1989.

[4]Of course, similar commentaries are recorded in other localities; see for example, Wadley 1994; Amin and Basu 2006.

[5] The understanding crystallized in Buddhism's Second Noble Truth, that desire or "unsatisfactoriness" (dukha or dukka) is the source of human suffering, was a commonplace understanding in Ghatiyali. As a religionist, I want to wonder but shall not be able to address whether or not the Buddha's key "truth" regarding desire as the source of suffering, a truth launched in the world a couple millennia before the "great transformation," might differ in meaning for the global economy. Are today's desires qualitatively different from the painful desires of Buddha's time? Or is Sahlins wrong about the pain of want being significantly modern?

[6]The pursuit of profit at the expense of pleasure as it is characterized in Rajasthan would not fit Weber's model for innerworldly asceticism, defined as a situation where "the grace and the chosen state of the religiously qualified man prove themselves in everyday life" (1972: 291). Rather in the Rajasthani interpretations I heard, morality was consistently opposed to success.

women to less rather than more pleasure I cannot of course determine. This discourse could be a smoke screen; perhaps there are new pleasures that no one emphasizes in conversations. I wonder about the relation between claims that pleasure is lost and overall diagnoses of sin and selfishness. Moreover, as Hindu cosmology has identified the "present" as degenerate for over 2000 years, we may wonder what has altered between the degenerate present of then and now?[7] In what ways do the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries present an accelerated and especially problematic set of conditions? (Gold 1998).

3) I consider the link between a dedication to accumulating money, that is to profiting, and violence against fellow living beings -- not only human but animal. And I juxtapose this to some customary practices as well as some prescriptive moments in Rajasthan's oral traditions which express a pervasive integration of living beings into what I might call a biomoral economy.[8]

Four unequal segments follow, each comprising a fragment of a still incomplete vision.

1) *background*

2) *unsavory conditions*: As money increases, food becomes flavorless and people become mean spirited so that modernity is simultaneously tasteless and sinful. A set of conversations in 2003, with a son and mother, provide a text from which these ideas unfold, revealing how two individuals from different generations understand the conditions of life to have altered. The older woman stresses tastelessness, the ill-treatment of livestock and human sin. The son describes a relentless and almost irrational pursuit of profit, or more bluntly of money.

3) *a biomoral economy?* Folklore confirms the contours of an interconnected universe of meaning where gods, humans, and other living beings interact in appropriate, mutually respectful, and mutually beneficial ways. Whether or not such conditions ever existed, or represent wishful nostalgic holism, is not the question at hand. But I do point to some customary

---

[7]The Puranic descriptions of the *Kali Yug* may startle us with their acute visions of corrupt humanity. For example, the *Linga Purana* states that the Dark Age is one where: ". . . there is always carelessness, passion, hunger, and fear; the terrible fear of drought pits one against another. Scripture has no authority, and men take to the violation of dharma; they act without dharma, without morality; they are very angry and not very smart. . . ." (*Linga Purana* translated in O'Flaherty 1988: 71). While dates on the composition of the *Puranas* are imprecise, a rough estimate would be the early centuries of the common era.

[8] Who launched the term biomoral into indological discourse? *I am trying to track this down.*

patterns of everyday life that at least appear to accommodate the views expressed in selected tales.

4) *lightweight times* Other interviews corroborate a sense of vexed moralities running through a panoply of changes in domestic and agricultural work, consumption and religion. In conclusion, but *inconclusively,* I offer one more folktale that appears to describe and recommend an alternative mode of being and of self-alignment with divine powers and with other humans. This could be equally "traditional," but perhaps more suited to the times.

background

I have been working in one place in Rajasthan, North India, for a little over twenty-five years. As a cultural anthropologist devoted to ultra-qualitative methods, I have pursued multiple topics, always within the same agricultural community and its immediate environs. At times, ignoring the economic and agronomic foundations of rural life altogether, I have elicited farmers' ideas about what happens to the soul after death, about world-renunciation, and most recently about miracles. However, I have also attempted repeatedly in various ways and from various angles to engage some meaningful intersections between the materiality of agricultural and pastoral practices, and pervasive religious values and ritual actions.

I know these interactions exist but have found it difficult to sustain a focus on them. Thus over the years I have found myself shifting to one piece or the other, rather than straddling the two.[9] I attempted an initial foray into the religion / ecology intersection via agricultural rituals in 1993. This metamorphosed into a ten-year project on histories of environmental change that barely attended to religion in terms of deities and their worship. Discourses of morality, however, were in many ways at its core and inform the present paper as well (Gold and Gujar 2002).

Everyone in rural Rajasthan with whom I spoke seemed to agree on a set of prevailing conditions. By and large these persons were men and women from the middle-caste farming

---

[9] Although the two are meshed, it is hard to talk about them at the same time -- and the reasons for this are probably a topic for a more philosophical and methodological essay than I am currently prepared to compose. Even life histories can be told both ways. For example, when Miller interviewed Sukh Devji Gujar about his past, due to Miller's interest in the Gujar deity Dev Narayan, Sukh Devji framed his life story as a devotee (Miller, personal communication). When I recorded the same man's account, Dev Narayan was mentioned only in passing and Sukh Devji told his life as that of a poor man's personal efforts, struggles, and eventual success (Gold and Gujar 2002).

communities -- Gujar, Mali, Lodha, Dhakar. But my subjects, or interlocutors, included some Brahmins, artisans, and leather workers as well. All were in their forties or older. All, without exception, ascribed moral deterioration to the present, seeing it as a time of less *dharm*, and less love (Gold and Gujar 2002; Gold 2006). For my most recent fieldwork, in 2003, I had proposed to look at links among agricultural practices surrounding seeds, the symbolic power of seed imagery in religious and poetic language and recent movements in India to preserve biodiversity through preserving and planting indigenous varieties of grains and vegetables. Although I did interview farmers, hymn-singers, government seed growers, village level workers, and activists, this work was abortive in some ways just as was my 1993 work on farming and religious values. As in 1993, what I gathered tended to be either, to me, rather dull accounts of agricultural activities; or diversions into folktales; or moral discourses that seemed ungrounded in the soil. Nonetheless, I had a few deep moments one of which is chief substance for the following section.

unsavory conditions: a conversation with Sohan Lal Dhakar and his mother

One unusually long interview, complex and multigenerational, provides most of the substance I set forth for consideration. It struck some new chords that continued to resonate, calling me to think about its implications and actually provoking this paper. New to me in this conversation, which I shall cite extensively, was an old woman's placing the selling of surplus livestock – explicitly male buffalo calves -- to butchers, for cash, right at the wounded heart of her moral critique of the present. This traffic in animal flesh had not been a recurrent theme during my two earlier research periods. However, trade in meat has accelerated in Rajasthan between 1993 when I first started talking about past and present with villagers, and 2003 when Bhoju and I spoke with Sohan Lal and Kesar Dhakar.[10]

The pitiful sight of cows and buffaloes, doomed to the knife and herded toward their deaths by Muslim meat merchants, had begun to be mentioned in casual conversation by various people as the antithesis of dharm, noted as a sign of the times. Benign treatment of farm animals

[10] I was in Rajasthan in July-August 2006 and tried to elicit from friends more about the fate of male buffalo calves. Bhoju's wife Bali, whose buffalo had just disappointingly given birth to one, told me that they would sell it and suggested that it would be taken to the Jaipur zoo to be fed to lions! Her husband was skeptical. Clearly for Bali, the idea of her calf becoming lion food was exotically preferable to picturing it butchered and consumed by humans.

is a mainstay of regional morality, and is prescribed in several oral traditions and enacted in numerous rituals as well as everyday customs, as the next section will show. Of course the time period from the early nineties to the early zeroes corresponds with an accelerating politicization of religious difference, partially indexed by consumption of flesh.[11]

Our interview with the two Dhakars crystallized for me a conglomeration of ideas and associations about tastelessness and profit, on the one hand; and about violence and sin, on the other. While these ideas do not diverge significantly from the views collated in some of my earlier writings, based on research in 93 and 97, they do reveal more starkly a set of contingencies and trade-offs many lament even as they are thickly involved in perpetuating them.

This was really a two-stage, three-way conversation. First, Bhoju Ram Gujar and I spoke with Sohan Lal Dhakar a middle-aged farmer and school headmaster, in his office. Sohan Lal was headmaster of Gandher school, and we had known him for over a decade; Bhoju had worked as a teacher under Sohan Lal in Gandher before his own promotion and consequent transfer in 1998. Sohan Lal is unusual among headmasters for at least two reasons. First, he has a posting that appears to be permanent in the village of his birth. I never inquired how he pulled off that rare and irregular privilege. Second, he comes from a relatively low status farming community. In Gandher, however, Dhakars were the dominant land-holding caste. This situation resulted, I believe, from a royal land grant to Sohan Lal's forefathers, and from his lineage's astute management of, and consequent success in, agricultural production as well as local politics. As a Dhakar, albeit well-to-do and landed, Sohan Lal shared roots in the peasantry with Bhoju which made them natural friends and allies.

We had tapped Sohan Lal's considerable knowledge about traditional agricultural practices and changing technologies in two previous interviews (all of which remain unpublished as Sohan Lal's pragmatic knowledge of farming and his schoolmaster's ability to stick to the topic never did yield the meandering storytelling that provides satisfying substance for my writings). Now in '03 we approached him with new questions about grain varieties and seed

---

[11] This period of time of course began with the threats to, and ultimate destruction of, the Babri masjid, a mosque in the pilgrimage center of Ayodhya which right-wing militant Hindu nationalists claimed was constructed on the site of the god Rama's birthplace. Thus I began my 1993 research in the wake of subsequent "communal" violence around the country. While Ajmer city and district remained peaceful, elsewhere in Rajasthan there were various trouble spots for Hindu-Muslim relations.

saving. Along with many others, Sohan Lal was deeply worried about the long-term impact of new agricultural technologies on the land -- especially chemical fertilizer. At the same time, and again in accord with general opinion, he saw no turning back. During the first stage of the interview, in Sohan Lal's office at the Gandher school, I asked him if nobody thought about resuming old ways if they were truly more sustainable. He responded by sketching a context of desire and heedlessness in which farmers were compelled to operate, stating:

> No, today the times are such that everyone wants to be powerful and rich. So no one thinks about the future; there is no concern for the future, but only for the present. The farmer thinks, "some way or other I have to increase production." He knows that he is doing something wrong, but even so he is motivated by greed.

Notice the immediate equation of craving for wealth with reckless practices, and conscious disregard for stewardship.

Because seed selection and storage, central to my 03 research proposal, are typically women's tasks, at Sohan Lal's invitation we went home with him, and in his presence spoke extensively with his mother, Kesar. This was my first visit to Sohan Lal's home. Kesar described her age as "more than eighty."[12] Our rambling and at times contentious conversation lasted a couple of hours, and demonstrates the intertwining of agricultural change with social and economic change, as viewed from different generational positions. Kesar, the old woman, moved unexpectedly from what was already for me a familiar discourse on vanished grain varieties and flavors to speak with unexpected passion on the sin of animal slaughter, and the shared souls of humans and animals. Unlike the majority of our interviews, this conversation with Kesar Dhakar was highly emotional. Many others had spoken articulately about degeneration and sin, but Sohan Lal's mother inflected her speech with acute grief, weeping openly as she described the selling of male buffalo calves to slaughter. [13]

---

[12] I met briefly with Sohan Lal in the summer of 06 and learned that his mother has passed away. We reminisced fondly about the interview and her passionate words, although at the time I think he found them more than a little disconcerting.

[13] I recollect only one other instance where an interviewee spoke with such emotion; this was Kesar Gujar, in a conversation with me and Bhoju's wife Bali, about the tragic era of deforestation (Gold 2001:160).

Toward the beginning of our interview, Kesar plaintively asserted a strong preference for indigenous wheat known as *deshi gehu* (local wheat), or *lal gehu* (red wheat). Deshi or indigenous wheat has just about vanished from this region, even though it grows with far less water than modern wheat varieties, and might be life-saving in draught years such as the year 2003. Importantly, the context for my 2003 fieldwork was barren fields, dry wells, and imported water. The government provided some water free of charge; but persons who could afford to purchase and who had the facilities to store water began to buy whole tanks full around 2003; and continue to do so today, even after three better rainy seasons.

Kesar said, "I would like to plant indigenous wheat, but he [Sohan Lal, her son] doesn't let me plant it. He says [to me], 'who is even smelling this wheat?'" [meaning there is no value to it, nobody bothers with it].

A little embarrassed, her son commented defensively, "Red wheat's production is very small."

Bhoju, as an old friend of the household, was able to ask provocative questions. He addressed Sohan Lal, "She is thinking you should grow some to eat in your home." Sohan Lal's reply resumed his theme from the earlier interview. However, then he was generalizing abstractly. Now, in the context of his own household and his own decisions, he still spoke in the third person, asserting, "Today people pay more attention to earning money than they do to eating." Bhoju wished to provoke him to acknowledge his own direct complicity. I transcribe what followed:

> Bhoju: if someone gave you some money would you sell the clothes you are wearing and the food you are eating?
>
> Sohan Lal: Yes I can sell them, we might even sell our bread for money.
>
> Bhoju [*addressing Kesar*]: It seems to me that in your family are two ways of thinking: old-time thought which is to eat good things and local things. And new thought, like your son's. He thinks about earning money. Which do you like?
>
> Kesar: Eat well, and don't worry about money. Who needs money? We need good food.
>
> …..
>
> Bhoju: So this season, which species of wheat are you planting?

Kesar: Either *lokvan* or *farmi* (two modern varieties).

Bhoju: In *lokvan* and *farmi* is there no flavor?

Kesar: There is no sweetness. [resuming her earlier theme] In the old days we grew red wheat. After we put butter on the bread it would turn a reddish color; it was very nice; it was so delicious! Suppose we make ladu bati (round sweets and round breads, Rajasthan's famous picnic fare) from red wheat, and another batch from today's wheat and put them side by side. Then you would see which was good and which wasn't good. [In the past], I didn't use fertilizer. I didn't know what "white manure" [chemical fertilizer] was. I didn't know what tea was either. Those two things we didn't know – white manure, and tea.

Persons belonging to Kesar's generation recollected a past without tea—now so thoroughly embedded in rural sociability. The advent of tea as a necessity of life is another watermark of transformation, and also an early harbinger of cash economy, exemplifying a pressing, addictive need for an imported consumer good (Gold and Gujar 2002).

There followed extensive and somewhat rambling conversation on seed-saving practices; women's work; the weakness of today's women who no longer grind grain and who give birth in the hospital; and the qualities of hybrid seeds, which Kesar likened to the offspring of mixed-caste unions. In short, following Kesar's lead, we spoke of mingled physical and moral, social and agricultural deteriorations. Bhoju then turned the conversation specifically to relations with deities.

Bhoju: Do you worship any god when you plant?

Kesar: Yes we take Dev Narayan's and Lord Shankar's names.

Bhoju: So, you say that you take the names of Dev Narayan and Shankar, but what else do you do?

[*In other words, "talk is cheap, what do you spend on the gods?"*]

Kesar: We have a feast every year; we do an all-night singing session (*jagiran*) dedicated to Thakurji (Vishnu) every year. . . . . We do a one-and-one-quarter-maund feast for Dev Narayan, after an all night singing session -- for Dev Narayan, and Balaji [Hanuman].

This year we have no crops at all and even so we will do it. We won't just do a little one we'll do the full thing, even this year. [Because] I have this conviction: we lost only one crop, not our whole life; so we will give.

[*This is a dramatic statement emphasizing the higher morality of selfless giving over calculated transactions.]*

Bhoju: in this year why was there so little rain?

Kesar: I don't know, you go to America so maybe you know about that. There used to be a lot of rain, and there was so much grass then that when we took meals out to men working in the fields, coming from the village we couldn't even see the oxen or the plough, the grass was so high

Bhoju: So why has rain become so scarce?

Kesar: Who knows?

Bhoju: But tell me what do you *think* the reason might be?

Kesar [passionately and with a conviction that belied her earlier profession of ignorance]: Maybe God thinks that as many human beings as there are in the world, he will kill them all and then give a good rain. Because people are the most sinful creatures.

Bhoju *[making a kind of leap in defining sin for her*]: So humans don't think of other humans: "this is also a human?"

Kesar [*following Bhoju's lead but taking her own unexpected direction*]: In the old days people didn't kill each other; these days there are murders. These days they kill every day, and this is sin, and this is what is responsible for there being no rain, this is the obstacle for rain. It used to be, even God did Cow Worship, but today, God causes cows to be slaughtered!

In my whole life I never sold even a male buffalo calf, I had many cows and buffaloes, but I never sold a buffalo calf.

Note the seamless transition in Kesar's thoughts from the murder of humans to that of livestock.[14]

A long narrative followed about a male buffalo calf which the men of the family had readily sold to the butcher for 800 rupees. Kesar related in detail how she and her daughter-in-law tried hard to get it back; how the two women had wept for the male calf. She said, "We were crying so hard our eyes were swollen . . . . " And as she spoke she began to weep again as the memories flowed through her and she continued to relate the story. The women despite all efforts were unable to rescue this calf. Six months later eight of Kesar's mature milk buffaloes sickened and died. Kesar believed this loss a just punishment for the sin of selling the calf to the butcher. She concluded, "I thought that my own soul is the same as the calf's soul."

This interview opened with a mother-son argument about the value of flavor versus profit; of old varieties of wheat grains versus new ones. It closed with a weeping narrative of a butchered buffalo calf and the consequences of that sin which not only fell upon Kesar and Sohan Lal's household in the form of a major economic loss, but rippled outward to the drought year we were experiencing, caused by the broader butchery of animals and humans in the world. However rambling the conversation, the theme of morality versus profit was consistent throughout. Moreover, and predictably, morality is aligned with the past, with tradition; profit is aligned with the present, with ambition. Perhaps more interestingly, morality is aligned with pleasure, good food, good health and a lush environment; while profit is aligned with tastelessness, sorrow, violence, and an unimaginable but likely disastrous future.

To savor the flavor of red wheat, and to believe that one's soul and the soul of an eminently discardable buffalo calf have something in common, are together opposed to market forces and money itself (received for the calf). Kesar and her son in tandem revealed these

---

[14] See Skaria 2002 on equivalence of *ahimsa* with love in Gandhi's thought and its inclusiveness of all living beings. Skaria writes:

> . . . neighborliness, as a rendering of *ahimsa*, perhaps brings out its political dimension better than Gandhi's preferred translation, "love."
>
> The Gandhian compulsion to neighborliness arose from a divinely instituted kinship (*sagpan*). As such, Gandhi's *sagpan* was radically inclusive, covering within it not only humans but all life: "If we really have imbibed the spirit of brotherhood, it extends to the lower animals." This created the obligation for the ashram vow of *ahimsa*, which was about the "sacredness and kinship of all life." "Ahimsa means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word, or deed, even for the supposed benefit of that creature" (Skaria 2002: 974).

The passages in quotations are from the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, as cited by Skaria.

oppositions more starkly and intensely in dialogic, or contrapuntal form. They made it seem as if life could be led on two totally different registers: one of rich flavors and morality; one of tastelessness and sin. Most rural Rajasthanis, however, find their footing somewhere in between these extremes. The next two segments put Sohan Lal's and Kesar's particular views into two overlapping contexts. I turn first to customs and oral traditions around the treatment of livestock; second to some less dramatic but complementary accounts of, and complaints about, modernity.

a biomoral economy?

Individuals recollect the past through the lenses of their personal histories, highlighting different features accordingly. Collective representations, however, offer models of and for appropriate behaviors surrounding relations with livestock. In general, I would stress that these cultural values apply to beloved cows and revered oxen. Buffaloes are not loved in the same way although of course the females' milk is valued. I have heard herders curse out their buffalos as "demonic species" and in fact, a Buffalo Demon figures in one of the best known and most often represented Hindu myths. A male buffalo calf is the most disposable of all creatures offering a hard case for human affinity and protection.[15] Only pure moral compunctions, Kesar's grounds, could argue for its preservation. Oxen, by contrast, literally supported South Asia's agricultural economy for thousands of years. A cultural materialism explanation readily explains why there would be so much folklore about their significance and the need to treat them well. It is all the more interesting that Kesar Dhakar felt so strongly about a buffalo calf. But for everyday practices, customary behaviors, and oral traditions displaying the ways livestock are well integrated into society's moral fabric, I must turn to cattle.

Anyone who has spent time in a South Asian village is well aware of the intimate terms on which humans and animals live; this was evocatively described by William and Charlotte Wiser in the chapter titled, "Occupants of the Front Room" in their classic work *Behind Mud Walls*, first published in 1930 (Wiser and Wiser 2000:59-71).[16] I mention a few moments to

---

[15] "The respect paid to the cow does not fully extend to the buffalo" (Crooke 1993:339).

[16] "Animals which share in the family struggle for existence are treated with consideration and kindness. . . . . In orthodox households, the first unleavened cake of the day is always fed to the cow. . . . . Along with kindness goes the consistent refusal to take animal life" (Wiser and Wiser 2000:67-68). See also Premchand's sweet story, "A Tale of Two Oxen" published in 1931 (Premchand 1980:123-129).

evoke this pervasive aspect of life in Ghatiyali. Every afternoon the cow, having returned from grazing with the village herd, finds her way, on her own, to her owner's door and rattles the gate, stretching her face through the half-open doorway and lowing. The immediate response is a general scurrying in the courtyard as whoever sees or hears the cow first calls around to whoever might be near the food storage room, "*gay ki roti*! *gay ki roti*!" (the cow's bread! the cow's bread!) Bread has been set aside from the previous meal explicitly for this purpose (and it is the same bread everyone else has eaten). The deliberately leftover bread is hastily delivered to the cow for whom it is but a mouthful, yet relished, and clearly understood by all parties to be her due before milking.

Besides this clockwork event, service to livestock takes other more occasional forms. Several bulls wander the village, as beasts dedicated to Shiva -- a supreme male deity whose animal companion is the bull Nandiya.[17] When these majestic and to me quite threatening-looking animals arrive in the neighborhood, they are immediately fed, in the hope that they will then move along (much like itinerant beggars and holy persons). Priests at various healing shrines regularly assign as curative penance for some past sin the task of putting out fodder for cattle: "Scatter x bundles of fodder for x number of days, or weeks" is a routine prescription. Building watering troughs, and making sure they have water in them, is another merit-making or sin-erasing activity. Each month the dark moon day is a holiday for oxen; moreover, they are worshipped on the festival of Divali. I turn to the mythic origins of these practices.

a story of Divali

In Ghatiyali and its environs, oxen are worshipped during celebrations of the pan-Hindu festival Divali. Divali in urban areas is more frequently associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and is called a "festival of lights." It takes place on the dark moon, and every house is covered with small lights to welcome Lakshmi. All this is equally true in Ghatiyali, but oxen are also a major ritual focus.[18] I recorded this story in 1993. It was told to me and Bhoju, in Rajasthani, by Sri Kisan Mali in answer to the straightforward question, "Why do we worship

---

[17] I believe these religiously dedicated bulls also perform breeding services, impregnating village cows; but I fear I have not inquired about or observed their functions beyond affording opportunities for religious merit.

[18] Thanks to Joseph C. Miller, Jr. for the use of his *Bail Puja* photographs and notes; although I have spent three Divali seasons in India, I have never been present in Ghatiyali on this important festival day.

oxen at Divali?" Thus far I have not located it in published folktale collections, although it may well exist as my search has not been systematic.

[*For those totally unfamiliar with Hindu mythology, Shankar Bhagvan is another name for Lord Shiva, one of Hinduism's three major deities; his cosmic consort is Parvati. As already observed, Shiva's animal companion (and each god has one) is Nandi or Nandya, a bull. The story makes no distinction between ox and bull.]*

Once Lord Shankar and Parvati were in the jungle, and Parvati felt a drop [of water] and she said to Lord Shankar, "Is there on this earth someone so great, greater than you?"

Shankar said, "yes, there is a fish who is turning over in the ocean and that is why we are splashed."

So Parvati bathed and took all her stuff; she took a platter of pearls; and she went to the fish, and the fish laughed, "O mother that's great, you gave me darshan."

She said, "I didn't give you darshan; you are the greatest on this earth so I came over here to worship you."

"No mother, I am not the greatest on this earth. There is someone greater than I. Greater than I is the ocean."

So she went to the ocean. And the ocean said, "O Mother, how good that you gave me darshan."

She said, "I came to worship you because you are the greatest on the earth."

The ocean said, "No I am not the greatest, the greatest is Earth Mother (Prithvi Mata). If there were no Earth Mother, then what would this water be on top of?"

So Parvati understood, so she went to Earth Mother and Earth Mother laughed happily, "How super! You came to give me darshan!"

"I came to worship you because you are the greatest."

"No, Mother, I am not the greatest; greater than me is Shesh Nag, because the earth is on top of him. I am on his hood and if he weren't there then what would I do?"

So Parvati went to Shesh Nag who saw her and laughed, "O Mother, you came to give me darshan."

"O brother, you are the greatest and so I have come to do your worship. Who is greater than you?"

Shesh Nag said, "The one greater than I am is with you."

"With me?"

"Nandya, he is the greatest! Without Nandya the earth would be worthless [literally, *aluuni* or saltless].

So Parvati understood this, and worshipped Nandya and from that day we have been worshipping the ox on Divali.

We accept him as great because even though today we have tractors and machines, in those days when we had no machines he was the one who turned over the earth.

In the Divali story, oxen are praised as greater than gods, earth and ocean, the source of food and life. Back in 1993 the storyteller already felt the need to insert a footnote regarding the advent of machinery and decline of plowing with oxen. I note that in the same era I often heard how machines had dispensed with the need for Brahmins and their astrological calculations (Gold 1999). However, while farming communities did not greatly lament their reduced reliance on Brahminical services, many spoke sadly of the diminished role and presence of oxen. The sense of interdependency that once bound the world of humans and animals together is correspondingly diminished by this change.

One of Rajasthan's great regional oral epics, the story of the Bagaravat Brothers and Lord Dev Narayan, features the signal importance of oxen in one of its earliest episodes. The king of the gods, Indra, makes a promise to oxen, speaking from the court of heaven. The ox receives these boons because it is holding up the world temporarily, while the cosmic serpent, Shesh Nag, goes to the court of heaven to complain about the behavior of the Bagaravat Brothers. Notice the intertextuality between this and the Divali story, as Shesh Nag figures in the Divali story as an eventually rejected alternative to the ox as the "greatest of all." The Dev Narayan epic, performed in somewhat archaic language, may give insights into an earlier history, and a deeper sense of mutual obligations, divinely prescribed.

This passage is in Miller's determinedly literal translation of a performance by Ram Narayan Gujar (Declamatory Chant 83 translated in Miller 1994: 360-361).

23. And do tell these tidings to the white ox.
24. 'Go white ox, the Lord has given this vow for you.
25. . . . The white ox who (is kept) hungry, his owner will remain hungry.
26. And he who keeps the white ox satiated, his owner will remain satiated.
27. Go, white ox, take leave (from work), at that time, during the twelve new moons of t he twelve months.
28. (The Lord) has given (you) a vacation.
29. And (anyone) born of man shall not harness (you).
30. If he harnesses you,
31. Then, at that time, he will be the victim of the sin.
32. And go white ox, (but remember) that when you drop the yoke to the earth,
33. On that day grain production will remain idle upon Mother Earth.
34. (And) on that day you must understand that the earth will be totally destroyed.'

According to a footnote to the last line, "Here the Lord warns the white ox against being lazy. Letting down the yoke will have terrible consequences" (1994:734).

The last line warns animals of the need to work faithfully for people, to accept the yoke that is their lot. But the entire speech, a promise from the king of the gods to all oxen, implies the need for mutual regard, putting most of the onus on human beings. It also explicitly acknowledges, echoing the Divali story quite closely, that life itself depends on oxen and their cooperation in human enterprises. No one in Ghatiyali violated the dark moon holiday for oxen. Yet, many persons emphasized that the quest for ever more profits motivated farmers to work more land for longer hours. As more and more farmers use machinery rather than bullocks, the cycles of the moon together with the astrological pronouncements of Brahmins, become increasingly irrelevant. The following segment of my paper turns from a focus on farm animals to look at other elements in a configuration of change broadly understood to result in moral and physical weakness on the one hand; increased convenience on the other. Flavorless produce

again codes modernity. I also note some gendered aspects of agricultural change that were generally underplayed in our interviews.

lightweight times

Winter is eggplant season, and talk about modern eggplant's lack of tastiness carried with it a subtle but perceptible moral critique of the present. I had multiple conversations in January 2003 about two species of eggplant, one readily visible and one largely invisible. The latter scarce item is "deshi" eggplant -- literally "of the land"; implying local and indigenous (although that is of course not always the case; see Gupta). Deshi eggplant are whitish in color, and the vine on which they grow has annoying thorns on it -- but everyone with whom I spoke asserted this variety to be the most delicious. Yet the widely prevalent species nowadays is called "disko": it is small, shapely, perfectly purple, its stem free of unpleasant prickles, but people say it lacks in taste. Disko is not only easier to cultivate, but sells better. In my photographs from 2003 there are no *deshi* eggplant to be seen.

Barji Mali, a gardener woman, was among several who told us, "There used to be local eggplant (*deshi bangan)*. We used to grow it, but now we have *modern* (*adhhunik*) eggplant, called 'Disko.' Now, *Disko* is available." Shambhu, an educated villager in his forties who has worked with me on and off over the years, immediately chimed in to emphasize a contrast in flavor: "The local eggplant was tasty, but it had prickles on it. It was really delicious, but the *Disko* has no flavor. Even today, the local is available in the market but it costs more than *Disko*." He then gave an elaborate recipe for what he said was the best way to cook deshi -- stuffed with spices after roasting. Nostalgia for the past is invested in the white variety which has shifted from staple to luxury, and is now presumably cultivated by a few for sale to the well-to-do in town markets rather than village lanes.

Just as Kesar Dhakar yearned for the flavor of red wheat, so Shambhu, probably more than twenty years her junior, seemed to yearn for deshi eggplant. Yet as a frugal person, with a produce garden that supplemented his family income, he did not choose to grow it, just as Kesar's son could not see his way to planting indigenous wheat. This contrast between the pervasive, modern shiny, purple, attractive "disko" and the white, prickly, flavorful but vanished indigenous species captures much about nostalgia for a past that people do not necessarily strive

to reclaim. Pleasures such as the taste of white eggplant, roasted and spiced as Shambhu recalled it, are missed but deemed irretrievable even though these vegetables are still available in the market, if too costly to be attractive to poor and pragmatic farmers.

I am struck by an obvious symbolism in the disko / deshi contrast and the psychology of loss it evokes. Tasteless modernity is perfectly embodied in the shiny purple tasteless eggplant, named after an emblem of urban amorality. The word disko for some reason entered village language in the eighties, long before television. Women's songs contrasted the allure of mixed gender dancing, referred to as "disko" with the traditional Rajasthani women's dances performed solo, with faces totally veiled, and in gender-segregated company.[19]

As Seremetakis (1998), Sutton (2001) and many other scholars of memory have told us, the past is readily evoked by flavors and other sensory modalities including scent, sound and touch. The irrevocable loss of a particular savory flavor whether it is red wheat or white eggplant, stands for much larger losses. Yet, those who repeatedly lament the cherished lost tastes of an indigenous species seem oddly willing to allow it to vanish from their tables, and even, eventually, from the earth. Awareness of loss has not translated in this region into any opposition to purchasing commercially produced seeds or any strong urge to save old plant varieties -- whether of eggplant or wheat. Here Agrawal's complex ideas about the making of "environmental subjects" would be directly relevant to understanding both current lack of action and a potential for future shifts (2005: 164-172).[20]

---

[19] See Gold 2002:89-90: "Uneducated females married to educated boys fear their husbands will go astray in the world of modern transportation and foreign 'dancing.' While the Hindi word for dance, *nachna*, evokes veiled women bending and twirling gracefully among themselves with no males present, the English 'dance' . . . represents the Westernized “disco” scene of which villagers are aware from media images. Forlornly, the uneducated herdgirl complains to her sister-in-law of their brother/husband’s desertion to that alien world."

[20] Perhaps these same persons might "imagine themselves" differently and assume greater agency, "incorporating into their mentalities new propensities to act and think about the world (Agrawal 2005:166-167). In targeted rural areas near the South Indian city of Bangalore – famous for its I.T., call centers, and general booming prosperity -- multiple NGOs have raised consciousness about biodiversity issues as these are connected to the use of indigenous seeds versus commercial agricultural products. In January 2003 I visited several seed banks, and I saw farmers, both men and women, extremely excited and enthusiastic about the many kinds of seeds they were saving and swapping. I heard about "bij jatras" (seed pilgrimages) and "bij melas" (seed fairs), although I was not able to experience these events in my short time. These involve, respectively, gathering seed varieties from village to village, and creating opportunities for exchange of indigenous grain and vegetable varieties. In general, in the brief interviews I had (either with English-speaking farmers used to visitors, or through a less than expert interpreter of Kannada to English) what I gathered was a great enthusiasm for returning to traditional seeds and the practices, both practical and ritual, associated with them. Of course, I only met farmers who had been influenced (converted?) by environmental activists (see Ramprasad, Prasad and Gopinath 1999).

In spite of her critique of the flavor of "disko" eggplant, Barji Mali spoke happily about commercial seeds in February 2003:

> Now we get them all: white radish, spinach, we get them all from the bazaar; small, big, they are all available whether you need a little or a lot. They sell them with a picture on the packet, on each bag; and from that you know what kind of seed it is; we could produce them ourselves if we wanted to, but we don't need to worry because we know we can get them in the bazaar. Whatever we need we can get them and nothing is mixed with them.

Thus, as an accomplished and successful produce-gardener, she lauded the new conveniences even if, earlier, she had expressed preference for the flavor of a local variety whose seeds are not available in packets.

These changes from home-saved to market-purchased seeds have had far-reaching gendered consequences as well as consequences for biodiversity. Women's work is reduced, and Barji appears to appreciate this in spite of some negative ramifications for the evaluation of women's contributions to agriculture and gardening. For it seems that an important role women once played, which involved selecting seeds while crops were still standing, gathering, storing and protecting those seeds in the home, and bringing them to the fields for planting the next season, has now more or less disappeared without fanfare. Interestingly, it was a man who most clearly articulated this change for me. And strikingly, neither men nor women seemed bothered by it, in contrast to many of the other changes that, as we have seen, they code as morally negative.[21] Technological and commercial alterations in agricultural practices are sometimes simply accommodated and appreciated, rather than coded as morally negative, even when they evidently involve certain losses.

Ladu Lodha, a farmer who was famous in Ghatiyali for his agricultural skills and dedication together with his political wisdom as a respected member of the pancayat, described for us clearly in 2003 the implications for gendered work in the change from saved seeds to purchased seeds:

---

[21] For a strong valorization of the time-honored associations between women and seeds, see many of Vandana Shiva's writings including, for example, Shiva 2001; Shiva *et al.* 1995.

Women would protect them [seeds]. They would mix them with ashes and store them so bugs could not attack them. That's why they mixed them with ashes. But nowadays the government has sent pills, medicines to use instead. . . . .

[In the old days] women did it. When it began to rain [and was time to plant], they would say, "This is channa, this is urrad," and so they would give advice: "Put this here and plant this here." They would have collected all the seeds for one season's crops. But today, direct from the bag, no mixing with ash, no work of women protecting; there is no work left for women.

Cucumber, watermelon, summer squash, green beans, bottle-gourd (*lauki*), white gourd-melon (*petha*), koala, all kinds of seeds: now they all come from the store. But in the past women stored all the seeds at home; and before the rainy season, they would gather them all; if they were missing any they would collect them from their neighbors. Women were the ones who kept seeds, formerly. Now every seed comes in a bag!

. . . .

Notice that the change in seed source from home to market also means less reliance on a community, on helpful neighbors. When I asked, " so you think the modern way is good?" Ladu immediately responded, "Yes it is good, there is no difficulty."

Just a few minutes later in the same interview session, we talked about Ladu's faith in divinities. He spoke of the goddess called Dhanop Mata, and of a miracle she caused in his family. His fifty-year old uncle lost his wife, and they asked Dhanop Mataji if he should take another wife. Through divination, with leaves, she said yes. But his uncle refused to accept this, answering that he was old: "What woman will come?"

The priest speaking as the deity admonished him, "Of course a woman will come."

"How should I believe this?" my uncle continued to argue. He went quite a distance from the shrine, and then said, " if a flower comes to me from this far, then I will accept what she says; and if not, then not."

Well, the flower came, from a great distance, and he said to the goddess, "within a month my woman should come." So she came, she had two children. He was over 50

years old and he had two sons! So he vowed to the goddess, "my future progeny will accept you," and since then she is the one in whom we believe.

Miracles remain a powerful feature of life. With practices of production increasingly rationalized in the interest of profit, as Kesar and others all observed, reliance on the goddesses-and-gods does not decrease. Nor have religious values seeped out of agricultural practices even if far less rituals attend the stages of production. As we saw, a headmaster's family celebrates divine grace even in years when such grace is hardly visible.

One interview from 1997, which I had not previously transcribed, gives a loquacious herder woman's take on changing times. Mangi Mali was probably in her mid-sixties at the time we spoke with her. We encountered her in the company of a group of child herders -- all Malis themselves but not all belonging to her own family -- whose work she loosely supervised. She jokingly called herself their "Mar-sa" the local word for school teacher (from the British "Master"). Mangi spoke volubly about women's work in the old times, although she did not concern herself with seed-selection, saving and storage:

> We knew that when the rooster crowed it was time to get up; and grind five kilograms of flour, milk the animals, pile up the cow dung, roll the bread, and make the vegetables. And then we would tie our children on our backs and go to the fields to do irrigation work.
>
> [*Agricultural work is seasonal; Mangi chooses for her generic account of women's work in the old days a task notorious as the most backbreaking labor required of women in the fields.*]
>
> In the evening we would put the rope and the leather water buckets on our heads and bring them home.
>
> [*I interrupted to ask why, and the explanation was "fear of thieves". On reflection, this offers one small but perhaps telling contradiction to the golden vision of the good old days that she proceeds to present.*]
>
> Then we would put down the child and tie up the animals, milk them, cook dinner, feed the children, eat our own meals and it would be 12 midnight.

We didn't even know about tea. If we were cold we would make karhi from barley flour and drinking that would make us feel well. But these days, until afternoon comes, we are waiting for our tea.

[In other words, anticipating it eagerly as I admit I always did myself. Once again, we see ignorance of tea characterizing the past. Here there is a local alternative. Mangi opposes store-bought tea to karhi which is made from buttermilk, the by-product of churning creamy yogurt to make clarified butter or ghee. Buttermilk itself is symbolic itself of old times, of hospitality, and of an explicitly non-market economy. I was told many times, especially by Gujars, that it was totally improper, sinful in fact, ever to sell buttermilk. On the contrary, neighbors could freely ask one another for it. In recent years, though, I have heard sharp criticism of some persons who continue to request buttermilk.]

In the old days women did so much work and still they were very healthy but today's women do no work and still they are weak; they are weak because they drink tap water and eat electrically milled flour. Women used to eat barley bread; first they pounded it with the pestle, and then they ground it and ate it. That's why they were so strong. Also, they drank well water. In the old days, mostly they ate barley, and white wheat.

[Mangi moves fluidly to ritual.]

After harvesting they used to thresh the grain with oxen and everyone would gather and wait for an auspicious time, and then they would do puja and light incense. They would take some grain and make a circle around the big pile, and then they would wait for the jackals to howl and then they would start winnowing; it used to take one or one-and-a-half months.

[*The howling of jackals had the power to override any astrological obstacle, a convenience for farmers in the days when wildlife were plentiful; see Gold 1999: 270-272.*]

Bhoju asked, "But today do people look for an auspicious time?"

Mangi: No! not at all. Today they get a tractor and "slap-bang let's go!"

. . . .

This is why the times are so weak (*jamana kamjor*). Today people don't have as much love; if you are eating and I am sitting here hungry I will not ask, "Have you eaten or not?" I will eat and leave.

But it used to be that we would all sit together and eat together and help each other, it used to be that way, but not today!

People used to be more satisfied but today they are not satisfied, and so they will fight and quarrel and over any matter; that is the kind of times (*jamana*) that have come. The times have become lightweight (*halka)*, and people are weak (*log kamjor*).

[*In Mangi's discourse adjectives seem readily transposable between people and conditions which both reflect and causally constitute one another.]*

People have started drinking a lot of liquor, and because of drinking they fight, and that's another reason there is no love. . . . . There used to be love between your family [addressing Bhoju] and the Malis; our fields are next to each other and we used to call each other on festival days, but today there is no memory, no one remembers one another; . . . . It used to be people would consult each other, take each other's opinions and then work together, but today people don't even like to look at one another.

One reason is that the population has increased too much, and so there isn't so much love.

Bhoju asked, "Besides that, why is rain less these days?" Mangi answered without hesitation, "Sin has spread over human hearts" (*manako ke dil mem pap cha gaya*).

In 1997, Mangi Mali reflected on change and a familiar cluster of non-dharmic behaviors, in language quite similar to that used by Kesar Dhakar in 2003. However, she made no mention of animal killing. She talked about changes in patterns of consumption, resulting in weaker bodies and poorer health, but not about an absence of flavor. Clearly the range of complaints about the present, and contrasts between present and past, shift from one person to another, and perhaps also shift over six or seven years, yet an overall shared sensibility does emerge. If Kesar highlights the flavor of old wheat varieties, and Mangi the strength-giving comfort of barley-thickened buttermilk, these are variations on a theme. The two of them share a sense of

increasing sinful behavior and its relation to climate change on the one hand and loss of community on the other. And both mention tea, a colonial legacy that has penetrated society and altered the rhythms and bodily cravings of a working day, even as it was, I suspect, one of the first widely desired necessities of life that had to be obtained from outside, with cash. According to both these women, today's unsavory and lightweight times are directly linked to divine disfavor revealed in rain and famine.

* * *

By way of an open-ended and purely speculative conclusion I am going to tell one more story. This was narrated to me at the very beginning of my quest to understand farmers' religious attitudes toward their environment. I thought it had to be important but I never could see a way to integrate its apparent meanings with discourses like those on selfishness, sin and divine displeasure that I heard so often and that have occupied me in the bulk of this paper. This story has explicit morals which seem to stress almost passive faith in divine grace. However, its content carries other messages, ranging from "hard work is its own reward," to "tricking the gods can be a good thing." To put it more positively: human perseverance, ingenuity, and wit will enhance survival where passive behaviors cannot. Unlike the stories presented earlier, this one is notably devoid of messages about mutual obligations among humans, or an interlocked moral universe of all beings.

Recorded in 1993, this story was told me in Hindi by a literate man, and it incorporated a few English words as well. I had my suspicions that its origins might have been a Hindi school text, rather than any Rajasthani oral traditions, but I have not been able to locate it. However, a non-exhaustive web search turned it up in a nineteen-eighties sermon from the transnational Sikh proselytizer, Yogi Bhajan. A. R. Vasavi confirms that this story circulated in drought-prone Andhra Pradesh as well, in the late eighties, early nineties, with the "work hard and you shall be rewarded" kind of moral. (personal communication, 2006). These diffused instances perhaps support my notion that the story's provenance is not Rajasthani, and in this it certainly differs from the Bagaravat epic and probably the Divali story as well. Last summer, I took the opportunity of being back in Rajasthan to see if a few others in the village knew it. I encountered local variants that make it seem more regional, naming the farmers by caste for

example. But of course those could be adaptations resulting from retellings in a particular place. Here is the way I first heard it.

The poor farmer and Lord Shiva's conch shell

Once Lord Shiva decided not to blow his conch. The rain depended on his blowing his conch. As long as he did not blow his conch there would be no rain upon this earth.

He wanted to see what would happen on the earth if it didn't rain.

Everyone knew about his decision.

So lots of people stopped working in the fields, thinking, "If there is no rain why should we spend our energy and material in the fields?"

But there was one poor farmer who was regularly working on his farm. He was thinking that maybe someday, who knows when, the Lord will start to blow his conch so I will have something.

And there was also a saying:

baiṭha hantar begar bhali (better to work without pay than just to sit).[22]

So that one farmer was working continuously.

After a long while Lord Shiva and Parvati were on their way somewhere, and they noticed that farmer. And Parvati and Shiva laughed. Parvati said, "Look at that stupid farmer working over there even though he knows you won't blow the conch and there will be no rain.

So let's go and ask why he is doing this work? So they decided to change their form because they knew that if he saw them he would start to pray for rain

So, they changed their form and went to the farmer, and asked him

"Didn't you hear about Lord Shiva's decision that he is not going to blow the conch?"

"Oh yes, I heard about that and I knew that as long as he doesn't blow the conch there will be no rain." Now, the farmer guessed that maybe these strangers were not what

[22] For *begar* and its complex semantics, see Gold and Gujar 2002:

they seemed, because no one else had asked him this question. So he had an idea what to say to them. He said, "There is a big reason why I am working on my farm."

Lord Shiva waited for his answer with great anticipation. He was excited to learn the farmer's reason.

The farmer said, “Look, I am afraid: if I will not work on my farm and I'm not plowing and my oxen are not working then maybe they will forget how I teach them to work on the farm and maybe I will forget how to do agricultural work.”

Then Lord Shiva thought, “Maybe this is a good reason. What if I forget how to blow the conch? I had better try . . . .”

So Lord Shiva resumed his original form and he blew on his conch shell, and there was good rain just after that. All the water flowed out from all the other farms because the earth was hard, because nobody had ploughed the fields so the water couldn't soak into the soil

But the farmer who was working continuously got all the water and he got really good crops.

From that time, the farmer doesn't wait for the rain; he just keeps working on his farm. The farmer's life is a life of faith. (kisan ka jivan vishvas ka jivan hai). If god gave us a beak, then he will give us something to peck at. (bhagvan chuch di hai to chuga bhi dega). The one who creates eaters also gives food.[23]

I have yet to meet a Rajasthani farmer who does not have faith in power or powers who control much that is beyond his or her own control; who does not do at least a few rituals in the hope that they will work on these powers; who does not have a way of referring to "bhagvan" (a generic term for god) as an ultimate force who may grant or deny success. Rain is only the foremost among the many factors that can make or break a year of agricultural endeavor. Yet farmers also know perfectly well that their own labor and expertise are key. That a human is able to manipulate or second-guess god may be a metaphor for the kind of brinksmanship agriculture requires in a region such as this where rains do seem to fail more regularly than not, and where

[23] Bhoju tells me that farmers use this as an argument against family planning: if god gives eaters he will also give food.

the history of oppressive and arbitrarily exploitative rulers remains vivid in individual and collective living memories.

This parable sees the gods perpetuating human suffering for not very good reasons, but ultimately manipulated back into giving what they should. It clashes with the discourses of morality I regularly encountered and have spent the bulk of this paper unfolding because it does not hold up a vision of unified community as ideal, but rather rewards the individual smart farmer, significantly at the expense of his neighbors (although ultimately all benefit from rain).[24] Another striking difference is that this tale blames drought on divine whimsy. It is *lila*, the radically inexplicable playfulness of the gods, rather than human *karma* or sin that provides an overarching causality. (Could this be a still more perfect theodicy?) It certainly could seem to be a "modern" story, in that it is decisively about getting ahead -- rather than about sharing without regard for profit, or about maintaining harmonious relationships with other living beings.[25]

Throughout most of this impressionistic paper, drawing on interviews and oral texts, I have highlighted various aspects of a rural critique of modernity, an apprehension in the present of ever-worsening conditions apparent in both nature and culture; an apprehension that seems to be at least partially correct. The last story might crack this narrative in some ways. But I do not mean to suggest that an "enchanted" world view is fatally ruptured by modernity. I recorded the conch shell tale in the same year, 1993, that I began to gather views of moral, physical, and ecological degeneration linked to transformations in technology and economy; to seemingly unlimited increased desire for profit and the goods money can buy. I have no evidence that such alternative moralities are sequential, lining up with a chronology of deterioration such as Kesar, Mangi and many others put forward. Moreover, the two viewpoints are not really opposed; Kesar or Mangi would likely appreciate the story of Lord Shiva's conch, which is after all a story about correctly negotiating divine favor, however unpredictable it may be. The conch story describes a route to success based not on biomoral community but on clever interaction with

---

[24] In that sense this tale has much in common with some women's devotional stories about clever young brides who transform adversity into opportunity, using their influence over deities to bring good fortune to their own homes sometimes at the expense of their neighbors; yet women always close their stories of divine rewards with prayers to spread these blessings throughout the whole world -- thus clearly seeking to play it both ways.

[25] Jane Marie Law, who heard a partial early version of this paper, suggested that the story is also about the need to maintain knowledge of traditional technologies in the face of environmental change (personal communication 2006).

deities, on the one hand; and faithful dedication to labor on the other. In that sense it is even optimistic.

It seems very likely that both attitudes and approaches -- valuing interrelationships above all and valuing individual effort above all -- have coexisted for centuries in some kind of balance.[26] Many scholars of religion in modern India have pointed to a shift in the last half century from collective to individual rituals and devotion. How does this shift in the religious realm mesh with other shifts in realms of political economy glimpsed in the fragmented accounts I have offered here? These accounts portray the willing relinquishment of pleasure for profit, the desire for goods and the cash that buys them, experienced as physical need; the complacent acceptance of packaged seeds even if this leads to the loss of valued species; and perhaps most powerfully the perception of relations among humans and between humans and animals as increasingly violent. Are there alternative moralities that make these conditions, which are after all most lamented by the aged and aging, considerably less ominous? These are questions for further investigation, and for discussion.

[26] As Norman Uphoff has argued in the context of irrigation development in Sri Lanka, this may be an eminently and productively "both/and" world (1992: 282).

References

Agrawal, Arun. 2005. *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Amin, Sajeda and Alaka Malwade Basu. 2006. Popular Perceptions of Emerging Influences on Mortality and Longevity in Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Crooke, W. 1993 [reprint] *Folklore of India*. New Delhi: Nataraj Books.

Gold, Ann Grodzins. 1998 "Sin and Rain: Moral Ecology in Rural North India." In *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, edited by Lance Nelson, 165-195. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gold, Ann Grodzins. 1999 "Abandoned Rituals: Knowledge, Time, and Rhetorics of Modernity in Rural India." In *Religion, Ritual and Royalty*, edited by N.K. Singhi and Rajendra Joshi, 262-275. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

Gold, Ann Grodzins. 2001. "Rooted Responsibility: Locating Moral Authority in North India." In *Taking Responsibility: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Winston Davis, 149-172. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Gold, Ann Grodzins. 2002. "New Light in the House: Schooling Girls in Rural North India." In *Everyday Life in South Asia*, edited by Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, 86-99. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Gold, Ann Grodzins 2006 "Love's Cup, Love's Thorn, Love's End: The Language of *Prem* in Ghatiyali." In *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, edited by Francesca Orsini, 303-330. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gold, Ann Grodzins and Bhoju Ram Gujar. 2002 *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Gupta, Akhil. 1998. *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Herring, Ronald J. 2001. "Contesting the "Great Transformation": Local Struggles with the Market in South India." In *Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, edited by James C. Scott and Nina Bhatt, 235-263. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Miller, Joseph. C., Jr. 1994. *The Twenty-four Brothers and Lord Devnarayan: The Story and Performance of a Folk Epic of Rajasthan, India*. University of Pennsylvania.

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. 1988. *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Parry, J. and M. Bloch, eds. 1989. *Money and the Morality of Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Premchand. 1980. *Twenty-four Stories by Premchand*. Translated by Nandini Nopany and P. Lal. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

Ramprasad, Vanaja, Krishna Prasad, and Gowri Gopinath. 1999. "The Synergy of Culture and Spirituality Enhances Biodiversity." Pp. 71-86 in *Food for Thought: Ancient Visions and New Experiments of Rural People*, edited by B. Haverkort and W. Hiemstra. London: Zed Books.

Sahlins, Marshall. 2000. *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays*. New York: Zone Books.

Shiva, Vandana. 2001. "Seed Satyagraha: A Movement for Farmers' Rights and Freedoms in a

World of Intellectual Property Rights, Globalized Agriculture and Biotechnology." Pp. 351-360 in *Redesigning Life: The Worldwide challenge to Genetic Engineering*, edited by B. Tokar. London: Zed Books.

Shiva, Vandana, Vanaja Ramprasad, Pandurang Hegde, Omkar Krishnan, and Radha Holla-Bhar. 1995. *The Seed Keepers*. New Delhi: Indraprastha Press.

Skaria, Ajay. 2002. Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (4):955-986.

Seremetakis, C. N. 1996. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Sutton, David E. 2001. *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory.* Berg Pub Ltd

Uphoff, Norman. 1992. *Learning from Gal Oya: Possibilities for Participatory Development and Post-Newtonian Social Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Wadley, Susan S. 1994. *Struggling with Destiny in Karimpur, 1925-1984.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weber, Max. 1972 [1923]. The Social Psychology of the World Religions. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 267-301. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wiser, William and Charlotte Wiser. 2000 [1930]. *Behind Mud Walls*. Berkeley: University of California Press.