THE LIFE OF DEBT IN RURAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

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Over 250,000 farmers have committed suicide across India since 1995, the majority of deaths concentrated in central India’s cotton belt. Scholarly consensus views mass suicides amongst the peasantry as debt-induced: transgenic cotton cultivation imprisons producers in downward monetary debt spirals. Based on two years of fieldwork in rural Vidarbha, my book project titled, ‘The Life of Debt in Rural India,’ examines the proximate entanglements of debt and techno-material transformations in cotton cultivation. It demonstrates that with the emergence of cash-debt as an essential component of the productive process, differentiated interest rates have become the medium of negotiating social and familial proximity. From a formerly caste-specific proscribed activity, the generalization of usurious lending has made monetary debt the language of social prestations (of gifts, grain and labour), reshaping customary understandings of status, honour and obligation. This project contributes to the anthropology of South-Asia, the peasantry and debt in two ways. In ethnographically tracing the force of debt as social obligation and the imbrication of modes of production with symbolic cultural life, I demonstrate the inadequacy of an economistic obsession with debt as monetary liability. Accordingly, against characterizations of the ‘risk-averse’ peasant in a customary moral economy, I describe an emergent ethical economy centered on uncertainty as risk becomes a structural precondition of peasant life.
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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations from Marathi, Hindi, Urdu and Marwari are mine unless specifically attributed otherwise. I use a simplified phonetic Roman transliteration without diacritics for non-English languages that appear in this dissertation. The pronunciations (and so spellings) of personal nouns differ when inflected through regional accents. I spell names of persons, places and objects as I heard them by the people who spoke them, and have attempted in the transliteration and translation to stay as close to particular conversational and speech forms in Varhadi (such as use of the present continuous tense) as was possible.
In April 2015 Gajendra Singh fell and hung from a tree at a political rally in New Delhi organized by workers of the Aam Aadmi Party, gathered to celebrate the electoral victory of the party’s candidate Arvind Kejriwal, the incoming Chief Minister. The incident spiraled into a national political scandal on the ‘farmers suicide’—the quarter of a million suicide deaths of cultivators across India, beginning in the late 1990s in the cotton-fields of Vidarbha. Gajendra Singh’s death caused brief commotion in the national and international media, leading to questions raised on the floor of the Parliament of India on the continuing crises of agriculture and the debt-burdens of farmers cultivating cash-crops for uncertain markets in an uncertain climate, and soon spiraled into a political battle between the police, political parties, the state machinery and discussions in the wider media sphere. The reports of this incident in the press are confusing. All accounts concur that Singh was sitting high up on a tree observing the rally and occasionally interacting with persons standing below. How exactly Singh died is however a matter of heated public dispute and litigation between the Delhi Police, the AAP Party workers, witnesses to the event, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, journalists, medical officers, Singh’s own kin and village acquaintances who disputed he was a farmer, indebted or sundered from his home. Some accounts say Singh fell, some say high-spirited workers of the Aam Aadmi Party gathered there to celebrate their election win heckled and urged Singh to jump from the tree. Once he fell there were delays in cutting down the body by medical personnel as the crowds got into altercations with the police clearing way for the ambulance. When

1 The incident received wide coverage in the print and electronic press. In this report in the Times of India the reporter claims the family held the Chief Minister personally responsible: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Gajendra-Singhs-death-Family-blames-AAP-brother-says-Kejriwal-responsible/articleshow/47025543.cms. In this report that appeared in The Times a few days after the incident the journalist met with Singh’s family who disputed many of the facts about Singh’s identity that had been reported in the newspapers, namely that he was indebted, a farmer or estranged from his home: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Gajendra-Singhs-death-Family-blames-AAP-brother-says-Kejriwal-responsible/articleshow/47025543.cms. This report that appeared in The First Post collates reactions to the death by celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other public figures in India: http://www.firstpost.com/politics/gajendra-singhs-suicide-at-aap-rally-from-pm-modi-to-shah-rukh-khan-heres-who-said-what-2207512.html
Singh’s body was finally taken down, a letter was discovered in the pocket of his kurta. The letter is handwritten in Hindi and reads in English translation:—

‘Friends,
I am the son of a farmer – my father has turned me out of my home because my crops have failed – I have three children – friends I live in Rajasthan’s Dausa Zilla Bodli village – please tell me how to return home – Jai Jawan Jai Kisan
Gajendra Singh, Bodli, Dausa, Rajasthan’

The immediate political fall-out of Singh’s death, which debated whether he intended to die or fell accidentally; whether he was even a farmer and thus his death a ‘farmers suicide’; whether he was indebted and if so for what to whom, nonetheless circled an unanswerable question: who and what killed Gajendra Singh? What public political language can bridge the chasm between sociological description—the ‘agrarian crises’, the ‘farmers’ suicide’—and an individual’s action to hang at a public rally attended by two thousand people in the national capital?

The public debates and discussions of Gajendra Singh’s death rehearsed a citational scene in which this death derived its sense from prior deaths: it was a ‘farmer’s suicide,’ not simply the suicide of a farmer because many thousand farmers have gone before Gajendra Singh. The name ‘farmers suicide’ in which Gajendra Singh, a farmer’s son from Rajasthan, killed himself in New Delhi refers to the deaths of a quarter of a million farmers in the cotton-fields of Vidarbha. Beginning in 1996/97 the two decade long suicide epidemic in Vidarbha has given to Indian public consciousness the figure of the farmer committing suicide, now a juridical category of the debt-induced ‘farmer’s suicide’ (shetkari atmabatya) on which hangs monetary compensation, which in 2015 the national public debated whether applied to the death of Gajendra Singh, a farmer’s son from Rajasthan.

2 The letter was reprinted in the Indian Express and may be read in Hindi here: http://indianexpress.com/article/india/my-crops-were-destroyed-and-i-have-three-children-gajender-singh-writes-in-suicide-note/
Cotton and Suicide in Vidarbha

More than a quarter of a million farmers have committed suicide across India since 1995, a vast majority of these deaths occurring in the central-Indian cotton belt of Vidarbha. Since what one report published by New York University Law School terms the ‘largest wave of recorded suicides in human history’ (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice: NYU Law 2011) first received attention in the mid-nineties the public, and now juridical, figure of the ‘farmers’ suicide’ has become a potent politically charged symbol for intense public, and scholarly, debates on India’s experience with neoliberal structural adjustment, and the failures of state and society. Scholarly and activist discourses have attempted to establish causal links between the widespread suicide of farmers and the large-scale industrial transformation of agricultural production in the early 1990s (see Kennedy and King 2014; Munster 2012; Mohanty 2004; Srinivasalu 2015). In these analysis, neoliberal economic policies implemented by the state following structural adjustment have made small-scale peasant producers, particularly cotton-cultivators, vulnerable to price volatilities in global commodity markets. As cotton-cultivation has been intensively capitalized (i.e. reorganized at the point of production and sale for the market) without a concomitant expansion in economies of scale and the consolidation of land-holdings, pesant producers tilling small plots of rain-fed land have found themselves entrapped in downward debt-spirals. In these regions cultivators have shifted from subsistence food-grain cultivation, to export-oriented cash-crop cultivation (cotton, coffee, tobacco, etc.) without the resources of scale and efficiency required to compete in the global commodity markets.

Under the aegis of wide-ranging economic reforms in the early 1990s, implemented as part of a structural adjustment package developed by the IMF and the World Bank, the state withdrew subsidies for agriculture, minimum price support for agricultural produce, removed trade restrictions on imports bringing small cultivators into competition with the international market, and encouraged a shift from food-grains to cash-crop cultivation, resulting in a large-scale industrial
transformation of agricultural production, wherein rising input costs in the form of genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides forced small cultivators to take out large loans (from institutional credit sources such as banks and informal loans from money-lenders). The decline of rural banks and sources of institutional credit, and increasingly low returns on investments as a result of price volatility in the international market, resulted in a series of crises in which cotton-farmers found themselves entangled in a network of debts they were unable to pay off. The highest numbers of deaths were subsequently reported as emerging from the six cotton-growing states of Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab; and Kerala (the primary crops being spices) and Chhattisgarh (which remains a mystery). Since the deaths first began emerging from the cotton-fields of Vidarbha the state has attempted to respond to the crises by offering monetary support to surviving kin in the form of a compensation package addressed to ‘suicide-prone districts’ (atmabayta-grasth shetra) for the surviving kin members of a ‘farmers suicide’ (shetkari atmabayta). All these terms appear on the compensation forms in the case-files, in judicial depositions and official correspondence, as well as are used in the news reporting on suicide deaths in Vidarbha.

This dissertation shows that this category of the ‘farmer’s suicide’, as a juridical category of state policy and an affective category of public investment, has emerged at the conjunction of the massification of suicides in a state-archive of case-files of deaths established in 2002 as part of a state monetary compensation scheme for surviving kin, and public concern about the ‘agrarian crises.’ However in enshrining the ‘farmer’s suicide’ as a juridical term it is the category and not the individual death that is recognized by the state. It is the category that then circulates in the wider public sphere, in which the individual death acquires meaning only as a point located in a series of deaths, which when viewed together are taken as the symptoms of and evidence for the crises of cash-crop farming post structural adjustment. However the means by which the suicide deaths of
cotton-cultivators in Vidarbha come to constitute this name—‘farmers suicide’—captated by which a farmer from Rajasthan kills himself in New Delhi, cannot be understood through this category which is, the dissertation argues, a legal fiction devoid of social history or empirical content. Rather than looking at cotton-cultivation or suicides deaths, this dissertation attempts to locate the scales along which a possible future analysis must proceed of the operations of monetary-debt as it re-aligns social relations in contemporary rural Vidarbha.

In so doing it intervenes in several regional and disciplinary conversations: in the transition debates and the emergence of agrarian capitalisms in agrarian social history and related debates on the peasantry in south-Asia for example. It also addresses the gift-debt concept cluster within social anthropology, the notion of value and exchange. Chapters on political economy, agrarian policy and genetic science address related conversations in these fields. The discussion of relevant literature is conducted in the chapters and footnotes, and analytical frameworks and techniques (structural Marxism, semiotics, historiography) are clarified as they appear. Rather than an explanation of methodology or a literature review therefore, in this introduction my aim is to orient the reader for what follows by marking the peculiar epistemological problem that besets current analysis of suicide in Vidarbha, and thereby explain the narrative and analytical choices reflected in this manuscript.

In his letter asking if someone could help him find a way back home having been cast out of a home, Gajendra Singh took for his own the words of a dead Prime Minister. Gajendra Singh’s letter was not the first of its kind. By 2010 letters written to sitting Prime Ministers of India from desperate farmers had begun reaching 10 Janpath Lane, the official prime ministerial residence in New Delhi. In May 2010 Ramchandra Raut, a farmer from Dhotragaon in Washim district Maharashtra, sent a letter written on Rs. 100 non-judicial stamp paper to the Prime Minister and the

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3 The slogan ‘Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan – Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer!’ with which Gajendra Singh ended his letter was promulgated by Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of India, at a public gathering in New Delhi on the eve of the Indo-China war in October 1965.
President of India, the village Sarpanch and the Superintendent of Police citing insurmountable debt burdens caused by successive crop failures as the reason for his suicide (Sainath 2010). By the April of 2015 when Gajendra Singh took his own life at a political rally in New Delhi leaving a letter, I had been looking at case-files of suicide deaths by farmers in the documents section of the District Collectorate offices in the Wardha and Yavatmal districts of Vidarbha, Maharashtra.

A back-office in the Wardha District Collectorate holds over 2,000 case-files opened on suicide deaths by farmers in the district to adjudicate compensation claims by surviving kin members. Under a relief package announced by the Prime Minister’s office in New Delhi in 2002, if through a process of judicial adjudication as per state issued criteria it can be proved that a person committed suicide as a result of ‘debt’ and not ‘social or personal factors’, then surviving kin are issued a compensation sum of Rs. 1 lakh from the Prime Minister’s relief fund. Every month state officials, NGO workers, farmers leaders, visiting social activists, the deputy collector, the district collector, the chief agricultural officer and the block development officer meet in the District Collector’s office to go over the files for the month and decided whether surviving kin will receive funds. Journalists from the local and national dailies, from the English, Hindi and Marathi presses attend these meetings, and reporters of state and national television news channels attend the public meetings on district suicide deaths held by the DC’s Office. Month and block-wise figures of suicide deaths are officially released and available on the Collectorate website. The case-files are open for public scrutiny under the Right to Information Act 2005.

Every month the numbers and figures of suicide deaths in Vidarbha are released to the press, enter the records of the National Crime Records Bureau of district-wise country-wide unnatural deaths, and overworked, underpaid and still committed officials at various levels of the state, administrative, quasi-state and welfare apparatus garner whatever meager resources are available at their immediate and reachable stations to extend help to the rural citizens whose welfare
it is their task to serve. On the website of the Wardha District Collectorate can be read an official pledge and prayer taken by all government employees in Vidarbha. Written in Marathi the text states in English translation:

‘We the employees of the Wardha District Collectorate pledge that finding answers to the questions raised by farmers are a binding obligation on us. By educating ourselves on the many state schemes and packages available for farmers within the government, we pledge to find ways of reaching this information to farmers so they may benefit from state assistance….In our homes, neighbourhoods and villages not a single person should commit suicide, we will shoulder the responsibility of this care. Committing suicide resolves no questions, this we pledge to impress on the children. The honour of farmers is the honour of the country. We are the servers of farmers, in this role lies our pride!’

While written in the stilted tones of state communiqué, the text still transmits a real concern and anxiety, which is manifest in the day-to-day functioning of the state machinery and bureaucracy, and few workers take their task lightly. I spent almost two years working in the Wardha District Collectorate, and interacting with state, administrative and medical officials in both districts, at various levels of the state bureaucracy. While the usual problems of inefficiency and inadequate resources constrain governmental functioning and impact in Vidarbha as they do in the rest of rural India, as state governments and administrations go Maharashtra has an efficient and responsive regional bureaucracy when compared to other states. The suicide epidemic has deeply affected everyone who lives in Vidarbha, and while officials may grumble at the long hours spent dealing with kin, paperwork, cheques and lists, the state officials I interacted with have a genuine concern for the people they serve. In my time state workers tried their best to respond to the questions and queries of kin, and in the monthly meetings officials tried as best they could to disperse compensation to as large a pool as possible, while balancing the pressure from higher levels of government and political interests more broadly to demonstrate a reduction in the numbers of cultivator suicides occurring in Vidarbha, which are tallied from the number of eligible suicide deaths, the rest being classed under ‘social and personal factors’. The doctors, staff and nurses at the
District Hospital, Datta Meghe Institute of Medical Sciences and the Kasturba Rural Hospital, where many of the post-mortems of suicide cases are conducted, are committed dedicated individuals, many of whom have given up lucrative city careers to serve in understaffed under-resourced rural hospitals serving poor patients with few incentives to improve care. The state officials, doctors, social workers, teachers and counselors are strapped in what they can do despite their efforts, since the scale of the crises far exceeds the ambit of processes and entities the state or allied institutions have now the power to control.

The public wound of the farmers suicide is in a sense Vidarbha’s tragedy. Since it is only because of farmers committing suicides that the analytical gaze broadly defined—media coverage; government, civil society and administrative publications; independent and state fact-finding commission and reports; scholarly articles; academic writing; grassroots and activist publics; farmer’s alliances; NGO circuits; the international anti-GMO lobby and so on—has been drawn to and stays on Vidarbha, and since the suicides began with the crises in cotton cultivation crystallized in the image of Monsanto’s transgenic Bt-Cotton, almost all analysis heretofore attempts to explain the former through examination of the latter: that is, it attempts to explain self-chosen death by persons who live in rural Vidarbha through cotton cultivation and monetary-debt. Except when it turns to cotton cultivation, it does so through examining the input-costs, monetary liabilities, and prices of cotton and pronouncing these to be unprofitable, which is proved by the fact that farmers have committed suicide.

There is no way in this parallax mirror to understand either suicide or cotton cultivation and their connection as two dimensions of the same material social reality, since the only way debt and suicide appear conjoined in analysis is as variables constituted in relation to each other. The lines of distraught kin at compensation offices in Vidarbha are a materialization of this analytical blindness, an institutional, administrative, policy and social opacity that is now part and parcel of how the
suicide epidemic is lived and experienced in Vidarbha. This dissertation argues that to say transgenic cotton-cultivation causes suicide is as meaningless as saying cotton-cultivation does not cause suicide. Trying to understand the suicides in Vidarbha through debt, or debt through suicides, soon produces a material tautology since it is not possible to get from one to the other, as neither lives to produce the other. No single event of suicide in its particularity can ever represent the conclusions about cotton-cultivation that are nonetheless pressed out of it in public discourses, as suicide comes out of the question of the viability of rural life not of the profitability of cotton-cultivation, and the force of monetary-debt undertaken for cotton-cultivation is to be found flowing through the exchanges and interactions of the living not frozen as evidence in the bank details of the deceased. This dissertation attempts to understand the suicide of farmers by de-linking the question of life and death from that of the productivity of cotton-cultivation, in contrast to the vast majority of academic and scholarly writings on the suicide crises in rural Vidarbha.

**Markets and The Market/Persons and Actors**
Since reports of peasant suicides first emerged from Vidarbha in the late 1990s, followed by similar reports from other states, the reigning paradigm for understanding this unfolding crises in rural society has been an economic one: economists and public discourses more generally locate Vidarbha’s prolonged suicide event as emerging from the psychological desperation of farmers trapped in debt-cycles attendant on the cash-cropping of transgenic Bt-Cotton. (See Assayag 2005; Gupta and Chandak 2005; Stone 2002 for discussions of seeds and shifts in agrarian policy; Rao and Suri 2006 for agrarian policy, suicide, cotton-cultivation and economic debt; suicide located in input-cost analysis and cotton-cultivation (Jeromi 2007; Reddy and Galab 2006; Satish 2006) to cite just a few. This dissertation seeks to show that this framing of the issue, because it is empirically incorrect, is analytically misleading since it is based on a theoretical and empirical fallacy—namely, that there
exist such things as ‘market forces’ and ‘monetary debt’ that act on the minds of ‘farmers’, except such entities theoretically stabilized for analytic purposes are not to be found in Vidarbha, in which specific sets of people located in specific sets of economic and socio-productive relations cultivate a specific crop for capitalist market-exchange. Thus even constructing models in which ‘static debts’, ‘cost of cultivation’, ‘price of lint’ and ‘suicide of farmers’ appear as relational variables whose interactions are seen as reflective of the behaviours and actions of actual persons is a gross analytical mistake since such an exercise with numbers cannot yield this information, absent the terrain of phenomenological reality, the embodied social, productive and intimate relations in which the ‘market’, ‘debt’ and ‘farmer’ exist as material entities.

The difficulty in theorizing what is occurring in Vidarbha is that the conversation is inevitably lead towards economistic formulations, since what we are given to see is a seemingly straightforward relation between savings and earnings; the cost of cultivation and the profit margins on cotton; size of land-holding and economies of scale. Almost everything I describe in this dissertation through reading shifts in social relations can be equally well described as the interaction of ‘actors’ with ‘market forces’ or rural-urban ‘push-pull’ factors in the vocabularies of development economics. I could say, for instance, that Vidarbha is a reflection of a familiar process: with the adoption of new techniques of cultivation making land more productive, the principle of scale (extension) is replaced by that of intensification. Those who can afford to remain in cultivation do so; the large mass of agriculturalists who cannot eke out a living from agriculture sell their land to those who can afford to cash-crop farm, become landless labourers or supposedly find other occupations, or continue to remain locked on the land in disguised unemployment, what is called ‘underemployment’ in the NSSO (National Sample Survey Organization) data sets, and loss-making farming amassing spiraling debts on economically unviable plots. This has already been said in innumerable news-reports, scholarly articles, journalistic accounts and an ocean of documents.
produced by state, market and capital alike, and a great deal of this writing is discussed in the pages ahead.

Through analysis in this vein—which crunches quantities of data on cotton prices, input costs, credit sources, size of land holding, mobility of assets and so on—a public commonsense has emerged in India, and internationally, of how the economy of cotton works (debt), and by extension presumably explains the behaviours of persons (suicide), and consequently runs into trouble when large numbers of people who had no personal monetary debts also committed suicide. Thus several articles try and parse the ‘true’ agrarian suicide caused by ‘debt’, as distinguished from other suicides also occurring amongst cotton-farmers in Vidarbha, but these caused by ‘social and family’ factors, i.e. those suicides that cannot be accounted for by monetary debt are then assigned to the misalignment of social relations (see Mohanty 1999 and Nilotpal 2002 for an example).

At issue is the question for which an answer is being sought, and it is here that the dissertation makes its basic intervention. Which is, that in order to begin to understand what is occurring in Vidarbha the question of cotton cultivation and the question of suicide must be analytically disarticulated precisely because the first appears as though it were the cause of the other since this causality is forged only within the terms of an analysis which stabilizes itself by defining both terms tautologically in relation to each other. If one wishes to understand cotton cultivation in India, then this question must be kept analytically and functionally separate from the question of suicide in Vidarbha which will devolve on explaining why so many people in Vidarbha (and not somewhere else), cultivating cotton (and not some other crop), on these land-holdings are killing themselves in this way at this time.

As regards the prospects of cotton-cultivation, agrarian economics has debated the numbers

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4 Nor has this mode of thinking remained a matter of debate between disciplines; it structures state policy and monetary compensation which is based precisely on this distinction between eligible and non-eligible suicides. Chapter 5 devotes itself to an exploration of this precise problem of the ontology of suicide.
for two decades and pronounced them to be grim. In the second chapter, ‘A Political Economy of Cotton in Vidarbha’, I cover this terrain and arrive at much the same conclusion. However, economics cannot tell us why the numbers in the global cotton futures market, or for that matter unprofitable cultivation, can drive over a quarter of a million persons to take their own life in Vidarbha. This mode of analysis cannot contend with the question of self-chosen death, because it cannot account for life as it is actually lived and experienced, which is not in the abstraction of ‘the market’ (or ‘capitalism’) that appears in economics (or crude Marxism), since for cultivators in Vidarbha this thing, as an abstraction, does not exist. Only materially (not theoretically) constituted markets are to be found in the world.

Given workable data sets, one could create a function that would register correlations between the price of land, the cost of cultivation, cotton-yields and inter-generational land fragmentation. This would not be inaccurate and it tells us where to look. There are certainly correlations between these things, but besides telling us this looking at yields and deaths has not much more to offer. If the attempt is to understand how actually existing persons, living in historically constituted social relations, cultivating this particular crop, negotiate and live through this particular experience with the capitalist market (social anthropology) then we will also have to consider the concrete social relations, the embodied lived phenomenology, in which the market both appears (the prices of cotton, the ground-rent on land, the local price of money), and from which ‘the market’ (microeconomics) is abstracted as a conceptual, which is also a material and socio-technical entity.

This dissertation argues that in order to understand how a terrain of life has become unlivable for a large number of people every year in Vidarbha as reflected in their self-chosen deaths, one will need to eschew this attachment to the true suicide caused by economic factors (debt) from those caused by social relations (family squabbles), since at the level of lived reality these
are the same thing.\textsuperscript{5} Thus simply pushing more credit into Vidarbha through extending credit, restructuring loans, debt-waivers etc., the stock solution to the cotton cultivation crises, may make cotton farming more profitable for some groups, or theoretically, every single cultivator cultivating cotton for a time. However, whether this will stop people from killing themselves is a different question since the issue of whether one wishes to continue living cannot be answered (solely and not in this way) by whether they are able to reap a profit from cotton this year.

In chapter 3, ‘A Proximate Economy of Cotton’, I examine interest rates on money between kin, caste and clan groups to show how the language of monetary debt in becoming (also) a language in which kin and clan members negotiated the strength of familial ties, made contractual the very relations that were meant to signify unconditional mutuality in this society. I do not offer this as an explanation of why someone in particular killed themselves; however even a partial ethnographic observation based on fieldwork will tell us more about what it means to live here (and so choose to die here) than numbers which graph the profit margins on cotton and the costs of cultivation. This is not because the numbers have nothing to say, but because the aim of these numbers is not explaining how anyone lives in them because no one does, but to explain what it means to cultivate cotton by these numbers (size of land, costs of cultivation, prices of cotton, etc.) in today’s economy of cotton, which is entirely organized by those numbers.

Looking at these numbers, which I do throughout this dissertation, tells us among other things not why someone kills themselves in Vidarbha, but rather how this event could come to be described in the language of numbers to begin with.\textsuperscript{6} That is, if today the vast majority of writing on

\textsuperscript{5} Such as is evidenced by by a suicide case-file in which a marriage card for a daughter’s wedding alongside bank documents detailing sums owed are enclosed as supporting evidence of the eligibility of this death for monetary compensation.

\textsuperscript{6} For a very different ethnographic engagement with how numbers and the language of economics construct contemporary reality in the neoliberal era see Soo Young-Kim’s 2016 dissertation on the debt crises in Greece. In A Future Continuously Present: Everyday Economics in Greece (Columbia: 2016) Kim considers how the future is made an agentive
Vidarbh takes numbers as its focus it is because numbers and the language of abstraction have come to acquire a tragic material life in this region. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation ‘The Flower-Infant’, I examine a cotton-harvesting ritual to show the historicity of this inhabitation of the language of abstraction and numbers as experiential realities in contemporary Vidarbha.

Separating out the vocabularies of economics broadly speaking from becoming the analytic through which one sees, and what one looks at when one sees, is made peculiarly difficult in Vidarbha because the entities that microeconomics ostensibly studies have, in this specific historical case for reasons I explain through this dissertation, become a material social reality. That is, economics and economists are not at all wrong when they say monetary debt kills people in Vidarbha. It certainly does and the routes through which it arrives can also be traced through economics because of the specific social history of Vidarbha in which the numbers by which global capitalist markets organize cotton production for commodity-exchange are materialized in the seeds each cultivator puts into the ground.

By this I mean something simple and descriptive not theoretical or metaphorical: in so far as modern economics considers the operations of markets, prices and the behaviours of actors, it does so on the presumption that there is a relation between these entities in the circumscribed domain of the operations of ‘the market’. These variables stabilized within the language of economics register movements in those material realms now enmeshed within the logics of commodity production for exchange that the cotton numbers in the graphs both describe, and through theirvalorization in the material and institutional circuits of the global capitalist market routed through the national state and domestic economy, produce as material entities that may be known through these numbers. In those parts of the world where conditions of life and labour have come to be governed by the logics of production for global capitalism, in these worlds too ‘the market’, ‘prices’ and ‘cultivator-actors’, social object in the present through expert knowledges about the economy, and everyday understandings of economics in the wake of the re-alignment of sovereign (and personal/consumer) debt.
precisely as abstractions have acquired a material, phenomenological reality.

The materialist method developed by Marx to analyze the operations of abstraction that come with capitalism demands escape from this double bind which does not allow anyone to look at Vidarbha for an answer to what is happening in Vidarbha. Marx’s method, and the techniques of social anthropology, urges consideration not of how the commodity (cotton) circulates and what values the market (commodity, public, state, academic) assigns to it, but to the social relations which produce the people who produce that commodity. In a sense Vidarbha is an ominously singular test case for the materialist method in that it may be employed both descriptively and analytically, precisely because in the case of Vidarbha we seem to be confronting a materialization on a vast scale of the logics of social transformation, historical change and subjective alienation that Marx identified as the necrotic and vivifying impulse of capitalism. In order to understand how capitalism, here used not as an ideological denunciation but a descriptive noun for an economic and social process that re-organizes social and productive relations to producing commodities for exchange in the market, re-structures the horizons of life under the pressure of cotton production requires looking at traces left on social relations and not the fetish of cotton yields.

Thus in drawing a different kind of relation between interest rates on money and bonds between kin-members and castes groups, I have attempted to show how the normalization of a condition of mutual monetary indebtedness in this agrarian community, by introducing contract into prestation (caste) retuned the terms and grounds of social authority. In making contractual the very relations that are meant to signify unconditional mutuality (kinship), the economy of cotton produced a social field, a habitus, in which large numbers of people (men) now kill themselves without the personal motivation of monetary liabilities since they too live in the regime of debt.

There are two significant dimensions and sites of agricultural life and cotton cultivation that do not receive separate treatment in this dissertation though these realms appear in many forms, in
many different ways, throughout this text. The first is the realm of the state and its organs broadly
constituted—the myriad different offices, branches and departments from agricultural offices,
irrigation departments, crop loan and insurance offices, to the tens of departments directly
concerned with agricultural production and village life. Then there is the administrative apparatus
more broadly consisting of the courts, land and revenue departments, survey and map offices, police
and law and order machinery; the welfare apparatus consisting of the district medical hospitals and
primary health clinics, village and district schools and so on. A vast state machinery directly and
indirectly structures daily life in rural Vidarbha, and cultivators access one or the other state office
every week for some purpose. Since the suicide crises the functional demands of care on the state
machinery has expanded without an adequate increase in resources, nonetheless through one or
more channels of state-funded or public-private partnership projects state officials team up with
private resource providers (doctors, NGO workers, researchers, social workers etc.) to extend help
on a variety of fronts to battle the crises of cotton-cultivation and the crises of suicide.

Some of these efforts in the districts I worked in include a CAIM project to improve the
quality of Vidarbha’s cotton so it fetches better prices in international markets; a mobile mental
health clinic project called VISHRAM in partnership between NABARD and doctors at the Datta
Meghe Rural Hospital; another mental health project run by a sustainable water coalition in suicide-
prone Amravati; a long-running collaborative project on cotton-cultivation between the District
Collector’s Office and the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation; projects on sustainable
agriculture and alternatives to hybrid cotton by the Chintan Agriculture Foundation, to name just a
few ongoing initiatives.

In the first few months in the field, as I worked in the Collectorate archive, I travelled with the
workers of one or the other of these projects to villages across Vidarbha to familiarize myself with
the landscape and settle on a suitable field-village. At these meetings held in suicide-hit villages I
listened and learned a great deal about the intricacies and risks of what cultivating cotton in Vidarbha today entails. However at some point in these meetings, otherwise a copious note-taker, I found myself drifting off and unable to focus on the conversation around me. In a few months I realized there was no point fighting this odd exhaustion, instead if I attended to the information being imparted and what was said at these meetings which seemed to deaden me within fifteen minutes of sitting down, I may understand why despite the thousands of meetings from village square to national capital, no one seems able to figure out quite what is happening in Vidarbha.

Sitting in a meeting called by the state or capital to discuss cotton-cultivation and suicide participates in the blindness that I have pointed to. I found myself not listening because everything I heard in these meetings called by the state, or by NGOs, or by the CSR wing of agri-companies was a plea to living farmers to submit their accounts of cotton-cultivation for comparison with those of the gone that hadn’t made it. I realized that as long as I continued to sit in the state and the market, and look at the village from their vantage, I would also produce an account of death in Vidarbha that has exhausted itself, even as the appetite of the force that drives it has not abated. So the organs of the state appear in this dissertation as and when they are present in the lives and deaths I am describing. The case-files in the archive comprise a large tranche of the materials analyzed here, as do interactions with state and administrative officials. These conversations are cited as and when they appear. What I do not do is an anthropology of the state per say. That is I do not spend any time describing the functioning of the state and its apparatuses as an object of ethnographic enquiry. I hope to do this in subsequent iterations of this manuscript; for now since so much has been written and I had no startling insights to add to the practical knowledges through which Indians of all stripes live with our state, I chose to come to the state in this dissertation through life not the other way round.
The second absence is a separate treatment of the question of gender as a structuring axis of cotton-production and rural life, and the inner worlds, spaces and relations of the domestic productive household and rural family, though again both these appear across this manuscript.

Researching and writing about suicide is an exercise fraught with many ethical and practical quandaries. It is one thing to spend several hours in cotton-fields with farmers or with economists and scientists, or recording rituals and public life, or even talking in the village square or in the home about cotton cultivation; and another to be writing about what happens between parents and children, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, lovers and the betrayed. This world, and the terms on which one is allowed access to it, are delicate for a fieldworker to negotiate and it takes a long time to understand what will be correct to take from it. It is for similar reasons, though the contexts are completely different, that I do not include ethnography from fieldwork in the mental health wards of the Sawangi Datta Meghe Rural Hospital. The technical skill, reading attention and narrative space handling materials generated from such spaces requires—where one sits with and amongst the shards and warmth of domestic life and distraught family members and damaged psyches—was not possible to achieve within the constraints of writing this dissertation. Choosing to address these spaces when I can treat the materials with the care they require, I have drawn a line and a boundary beyond which I do not go in this manuscript, which stops at the threshold of the home and the hospital.

This dissertation as a whole makes one argument, which is that if we wish to locate suicide deaths in Vidarbha in cotton-cultivation, we must do so not in isolation but in totality, in the economy of cotton as a total social fact. Any attempt to locate the deaths (if it is death not cotton that is the concern) in Vidarbha in disjunctions of ‘the market’ must attend to the scale and expanse of what the market has effected, that is what ‘the market’ as an abstract realm trading in abstractions has materially produced in the social relations tasked with producing transgenic cotton for that
market. This dissertation argues that while the public and scholarly focus on economic causes has illuminated the operations of market-debt in the economy of cotton, however to understand suicide deaths requires turning away from cotton-cultivation towards an understanding of the workings of the regime of contract that this kind of cultivation has unleashed.

The regime of contract’s violent re-ordering of the material supports and social values of a world towards the purposes of accumulation—put in place through colonial and postcolonial interventions into agricultural life for cotton production for the global capitalist market—has taken the form of the appearance of individual suicides in contemporary Vidarbha. To understand how a world becomes unlivable for any single member of that world, such that large numbers of singular individuals choose in isolation to leave that world, requires turning away from the suicide event in Vidarbha and looking closely at this world. Since in becoming an event suicide only becomes visible through the massificatory logics and recursive inscription of the state, media and public archive where neither the individual death nor the world the living inhabit are present as anything other than evidence for the crises of cotton-cultivation; in order to understand what suicide may mean apart from the self-chosen death of a ‘farmer’ requires understanding who this person is alongside this name, and the texture of this world apart from what its fields produce. For the reasons I have sketched above and explore in what follows, I realized if I looked at suicide itself I would never be able to see debt. This dissertation is thus an attempt to see the shadow of suicide in the life of debt in rural Vidarbha.
CHAPTER ONE: DEBT, ACCUMULATION, AND THE POTENCY OF MONEY

On 9 November 2014, the mutilated body of a child was found in the fields behind a school in Wardha, the rural central-Indian town where I conduct fieldwork. Identified as 9-year old Rupesh Hiraman Mude, the body was discovered two days after the child’s mother filed a missing persons report at the police station. Early that morning villagers who had gone to the field to defecate discovered the body. On seeing a mutilated bloody corpse they informed the police, who arrived along with local journalists. The body was wrapped in an orange sheet. On turning over, it was discovered that the body was missing vital organs—the eyes, the kidneys, and the penis. The police sent the body to the district hospital for a post-mortem. From the day the body was discovered, rumours began circulating in the town of possible motives behind the killing. Two main theories gained ground: first that the child had been killed and his organs taken for the illegal organ trade, and second that Rupesh had been killed as narbali, as a human sacrifice.

Initially the police made no statements confirming or denying the rumours though the circle inspector of Wardha speculated at an early stage the possibility that Rupesh may have been

1 First Information Report dated 7/Nov/2014, time: 23:00 hrs, orally filed by Renuka Hiraman Mude (resident of Vadar Zhopadpatti, Arvi Naka) at thana Arvi, Wardha. F.I.R. contents state: “It is stated that the complainant states that on the day of the incident she left her child at home and went to the market. On returning from the market she could not find her son despite searching for him. She pleads that some unknown person has kidnapped him. Based on this oral testimony a compliant has been lodged against an unknown person (agyat isam).”

2 Post-Mortem Report, dated 9/11/2014, District Civil Hospital, Wardha, conducted by Dr. R.K. Bisen; Dr. P.P. Khedikar, Dr. Khubanani; Dr. Krishana Shende.

3 “Was the Missing Child Killed as a Human Sacrifice? (Tya Bepata Balkacha Narbali?)” Lokmat 10 November 2014. This first news report appeared the Monday morning after the child’s body was discovered on Sunday. It speculates on whether the child has been killed as a human sacrifice. It also rejects the police speculation that animals killed the child by noting the presence of knife wounds on the body.

4 “Are those Bloodstains on the Street near the Crime Site? (Ghatnastbalakade Jaanaarya Margavar Rakhtache Daag?)”. Lokmat, 11 November 2014. This report repeats that the missing organs have lead people to believe that this is a human sacrifice.
killed by animals. This theory was greeted with derision in the local press. Many had seen the body and the precision with which the organs had been removed did not bear the mark of savaging by an animal. A cut on the child’s head and that he had been missing for two days seemed to point to foul play. On the 12th of November the rumour of human sacrifice is repeated in the press. A news report, primarily devoted to the incompetence of the police, notes that from the beginning there had been suspicion that Rupesh has been killed as a human sacrifice and the town awaited confirmation from the results of the post-mortem. By the 13th the police declared that they had apprehended a suspect and were interrogating him for leads about accomplices. This same report also mentions that ‘sources’ have revealed that two known local doctors were under suspicion for possible involvement in the killing. The suspicions were bolstered by the post-mortem report, which indicated that the margins of the wounds were ‘regular’, with signs of strangulation visible on the neck. The next day for the first time details of the suspect were released, and police publicly linked the killing to a motive—a search for hidden wealth. This revelation, the news report goes on to note, had only

5 “The wounds on the corpse have not been made by an instrument. They are marks by an animal. Not just the eyes, but the flesh on the face is also missing. The death has been caused by the attack of dogs, or some other animal.” This statement by A.M. Burade, the circle inspector of Wardha, appeared in the Lokmat, 10 November 2014.

6 “Suspicions raised over wounds found on Rupesh’s body (Rupeshchya Angavrel Zakhmanude Sambhram).” Lokmat, 11 November 2014. The report quotes Dr. Anupam Hivlekar, the district medical officer, who notes that a cut on the child’s head has raised suspicions.

7 “Awaiting the results of the post-mortem (Police Sharaswachedan Ahar vachyacha Pratikshet).” Lokmat, 12 November 2014. This report criticizes the police and states that whereas no progress has been made in the investigation the police continue to “spout pieties about dogs and bears” (police…kutryanchya kiva kohlyadcha hallayatech tyacha mrityajhalyacha pada vaahat abe).

8 Another report on 12 November 2014, Lokmat, carries a statement by Dr. Indrajit Khandekar, identified as ‘Head of the first Department of Forensics in the country, Kasturba Gandhi Hospital, Sevagram (Wardha)’. Dr. Khandekar states that, ‘Whether he was eaten by animals, or whether this was a human sacrifice, this is will be revealed through forensic examination of the crime-site, clothes, wounds on the body, condition of the corpse, and whether the wounds were made prior to, or after, death.’

9 “The suspect is on the police radar (Aaropi Policachya Radarvar)”. Lokmat, 13 November 2016. The report mentions that two known local doctors are under suspicion, but their identities have not been revealed. This report repeats again the suspicion that Rupesh has been killed as a human sacrifice. It also reveals that the suspect lives on Karla Chowk, a main thoroughfare in Wardha.

10 Post-Mortem Report: page 3/9, section 17 (1): “Edges and margins of the wound are regular & inverted at most of the places, pale and not contused.” Page 4/9, section 17 (2): “Abraded contusion is present involving the neck at the level of superior margin of thyroid.”
strengthened the suspicion that this was a human sacrifice.\textsuperscript{11} The report further repeats the claim that doctors must have been involved in the murder. Another news account on the same day states that the police were certain the suspect in their custody, an autorickshaw driver, was responsible for the death of the child as a house search had turned up bloodstained clothes—white school shirt and red shorts—and a bloodstained sheet.\textsuperscript{12} Police also revealed that the suspect was involved in \textit{jadutona} (black magic) and the \textit{payvari} business.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Payvari}, which literally means ‘on the foot’ (pay—feet, vari—on), refers to breech-born persons (payvar i.e. one so born) who are believed, in the manner of water diviners, to be able to see wealth hidden under the ground. In the last two decades \textit{payvari} has emerged as a widely circulating practice wherein farmers contact groups of people in the \textit{payvari} business to sweep their fields at night. Closely associated with black magic, and dismissed as blind faith (\textit{andhosradha}) by educated elites and the state, the practice, despite being widespread, has strong connotations of the illicit, immoral, and ominous. Moreover, while not specifically prohibited, the practice is of dubious legal standing under the ‘Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013’, which criminalizes a variety of practices associated with the supernatural and the superstitious, and which as such incite fear and awe.

On the 14\textsuperscript{th} the possibility that the organ-trading mafia had murdered Rupesh was explicitly

\textsuperscript{11} “Has the Case for Human Sacrifice been Strengthened? (\textit{Narbalichi Shakyata Badavali}?).” \textit{Lokmat}, 15 November 2014. The report says that the suspect is someone who is known to the police to be a searcher after hidden wealth (\textit{poliani tahayat ghetla sanshayat gyptalbancha aadben aslyache policachya tapasat samoryet aslyachi mabhi aab}). This fact, the report says, has strengthened the suspicion that this murder was committed as a human sacrifice (\textit{yamnde rupesbicha narbali ghetlyacha sanshay badavat aab}).

\textsuperscript{12} “The Suspect is on the Police Radar (\textit{Aaropi Policesachya Radarvar}).” \textit{Lokmat}, 13 November 2014.

\textsuperscript{13} Many people in Vidarbha, especially children, have red or black cotton threads tied around the wrist, waist or the upper arm. These threads are worn as talismans against the evil eye or to cure a sickness and can be bought at village markets and fairs, or may be acquired at saint shrines. A mendicant, or a shaman, usually blesses the thread and ties magic words in it as protection for the wearer. Conversely such thread can also be used to bind; to ensorcell. Munna Pathan was described by many persons, and also in the police depositions, as someone who, ‘\textit{dor det hota}’, as someone who ‘gave thread’: a person who ensorcelled others by tying them with magic threads. This was taken as proof of his involvement with black magic.
mentioned again in the press. The rumours of organ trading and the involvement of doctors cohere with the speculations of human sacrifice. Indeed sacrifice and sale always appeared together in people’s conversations and news reports as two variables in the same terrible transaction: the taking of organs for personal gain. On the 16th of November an official narrative was finally presented by the police reported in the local, and now national and international, media: one Asif Shah had killed the child. An autorickshaw driver by profession, he was involved in the payvari trade. Asif Shah, or Munna Pathan, the name he went by, had committed this act for personal wealth. He had kidnapped and killed the child, eaten his eyes, kidneys, and penis in order to gain monstrous power (aghorishtk) so he would be able to find wealth hidden under the ground.

At the time of this murder I happened to be living at a few kilometers distance from the bus stand near which Munna Pathan had plied his trade. The district collector of Wardha, with whom I had become acquainted through my work in the archives, asked if I would provide my perspective on the incident. Wardha is a small rural town. A 9 year-old child had been killed in a grotesque rite by someone the child knew. More details emerged in the days that followed and the sites of the kidnapping and murder were identified: the crossroad at the vegetable market where the killer had parked his autorickshaw; the field where the murder had been committed; the street where the body was dragged, now stained red; the small orange shrine where he had spent the night praying; people I spoke with had ridden in Pathan’s rickshaw.

A news report on the 16th reconstructs the crime spatially locating the event in Wardha: “Saying, ‘Come I’ll teach you to drive it,’ (he) made (him) sit behind himself and drove off on Aalodi street towards the bypass. He stopped the auto just beyond the bypass. Seeing no one was around, at approximately 7 in the evening he strangled young Rupesh with his own hands…From there he

14 “Catch Rupesh’s Killers (Rupeshiya Marekyana Attak Kara).” This new report that appeared in the Lokmat, 14 November 2014, states, “His eyes and both kidneys have been taken. This reveals that this was a planned (niyojit) murder. Not just that, only a person with knowledge of medical procedures (vaidik shastracha abhyas), can commit a murder in this way, is what is being said.”
came back into Wardha town and went to the Vikas high school in Gandhinagar. He left the body there and went to the Mahakal canal (on the Karla river). Besides the river he lit a fire, cooked and ate the organs with some salt he had carried for the purpose. Then he bathed in the canal and in that naked state he sat praying in the Hanuman temple till four thirty in the morning. It appeared as though a horror was abroad in the familiar spaces of everyday life.

Three demonstrations lead by members of the child’s community and his grief-stricken parents stopped traffic on the highway and agitated townspeople refused to depart till the local police intervened. Members of the Maharashtra Anti-Superstition League (Andhashradha Nirmoolan Samiti) held a press conference and decried what they viewed as a resurgence of obscurantist beliefs and traditions in the heavily polarized national environment post the 2014 general election. This incident reflected a generalized attack on rationalism, reason, and the scientific temperament in the Indian public domain under the encouragement and protection of the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party in power at the center. Local leaders held public meetings castigating the state administration for not cracking down on regressive traditions and demanded harsh jail sentences for anyone practicing black magic and spreading superstitious beliefs that waylaid a gullible rural public with promises of material wealth.


17 “Leaders of the Vadar Community Have Arrived in Wardha (Vadar Samajache Shishtamandal Wardhet)”. Lokmat, 13 November 2014.

18 “Anger Rally (Nished Morcha)”. Lokmat, 14 November 2016. This caption accompanies a photograph of the rally.

19 “If Not a Human Sacrifice then A Monstrous Act (Narbalich Nahin Tar Aghori Kritya)”. Lokmat, 17 November 2014. The reports notes that Shyam Manav, a well-known rationalist, public intellectual and anti-superstition activist has addressed a public meeting, and met with Rupesh’s parents. I also attended two lectures by Shyam Manav, an erudite and charismatic doctor and public speaker who has been at the forefront of the rationalist movement in Maharashtra for two decades.
In this tense atmosphere it was important that the administration offer a suitably scientific explanation to reassure a worried town. Perhaps I, the anthropologist, had better ideas than the state machinery about what had prompted Pathan to do what he did. This was not the first time, as the superintendent of police later remarked, that such things had happened in Vidarbha. In the last twenty years there had been a worrying increase, a local journalist noted, of such incidents in central India—human sacrifices by persons seeking hidden wealth. In turning to the anthropologist, the District Collector demanded discursive responsibility from someone whose job description entailed a presumptive familiarity with things fantastical and bizarre; magic, sorcery, and the occult have long been anthropology’s stock-in-trades. In asking that I do my job as anthropologist by providing a reasonable explanation in the face of what appeared to be the collapse of reason, the district collector implicitly recognized the collusion of my discipline in producing knowledge that could enable the state machinery to act for, and upon, the populations under its care. Given the socio-economic vulnerabilities I encountered in my field sites over the two years I lived in Vidarbha, I do not consider such a demand to be either illegitimate or cynical. At the time I was unable to offer any response much less policy suggestions; what follows below is a meditation on the event and ecosystem of its emergence, though I still cannot offer remedies.

Illicit Wealth, Occult Economies and Anthropology
By the time the killing of this small child in central India made news around the world, anthropologists had been studying an apparent rise in what Jean and John Comaroff have termed ‘occult economies’ for almost two decades (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a; 2002b). Rupesh’s murder assumed its macabre place alongside fears of zombie workers in South Africa; Akan cults in New York city; witch-killings in Indonesia; devil compacts in Bolivia; organ harvesting in Brazil (See Taussig 2010(1980); Comaroff and Comaroff 1999a; Parish 2015; Siegal 2005; Scheper-Hughes
The dominant anthropological understanding of such incidents—the resurgence of rumours of the occult, witch-kilings, fears of organ trading with grotesque descriptions of cannibalism and necrophilia amongst poor populations around the world—is that such incidents express the moral and experiential anxieties of subjects confronting the uncertainties of contemporary capitalist change. Persons act in these ways out of fear and vulnerability. Because the rules of the game of contemporary capitalism elude poor inhabitants of post-revolutionary postcolonial societies, they attribute wealth gained by corrupt neocolonial, postcolonial, and now neoliberal local elites, through forms of accumulation from which they themselves are barred, to magical fearful sources (such as zombie workers in South Africa, the Comaroffs’ case study). These forms of wealth garnering, made possible through the conjunction of global market forces acting through local clientalistic networks on denuded economies, accompany the production of desires and images of social mobility and economic promise that can never be fulfilled. Those living in rural and semi-rural regions see the conspicuous wealth of local elites, accompanied by extreme social inequity as postcolonial states withdraw from (or were always structured by neocolonial dependencies to fail in) providing basic forms of welfare to desperately poor populations. This wealth, which seems to arrive from nowhere, is attributed to frightening apparitional sources: zombies, witches, demonic human-like animals (1999: p.284; 2002: p.788). In turn, the excluded try, often in violent ways, to contain these sources of fearful value from infecting the social body. The targets of such witch-hunts and killings amongst populations unable to access secure forms of wage-labour and socio-political recognition are themselves the most vulnerable within them—old men and women; the disabled; migrant workers (1999: 289; 2002: p.785). Awash in images that equate freedom with consumption without social welfare, job security, or a living wage, young men are investing the relation between the production of value and wage-labour in newly precarious times with redoubled force (284). If capitalism was once described by Marx as heralding the fetishism of the commodity (Marx 1977: pp.76-87), in these
analysis neoliberalism has inaugurated a renewed investment in fetishes where the necromancy of capitalism, the magic in which living labour unleashes dead labour as surplus-value, is literalized in armies of vivified corpse-workers without speech; will; cognition or the capacity for moral reasoning, producing wealth for shadowy controllers (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002: pp.789-799).

Against these analyses, rumours of hidden wealth and human sacrifice amongst peasants in central India express a markedly different relationship to contemporary capitalist accumulation, one in which, I will argue, there is no misrecognition or misattribution. Rather, there seems to operate an almost preternatural recognition of the mechanisms through which surplus, and value, is generated in this rural economy. Capitalist change does not externally bear down upon the inhabitants of a traditional rural society. Rural denizens participate in occult activities not as a fearful response to present lack, but in the thrall of future promise. The rest of this chapter traces a historical account of the inhabitation of a discourse of (foreclosed) future abundance, read against its expressive manifestations in occult practices in this remote rural world. In doing so, it provides an account of late-capitalist change, and its accompanying fetishes, not through consumption, the focus of almost all scholarly accounts, but of production.

**Production, Consumption and Debt**

I stress production for a reason: recent theorizations across a range of disciplines have argued that the production of wealth in the contemporary neoliberal era marks a break with wealth generation through manufacturing and industry, i.e. production. Instead, since the 2008 financial crash, debt has emerged as a topic of global public and scholarly concern, occasioning recent inquiries on the emergence of personal debt as capital’s new frontier (Berardi 2012; Dodd 2013; Graeber 2014; Lazarrato 2012; Morris 2016). Capitalism, in its classical form, generated wealth by stripping persons of their means of production and converting them into disciplined wage-earners dependent on the
market for subsistence. The era of financial capitalism generates wealth not simply through the finding of new sources of natural resources or cheap labour for outsourced industry (though this continues and indeed intensifies), but also through the servicing and financialization of personal debt (Morris 2016: p.64; Rose and Miller 2008). This form of ‘fictive capital’ (Hilferding 2006), in which personal debt (credit card debt for instance), owned and traded by financial institutions, emerges as a source of capital in itself, is predicated on the continuous consumption by indebted subjects beyond their means (Morris 2016:p.65). The emergence of personal debt as the governing form of neoliberalized economies has further occasioned a range of scholarly inquiries on the ‘financialization of ethics’—the new subjectivities and moralities through which individuals are interpellated as subjects of capital not as wage-earners (since the ability to earn a wage is by no means guaranteed) but as ‘self-governing’ and ‘self-disciplining’ consumers through debt (See for instance Collier 2011; Donzelot 1991; Elyachar 1992; Roy 2010).

The two arguments I have just detailed (occult economies and debt as capital) are linked—they grapple with a post-welfarist global situation wherein in the wake of the collapse of the developmentalist state wage-labour, unemployment and poverty have lost their socio-political referents. The modern postwar state generated wealth by putting populations to work and building national economies through personal savings (Morris 2016:p.69). Through much of the twentieth century, poverty and social redistribution were imbricated with economic growth through employment. The postmodern state and economy generate wealth ‘fictively’, i.e. through global financial instruments and technologies whereby money becomes a commodity proper and the global precariat inhabits the remains of the post-industrialist economy of dematerialized transnational capital flows. In the advanced west, and the neoliberalized economies of Southeast Asia, consumer spending through personal debt instruments supplants an economy organized around wage-labour (Morris 2016:p.66). Third-world citizens watch the conversion of the external debts of gutted
national economies into private wealth by political elites (Roitman 2003: p.214) and conjure frightening images of consumption gone mad.

Debt for Production
My inquiry begins from another vantage all together, namely the emergence of a regime of personal indebtedness amongst peasants in rural India that departs sharply from the situation above. In these regions, comprising one of the largest personally indebted populations in the world, the interpellation of subjects into debt occurs not through consumption but through production: it is in order to continue to remain producers, to enter capitalist cash-cropping, that peasants acquire personal debt. Locating production at the center of contemporary relations of debt-bondage within peasant society illuminates the relationship between capital, debt, and desire in a new way. There has been a tendency within recent anthropology, perhaps influenced by the uptake of Agamben’s figuration of ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1998), to focus on what Joas Biehl has called ‘economies of abandonment’ (Biehl 2013). Scholarship in this vein understands the logic of biopolitics in a restructured global economic environment gutting the welfarist capacities of state and society, and characterizes large numbers of people as living in a kind of post-industrial departure lounge of history, abandoned by the state and subjected to the power of deregulated market forces (See Povinelli 2011; Clara Han 2012). I am not contesting these readings. Perhaps the worlds they describe have indeed been hollowed out in this way. However, for Marx, capitalism was creative; indeed this was its terrorizing power. It unleashed world-transforming, world-consuming forces that produced new objects and new subjects with new desires. It did not simply hollow out and destroy. Posing the problem in this way does not make this process any less violent: catatonia and mania are
both extremely painful for those caught in their grip. It is a question of etiology and hue. I will have occasion to return to this thought at various points in the dissertation.

For now, in contrast to zombie workers, human sacrifices for hidden wealth do not express the terrors of persons confronting the depletion of the resources (economic, social, and affective) of their world. On the contrary they express a redoubled, and violent, investment in its productive energies and capacities. Such activities are not narrated as signifying a breakdown of the rural social structure, nor is the wealth gained from them marked as illicit. The wealth is figured as dangerous but not morally suspect. Rumours of the power of breech-born children, hidden wealth, and human sacrifices are not expressions of the negative remains, the residues, left of once coherent worlds in the wake of colonial modernity and capitalist change (Mbembe 2003). Instead something stranger has occurred in these regions of rural central India—rumours of hidden wealth incarnate a discourse of productivity that has come to inhabit peasant communities not in the form of external forces acting upon them, but in the nature of a commandment by which they now organize themselves.

The Hidden Wealth of Hidden Moneylenders
Rupesh’s murder, though salacious and headline-grabbing, was only the latest, though perhaps most extreme, manifestation of what appear to be commonly held beliefs in Vidarbha regarding the potency and possibility of illicit wealth, and the forms of social and economic accumulation that such wealth promises. More than its source—where and by whom it is produced/found—the crucial importance in local narratives is to what ends such wealth is put. In the months that followed the murder I heard iterations of this rumour, that of the finding of hidden wealth (guptdhan), in

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20 During my time in Vidarbha I spent almost 8 months visiting the psychiatric ward of a rural hospital in Wardha. The doctors there had many interesting theories about transformations in the etiology of rural mental health: according to them, a rise in cases of mania rather than catatonia, which the head doctor claims used to be the predominant form schizophrenic states assumed in rural subjects. For various reasons this material is not analyzed in this dissertation.
villages across Vidarbha. Tellingly, *guptdhan* is narrated as the source of wealth for new moneylenders. When asking how someone had become a moneylender, I was told, ‘He found the wealth. It came to him through *payvari*’. Interestingly, the moneylenders whose wealth was associated with *payvari*, i.e. as having been miraculously discovered in the fields, rather than earned through cultivation or trade, are ‘new’ moneylenders. That is, these moneylenders do not come from traditional moneylending castes but comprise persons from agriculturalist and formerly untouchable castes. These erstwhile subaltern caste groups (such as the Baudh Dharma Buddhist formerly known as Mahar), historically barred from landed social power, diversified into trading and lending with the recent boom in the cotton economy.

In what follows I will show that this event, rumours of hidden wealth (*guptdhan*), and beliefs and practices around money as a source of hidden value, mark a moral resignification of debt as a reflection of the potency of money in the preceding two decades. Rumours around *payvari* wealth narrativize hidden money as a force *in potentia* that is not a rehearsal of the commonsense that money enables the buying of more things. Instead, I will argue that rumours of tabooed wealth, while themselves not new, have acquired specific velocity against the backdrop of a decisive shift in the structure of agricultural production. Wealth’s potency derives from the structure of smallholder farming wherein peasants enter capitalized agriculture in a structural paradox—a process that requires, for its sustainability, access to sources of surplus wealth that themselves cannot be produced through farming. Peasants are thus forced into a regime of personal indebtedness, wherein debt emerges both as a source of surplus value for the lenders and an endless trap which cannot be escaped for the debtors. It is this surplus wealth that the moneylender seems to access, while the ‘moneylender’ as a socially determinate and locatable figure disappears.

Moneylending, like many occupations in rural India, is traditionally a caste-specific activity, conducted by persons belonging to designated trader and moneylender castes. In the wake of
transformations in the agrarian structure in the past decade and a half, usurious lending has come to be a generalized social activity. In its scale, this is a recent phenomenon in Vidarbha, a scant two decades old. The social implications of the generalization of usurious lending are that if anyone can now be the moneylender (sahukar), then anyone may potentially become the person to whom one is entrapped in debt-bondage. One might in turn become the person who indebted others, even one’s own kin. Further, if anyone may now undertake the activities of the traditional moneylender—the multiplication of money through debt—then the logic of such monetary accumulation, and the desire for it, can potentially inhabit anyone regardless of social location. It is in this context that usurious lending and earning money through debt, from formerly proscribed activities, have been re-signified as sources of power. Rather than a thief, a common descriptor of moneylenders in the colonial period, the contemporary moneylender is never described as such, nor is his wealth condemned as ill-gotten gains. Rather, the moneylender (sahukar) is viewed as a man of power who is able to tame a potentially dangerous source of tabooed wealth to his own advantage by displacing the risk that inheres in it onto the borrowers.

* Exchange, Magic and Anthropology
How are we to think of money and the occult in such a world? A basic problem of reading confronts the anthropologist when examining economies of the occult. At issue is how to read the rumor or magical belief as something other than the irrational expression of irrational persons, while not imprisoning the excess that the rite/belief does articulate within the terms of a structuralist or functionalist analysis. In such an analysis (see Taussig 1980 for the most famous of these undertakings) the terms of the myth/rumour/belief are correlated, through correspondence, with an underlying set of variables within the ‘material conditions’ or the system of production and social reproduction. The rumor is then analyzed as expressing a crisis in social reproduction under the
pressure of socio-economic forces: in Taussig’s case-study the crises is precipitated by the violent entry of capitalist wage and exchange relations in a rural pre-capitalist world of supposedly unalienated relationships (or rather, organized around different fetishes) between labour and its products (Taussig 1980).

The term ‘occult economies’ bridges two foundational interlinked concepts in anthropology: exchange and magic. One tradition within anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1976) has analyzed magical thinking and witchcraft as a social expression of causality: magic provides a social explanation, through occult means, of phenomena that threaten mutual recognition through reciprocal exchange. In the classic example of Azande society, sorcery is the explanation for an accidental occurrence (the collapse of a granary on the heads of those sitting beneath), which would otherwise be inexplicable. Instead a magical cause is assigned, the actions of a malevolent sorcerer, and this way magic and magical thinking produce expressive forms through which social coherence is reconstituted in the face of dissolution (Evans-Pritchard 1976). Magical thinking represents a means of social cognition, and the attempt to locate within relations of causality that which otherwise threatens to tear society apart. In the words of Evans-Pritchard, new times call forth new magic (Evans-Pritchard 1937: p.513; qtd. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: p.279) in the contemporary era wherein some persons presage social conflict by accumulating large amounts of wealth through opaque mechanisms, these forms of wealth-garnering that cannot be socially explained are attributed to the operations of demonic forces.

Against this understanding some anthropologists have argued, James Siegal the most prominent amongst them, that locating magic within functional registers cannot address those situations wherein no recovery is possible for the social (Siegal 2005: p.4). Magic does not stick the social back together; rather it marks the place where something foreign, what Mauss calls ‘a heterogeneous term,’ appears inside the social (Mauss 2001: p.151; Siegal 2005: p.79). And this
foreignness within the social (what Freud would call the *unheimlich*, usually translated as the ‘uncanny’, better translated as ‘un-homely’ in so far as the latter captures the sense of not recognizing that which is most intimately familiar) does not go away (Freud 1919). It remains there; it cannot be domesticated. Magical thought is not the mark of an overcoming, of the ability of subjects to re-capture for reason by making something socially comprehensible. Rather magic names a site of the failure of recognition.

In this vein I will argue that participation in, and apprehension of, occult forces in Vidarbha is not instrumental such as Parish describes of Akan cults that reconcile diverse west African cultural elements with prosperity gospel in New York city (Parish 2015); rather, the occult produces a dissonance at the level of social and personal comprehension. The supposedly foreign seems to activate and take the form of something inhabiting the culture itself (such as rumours of hidden wealth and child sacrifice which have an old provenance in this region). However an occult explanation, its appearance in this mutant form (the eating of a child), does not produce familiarity on the part of knowing subjects (Siegal 2005: 51). The occult does not make comprehensible that which is otherwise incomprehensible. Rather, it is because the motives are comprehensible that the occult produces a kind of shock: it terrorizes those who know what it is because it incites in them the recognition that they themselves may desire what it gives. As we have seen, townspeople did not require official confirmation from the police to believe this was a human sacrifice conducted for wealth. From the day the body was discovered public speculation centered on sacrifice as the motive. Nor was anyone surprised when six others were arrested in connection with the murder case. These other persons—who included a farmer, a schoolteacher, a lower government

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21 In Freud’s classic example, the unexpected sight of his own face.

22 “Based on Information obtained From the Accused Five Persons Arrested (Aaropichya Samparkateel Path Jan Tabyat)”. *Lokmat*, 17 November 2016. A total of seven persons were eventually arrested in connection with the case. This report also mentions that the police are searching for Pathan’s ‘guru’, i.e. the teacher from whom he received his knowledge.
functionary—were not directly involved in the killing of the child. They had come together to search for wealth with Munna Pathan’s assistance. However the arrests of the ‘payvari gang’ did not provide any comfort. The identification of the prime culprit and his accomplices did not make anyone feel safer. On the contrary, townspeople were convinced that even more persons were involved, that there must have been a head conspirator who was still at large. As discussions in the local newspapers showed, every successive arrest only demonstrated that the occult could take hold of anyone regardless of intention, social position or educational qualification. With this preamble, I now turn to an examination of the practices of payvari.

**Payvari**

In the months that followed the child’s murder I began to hear iterations of this rumour in conversations in villages. While the specifics differ, for my purposes here, the essentials are as follows: There is wealth hidden in the fields. This wealth once belonged to Rajwadas (chieftain houses). It is royal (or at least chieftain-ly) wealth. The wealth was secreted away by Zamindar

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**Notes:**

23 “Information on the Case of Rupesh Hiraman Mude”, dated 19/11/2014, Police Station, Wardha, Notification no: 2792/14: According to the investigations conducted thus far, accused Asif Shah in the preceding month, he, along with Uttam Mahadev Pohane (age 43), Ankush Suresh Giri (age 27), being a payalu, showed Subhash Bhoyer, owner of field in Deoli, where wealth is lying, and accordingly conducted rites and rituals there, and also dug the ground. To undertake monstrous acts to find wealth Suresh Ramrao Dhanore (age 45), Dilip Balkrishna Bhoge (age 36), Dilip Uttamrao Khankar (age 34) agreed that in order to find hidden wealth it is necessary to conduct a human sacrifice. Accordingly the prime accused Asif Shah, got this idea in his head and committed this act which is punishable under the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013, section 3.”

24 “Suspicion that a Mastermind is Responsible for the Incident (Ghatnemage Sutradhar Asnyachi Shakyata)” Lokmat, 19 November 2014.

25 “In the Matter of the Human Sacrifice of Rupesh Finally Another Arrested (Rupeshche Narbali Prakaranat Aankhi Ekalu Atak).” Lokmat 18 November 2014. The news report states, ‘The number of persons involved with this case has now risen to seven,’ and notes that one of the suspects is a school teacher.

26 I should note that rumours of wealth buried in the ground are not unique to Vidarbha, nor of particularly recent provenance. That there is money buried in the ground is a common belief in other parts of rural/peri-urban India. See Singh (2015) for mention of similar beliefs in Rajasthan. What is interesting, however, is the prevalence of these rumours in Vidarbha in recent times, such that the rumour now has a material presence. The connection between breech birth and an ability to locate wealth is specific to Vidarbha, as are organized payvari gangs, kidnappings of breech-born children, government legislation banning the practice and incidents of human sacrifice. In this chapter I read one sacrifice, which occurred while I happened to be there; but this is not an isolated incident.
families to protect it from marauding armies. The marauders change depending on the
teller—sometimes it is hidden from the Mughal armies, sometimes from the Nizam of Hyderabad’s
armies, sometimes from the British, sometimes from tax-gathering officials of the Indian state. The
source reveals the long political history of this region, an internal frontier zone won and lost, but
never completely pacified, by the armies of various empires and states.

The hidden wealth (guptdhan) is narrated as under the protection of occult beings – Djinns,
often snakes. The wealth (dhan) is alive and mobile; it has life (jiv), it moves. Though the wealth is
hidden, it is active. This is how people know it is there in the first place; it is a quickening, they can
feel its presence, sense when they are near it. But it is more than that: the wealth speaks (bolte). It
talks to the owner of the field. It asks the owner to come and claim it. It appears in people’s dreams
(swapnamadhe yete). When it has revealed its presence, it often does not let go (sodat nabin). People go
mad by its insistence (hawada karun dete; to yeda zhala); it does not let them sleep (zhop nabin yete).

This hidden wealth is dangerous, but is not dishonest. It asks to be claimed, but it names
its price: life itself. The wealth promises to claim the life of the person who touches it. The wealth
demands a human sacrifice (dhan bali ghein). In killing Rupesh to gain the monstrous power
(aghanishakti) that would enable him to reach that wealth, Pathan was rehearsing, and attempting to
displace, a choice that would eventually confront him. To protect himself, he trained with a sorcerer
(mantrik) in Bengal. A payvar gang consists of a ‘light’; this is the payvar himself who acts as a
conductor who feels the vibrations of the wealth. The breech-born, the payvar, is the skilled artisan
(karigar) in the group. A sorcerer (mantrik) who, once the wealth has been located, casts spells that
‘bind’ (dor bandhte) it so that the wealth can only move within a limited radius. The sorcerer (mantrik)
performs the important function of distributing the potency of the wealth, and negotiating the terms

27 This is what happened to Das Bhai, a moneylender in Kadam. He was driven to insomnia and near madness by just
such a pot of gold hidden in the ground. We will meet Das Bhai in a moment.
of the sacrifice, so it can be rendered safe to touch. The gang is completed with the addition of a few young men, who are responsible for the manual labour of digging and hauling.

Divining wealth through payvari is narrated as a delicate process, fraught with danger. In the manner of a live charge or a bomb, the wealth must be handled with caution and care. The wealth both seduces and militates against being found. The breech-born (payvar) walks with his left arm outstretched before him, his palm pointed downwards. The palm is covered with a mixture of soot and oil. He walks barefoot, feeling the ground with his feet, occasionally halting to press his toes into the earth. As he gets nearer, his arm begins to shake violently, and at this point care must be taken that the palm does not flip over and rebound back onto him. Since he is the ‘light,’ the conducting rod through which the charge of the potential energy of wealth is flowing, any contact made with him by others, or any contact between his palm, arm, and the rest of his body will result in death—his own and that of the person who touches him. There is nothing mystical or superstitious about this; it is perfectly logical. The breech-born payvar is not at this moment an integrated person. He is a pair of feet, an arm, and a palm that together compose a circuit: feet through which the charge of the wealth rises up to the ground, flows through the arm, and is directed back downwards through the palm. At a point where he is certain he has located the wealth, the payvar stops and indicates the radius in which it lies. The sorcerer mantri now commences to ‘bind’ (dor bandite) the wealth to restrict its sphere of movement. Then the others begin to dig.

Most narratives halt at this point and immediately cut to the moment at which the wealth has been discovered (here or elsewhere) and the Faustian choices that confront its claimants. In the beginning this elision bothered me. I would insist on asking, ‘But did they find anything? Was there actually wealth in X’s field?’ ‘Of course there was and this other man, when he found it in Z’s field, he…’ ‘No’, I would interject again in the manner of a persistent and annoying amateur, ‘Never mind that other man. First tell me if they found wealth in X’s field’, only to be greeted with pitying looks
and an uncomfortable end to the conversation. I accepted that my persistence appeared remedial. Not so much in its demands for empirical ‘facts’ (though there is that too and people do find buried wealth occasionally), but in its inability to see that there is indeed wealth hidden in the fields: the paradigm of economic production in which payvari as social practice receives its sense is not one of agricultural scarcity but of presumptive super-abundance. Intensive cash-cropping, the industrial farming of cotton—expressed in a complex of new agro-technologies, hybrid cottonseed, intensive pesticide and chemical use, and a variety of financial technologies (crop loans, crop insurance, open procurement markets)—is predicated on the (foreclosed) promise that through individual initiative and striving the fields will produce unimaginable surplus through production for market exchange. If capital as mode of production is also a machine of desire (Deleuze and Guattari 2009)—if it operates through the making of subjects who not just produce new use-values for a futurity of exchange (Marx 1992) but in producing them desire new objects—then payvari is not an allegory of lack. Rather it is a narrative of surplus: of the practices and persons by which it may be claimed. ‘The question is’, as Humpty Dumpty told Alice, ‘which is to be master—that is all’ (Carroll 1999: p. 81). In collapsing the moment of the potential discovery of wealth with the surety of its having been found, the storytellers are not dissimulating. They are telling the tale in the only way it makes sense (White 2000: p. 83). The story does not receive its sense from the recounting of failure; it is not a negative story. It is, rather, a story about the production of subjects through the potentia of illusive wealth (Roitman 2003: pp. 212) and the choices that confront them.

_The Demonic in the Law of Man_

In the first few days after Rupesh’s killing, based on teeth and claw marks found on the body, there was brief public speculation as to whether Rupesh may have been killed by dogs or bears. But the eyes were missing. A forest officer gave a statement wherein he categorically declared that this could
not be the act of dogs or bears as they do not eat human eyes, nor were there any bears in the area.\textsuperscript{28}

With the police revelations, the matter was clear: this was a deliberate act conducted not from blind animal instinct or blood-thirst, but with intentionality. All speculation on the involvement of other animals ended and the police now began to look for (human) accomplices that they were convinced must have been involved. A report on the 16\textsuperscript{th}, now proceeding on the ostensible basis of facts, begins like this:—

‘[I] With extreme cruelty having killed Rupesh [he] offered him as a human sacrifice (narbali), then [he did so] only for the greed for hidden wealth in [his] (the killer’s) stomach (lalaspoti). Having strangled Rupesh and killing him, each act committed demonstrates that despite the law of man (naradbama) the demonic predilection (rakshasivritti) is still at work within the human (manshyat).\textsuperscript{29}

Rupesh’s killing marks something demonic (rakshasivritti) within the human, in relation to the kinds of exchanges that befit the human. In this news-report the killer’s actions are located within an ethical and practical cosmology of distinctions, which serve to clarify the domain of exchanges which are appropriate to (and have been perverted by) the human. Once the desire for wealth had been identified as the motive (now no longer a public secret traveling only through rumour but openly acknowledged by the state), the act was no longer unthinkable. Only a human animal is able to enter into exchange. Only a human animal would have use for organs separate from the body. Significantly at no point did the papers, or people’s conversations, reference madness. Not even as a casual description of a horrifying killing. Horrifying though it was, it was not irrational.

\textsuperscript{28} “I have not seen the body myself; however [Wardha] being a town bears will not choose to live here. Neither do we [the forest department] have any information of the same.” This statement by Uday Sonvane, the district forest officer, appeared on 11 November 2014 in the \textit{Lokmat}. The same report mentions that Sonvane contradicted the police story by stating that dogs and bears do not eat human eyes.

\textsuperscript{29} “The Community is in Shock over Rupesh’s Sacrifice (Rupeshcha Narbaline Samajman Sunn)”. \textit{Lokmat}, 16 November 2014.
The commission of the act was not pathological. It was sensible and its sense lay in this horrifying perversion of exchange.

In Marathi, like in many Sanskritic languages, it is possible to construct a declarative sentence in the third-person wherein no direct subject enacts the verb. There is no exact equivalent for this grammatical structure in English, but what is of significance here is that the above report is written entirely without reference to a subject.\(^{30}\) The thing that took hold as a greed within Pathan (lalaspoti: lit. greed in the stomach), that made him kill the child and eat his organs, is not peculiar to Pathan. Rather it is at work within the human (manusbyat) itself. It is a force that, in its perversion of exchange as the parable of the human, breaches the boundary between the law of man (naradhama) and the demonic (rakshasirvitti). This is why its appearance is so instantly recognizable. The police investigations do not reveal anything that the public does not already know. In marshaling the details of how the act was committed, the investigations only confirm the rumours that began as soon as the body without organs was discovered.

What is ‘naradhama’? What is the law of man? One powerful anthropological tradition drawing from Marcel Mauss would claim it is the production of sociality through exchange. Indeed for Levi-Strauss it is this that marks the ascension to human-ness itself. The incest taboo in so far as it enables the entry into kinship, and thus mutual exchange through the gifting of women, marks the aporetic break between nature and culture: to be in culture is to be in reciprocal exchange (Levi-Strauss 1971: pp. 50-61). The potency of this force, what renders it both formidable and demonic (aghorishakti: lit. awesome monstrous power) enables Pathan to breach and overcome two boundaries that the circumscribe the human—it makes him eat human flesh and, through a perversion of exchange, breach the boundary of ordinary sociality.

\(^{30}\) The pronouns are my insertions for purposes of translation.
How did Munna Pathan find Rupesh? How did he know the child was breech-born?

Parents do not usually reveal such information to strangers fearing a gang may kidnap the child. As an autorickshaw driver, ferrying people to and from their daily journeys, Munna Pathan became acquainted with the residents of the Wodar neighbourhood (basti) and became a friend of Rupesh’s parents. Through this contact he learned of the child’s breech birth. This acquaintance added to the horror of what he had done. While Rupesh’s father repudiated Pathan in the weeks that followed—he claimed in the press the rumours that Pathan was known to the family were false—others, including neighbours, insisted the parties knew each other. It is because Pathan was someone he recognized that the child willingly entered his rickshaw. Pathan did not attack an unknown child. Rather he betrayed the bonds of everyday sociality and killed a child he knew for personal gain. Here Pathan acted on the basis of, and in acting betrayed the structure of, kinship. We might see this as a poignant and perverse play on what Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo*, ‘Kinship therefore signifies having part in a general substance. It is natural then that it is based not only upon the fact that we are a part of the substance of our mother who has borne us, and whose milk nourished us, but also that the food eaten later through which the body is renewed, can acquire and strengthen kinship. If one shared a meal with one’s god the conviction was thus expressed that one was of the same substance as he; no meal was therefore partaken with any one recognized as a stranger’ (Freud 1990: pp.167-168). More than the moment at which Pathan reifies Rupesh’s recognition of him as familiar, the act of killing and eating the child produces its own logic of shared substance. Because the very attribute for which Pathan sought out Rupesh, that he was breech born, Pathan already shared. He too was a breech birth. In eating Rupesh, Pathan engages in an intimate autophagy. The flesh of the other as the flesh of himself.

But the act of eating is not figured in police or news accounts as one of intimacy, kinship, or communion. The motive, according to police, was the most individuating of all: greed. Curiously,
because the desire for wealth was identified as the motive, the police were also certain that other strangers brought together for greed had to be involved. There too a kinship is formed. Its common substance is wealth not flesh. While the police were searching for names, for evidence that would tie determinate persons with the act that had been committed, Pathan kept saying things they could not understand. The ‘evidence’ Pathan offered, the things of which he was speaking, was ‘of no use’ (polican yash nabin midlala) because their referents were unclear.\textsuperscript{31} The police were, literally, ‘going round in circles’ (police chakravale abel).\textsuperscript{32} Based on his statements the police had arrested five others; but since their exact involvement with this killing could not be ascertained, they were released.\textsuperscript{33}

The Indian police are not known for treating persons in their custody with kindness. When the man in custody is accused of torturing and killing a 9-old child one may only begin to imagine the violence unleashed to make him speak. Faced with this circularity that they could not breach through blows,\textsuperscript{34} the police, the newspaper says, finally entered the circle of unreason traced by Munna Pathan. They asked a sorcerer (mantrik) for advice and told Pathan that if he did not reveal the source of this monstrous power, if he did not reveal from whom he received it and who else was involved, they would force him to drink water out of leather shoes.\textsuperscript{35} It is then that Pathan began to speak, to say what the police hope to hear. He spoke because, the report continues, he was afraid. Of what was Pathan afraid? Pathan was afraid that drinking water from leather shoes would destroy his power (and possibly him). Why leather shoes?

\textsuperscript{31} “The Suspect in Custody is Misleading the Police (Tabyateel Sanshayit Phiravtoy Policana)”. Lokmat 14 November 2016.

\textsuperscript{32} “Has the Suspicion of Human Sacrifice been Strengthened? (Narbalichi Shakyata Badavali?)”. Lokmat, 15 November 2016.

\textsuperscript{33} These others were subsequently re-arrested and are currently standing trial as accomplices to the murder.

\textsuperscript{34} There is no real speculation involved. Manohar Bhau, a Gujjar butcher I knew very well and who had several contacts in the local police, told me, ‘They beat the shit out of him (Lay thokle tyala).’

\textsuperscript{35} “For Monstrous Power Rupesh Sacrificed (Aghorishaktisathi Rupeshecha Narbali)”. Lokmat, 16 November 2014. The report states, ‘Even though the police knew this man used to give threads (i.e. was involved in black magic), he (the killer) still tried to confuse the issue. We will make you drink water from a pair of leather shoes, as soon as they said that, fearing he would forget all his secret knowledge, he (the killer) finally admitted to his terrible deeds.’
Let us look again at the components of the sacrifice: Pathan ate the eyes, the kidneys, and the penis. He did not spill the blood. Within the substitutional structuralist logic of ritual (Smith and Doniger 1989: p.190; Hubert and Mauss 1964: p.58) when one term changes, the entire substitutional chain transforms in turn. Further, tantric ritual, of which this nārbali is a subset, works through the inversion of substance in classical Hindu ritual. The impurity of substances—menstrual blood, urine, or feces—is harnessed precisely as a source of power from filth. Here, the logic of payvari proceeds from the inversion of birth—the child is the recipient of power because it emerges feet-first from the womb. Its source of power, its phallus we could say, is the foot. In so far as the phallus is not the penis, in so far as the phallus is the transitory node through which a power lying elsewhere is accessed (Lacan 2007: pp.575-585), the feet are not touched in any way. Instead a substitution for the foot is taken—the eyes. Two other organs are also taken—the kidneys, which hold the waste of the water of the body, and the penis itself. The penis is taken as the sign of active male power, as the location of beej (semen), but here the penis is a substitution for the eyes, which substitute the feet. The ‘reverse’ spell inverts each of these symbols along the chain. Eating human flesh is not in itself necessarily taboo, nor is flesh itself impure within ritual logic. Munna Pathan ate organs and took flesh into himself. The reverse spell pours water (the substance moving through the kidney) into a leather shoe (an encasing shell and extremely impure covering of dead flesh for the foot, itself ritually the most impure part of the body) and forces him to drink it (to take water into himself). For now we will simply mark this doubled valance of Pathan’s fear of losing, and simply fear of, his power. I will return to it later in this chapter, but for now, Pathan is speaking again:

Pathan tells police that twelve years ago he went to Bengal to apprentice with a caster of spells (mantrik) and received dark knowledge (kali vidya) there. He then came back and began work as

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36 Rupesh was killed by strangulation.
Hearing that he did this work, six others made contact with him, one of them himself a
payvar. A farmer in Deoli (a village about 30 kms away) had asked this gang to sweep/search his
fields. This gang and Pathan made an attempt in the night but this first, and from the case-files and
news reports it seems the only attempt, ended in failure. They dug a ditch in the field but they
found nothing. Fearing his powers were waning, Pathan killed the child and took his organs.

It is of little consequence to ask, as some persons did, if there is any evidence that
Pathan’s powers were ‘real’. Namely, that the waning of powers is predicated on a presumed prior
efficacy of said powers. Had Pathan ever found wealth in someone’s field? But to ask this question
is to misunderstand the nature of magical judgments, which are, as Mauss reminds us, a priori
synthetic judgments (Mauss 2001: pp.149-153). Magic does not require empirical proof of its validity
to be efficacious. The magical event is a Kantian a priori: magic is experienced before it is
experienced. Its force depends neither on previous encounter, nor does it emerge from within the
elements of the magical rite (153-55).

Hidden wealth, in these narratives, is itself a form of such magical thinking. A form of
magical thinking that, I wish to argue, operates the synthesis between cultivation and accumulation.
‘Guptdhan’ (hidden wealth) is a compound noun constructed through the joining (sandhi) of the
adjective ‘gupt’ (secret) with the noun ‘dhan’ (wealth). The adjective ‘gupt’ can mean one or all of these
things—hidden; concealed; preserved; protected; secretive or secreted (as in secreted away)
(Molesworth [1865]2010: p. 235). All of these valences are at play in the rumour. The wealth is
hidden as it cannot be found and its precise location cannot be ascertained without harnessing a
power whose source is mysterious. It is secretive because its precise character has not yet been

38 “This was the First Attempt by the Gang to Search for Hidden Wealth (Guptdhan Shodhanyacha Pakilach Prayatna)”. Lokmat, 21 November 2014.

39 The Anti-Superstition League - Andhshradha Nirmoolan Samiti - of Maharashtra for instance, representatives of which came and met with Rupesh’s parents.
revealed. And it is powerful because it acts through the activation of secrets—Pathan acted on the basis of a secret knowledge (the child’s birth) to gain a power to gain secret wealth. What is the secret the wealth keeps that is not given within the social and economic milieu wherein it is discovered? As an early advertisement for hybrid cotton states: the secret of how to turn mud into gold (maati sona ugalnaar). ¹⁰

**Gold from Mud**

We are now at the point where we can step back and begin to historicize payvari as belief and practice. Before we move to an ethnographic examination of the social life of this rumour within contemporary peasant society, it is necessary to understand the historical transformations that presage its emergence. Narratives around the claimants of payvari wealth, as I have asserted above, demonstrate a thinking of hidden money as a force in potentia that bestows capacities for action on he who wrests it. This potency of money is not simply a rehearsal of the common-sense that, in a world organized around transactions through the money-form, the availability of money enables an individual to buy, and thus do, things others cannot (Graeber 2001: p.101-105; Munn 1983: pp. 277-308). Rather, the particular potency attributed to wealth as a powerful source of hidden value derives from the structure of capitalist small-holder farming wherein peasants with very small plots of land (2.7 acres on average) enter intensively capitalized farming which requires the raising of monetary surpluses which cannot be produced through farming. This structure of contemporary debt-relations in peasant society arises from the specific role agricultural production has played in the making of modern independent India.

The staggeringly high suicide rates in contemporary peasant society present a historical puzzle, because rural indebtedness is not in itself a new phenomenon. Small peasantry have been

¹⁰ Advertisement on page 5, Desbhunatti 1991.
linked in relations of debt, through complex caste and kinship ties, with landowning and moneylender communities for at least the past three centuries, particularly in this region of west-central India. A significant feature of the South Asian rural landscape, until the mid-twentieth century, was successive peasant revolts most undertaken in reaction against usurious money-lending practices. A large body of historical work has meticulously documented the centrality of peasant struggles in Indian politics in the late-colonial and post-colonial period (See Arnold 1984; Desai 1979; Dhanagare 1983; Guha 1983; Hasan 1989; Hardiman 1987). Thus several scholars have remarked the demise of peasant political action in the past half a century, for districts lying a few hundred kilometers west of this region (Berar), today in the grip of a suicide epidemic, were once the epicenter of peasant insurgencies in the colonial period (Catanach 1970; Hardiman 1996). However the depoliticization of the peasantry appears less enigmatic once the logic of cash-cropping is understood. Marx once disparagingly remarked that the peasant was not a fully historical subject, could not indeed be the agent of social transformation, as trapped in an individual mode of production the peasantry could never be a class in itself and thus for itself (Marx 2000: 167-172). Marx was of course speaking of the European peasantry (and towards the end of his life revised this view besides) (Marx and Shanin 1984). In India, the Subaltern Studies collective (henceforth SS) has done seminal work in demonstrating the symbolic modes through which peasants articulated collective political action in colonial India (See Guha 1999; Guha and Spivak 1988 for a small selection). However today, in the regions in which the capitalization of agriculture has emerged as the dominant productive mode, the peasant household has been individualized.

Contemporary peasant debt undertaken for production must be located in the valorization of the agrarian countryside as the site of potential national wealth for the new nation. In 1950 the agricultural sector as a whole comprised 51.81% of GDP, and agriculture continued to contribute over a third of GDP till 1980. In the decades after independence, in the absence of a postcolonial
bourgeoisie able to generate the capital required for industrial growth, the countryside was represented both as the creator of national wealth as well as the protected site of its economic, political, and affective investments. This process was contiguous, in some respects, with colonial policy: the colonial annexation of Vidarbha (Berar) was aimed at funneling its cotton-wealth specifically to the mills of Manchester and Lancashire (Harnetty 1972: pp. 52-53; Guha 1972: pp.28-29; Satya 1997). This process resulted, as Frank Perlin has shown, not only in the peasantization of this part of the world but also in a constriction of its monetary and trade relations with global and sub-continental markets. Likewise, in the early years after independence, increasing agrarian productivity, particularly in the crucial domains of food-grain and revenue generating fiber crops, was a stated goal of the postcolonial state since agriculture was to provide the surpluses for rapid industrialization (Frankel 2005: pp.85-90, Gupta 1997). Agricultural producers in post-independence India were now producing for the nation, and the material conditions of this production, like all production (particularly industrial production), became the site of targeted interventions in the service of the national economy. This process was not unique to agriculture by any means: as many have argued, and demonstrated in detailed studies, the new nation-state was state-capitalist wherein the only entity able to raise capital for investment in industry, infrastructure, manufacturing, and finance, was the Indian state (Kohli 2004). With the failure of land-reforms, the country embarked on the path of the intensive capitalization of agrarian production through the adoption of high-yielding technologies, a process now called the Green Revolution, whereby in the absence of the consolidation of land-holdings, peasants were encouraged to intensively cultivate given land by adopting high-yielding seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. This process, of which a detailed examination is undertaken in a subsequent chapter, made money, and thus debt, a central component of the production process. The centering of debt in contemporary production has made the moneylender a ubiquitous, and powerful, figure in the village economy.
Until the 1990s, the crises could be staved off, and peasants somewhat insulated, because in erecting the bounded space of the national economy, the Indian state also created the mechanisms wherein the worst contradictions of this peculiar mode of production could be managed through the state’s own instruments of continuous intervention in production via redistribution of welfare, the infusion of credit in specific and bounded forms, restrictions on the alienation of land, fertilizer and insecticide subsidies, the monopoly procurement of produce through state commodity boards and so on (Sanyal 2007: pp.186-91). With liberalization and the opening up of the economy in 1991 to international capital, this last barrier dissolved. However, it is crucial to emphasize that this form of production could never have come to be without the continuous rearrangement of production through the state and market-functions subordinate to state control.

It is not my contention that the state now abandon peasant communities to their fate and the very visible hands of the ‘market’ determine the future viability of agricultural production, if not agrarian lives. On the contrary, I am suggesting, that it is postcolonial agrarian policy that produced this particular form of agrarian production—capitalist agriculture without scalar expansion. Moreover, this marshaling of agriculture into the ambit of a national economy had specific consequences for agricultural producers and agrarian worlds that are unique to the conditions that obtain in the Indian countryside: namely, of a community of individual small commodity producers, cultivating within a domestic mode of production, tasked with producing national wealth, wherein the forms of labour and capital investment are not themselves socialized, either through the emergence of an agrarian capitalism proper (such as is seen in the United States and Latin America) or the forced collectivization of landholdings (such as was undertaken in China and the USSR). This situation, where an individual peasant household must meet the requirements of production for market-exchange entirely through private means without the scalar expansion that accompanies
industrial farming, is uniquely the burden of peasant producers. Contemporary cash-crop cultivation thus presents as a paradox demanding a distinction be made between ‘industrial farming’ and ‘capitalist farming’—agriculture in Vidarbha is not industrialized in the classic sense (i.e. there has been no consolidation, no socialization of agricultural production). It is however now capitalist in that the entirety of cotton production from production to sale (i.e. all components of the productive process, which can also be called ‘constant capital’ of the peasant—seeds, manures, insecticides, pesticide, money for hired labour) is now oriented towards the market.

It is agriculture, not manufacturing, that expresses the logic of contemporary capitalist change in India. Peasant proprietors are the unlikely entrepreneurs of modern India: investing personal surpluses, raised through debt, in production for the market. If this sounds like an absurdity, the absurdity lies in the model for it articulates the impasse peasants confront—that of capitalist agriculture without capital; cash cropping without cash. It would be unthinkable, within current economic arrangements, to expect any other group of producers to produce with these ratios—a return on investment of 3.7% wherein an average peasant family must invest over Rs 60,000 in a single sowing season in order to earn perhaps Rs. 1800 (Kranthi 2015: 5). Peasant producers in central India exemplify the fundamental contradictions of postcolonial development: the most vulnerable sections of the populace are engaged in the riskiest form of production.

A historical analysis of peasant production is undertaken subsequently in this chapter. What I wish to mark here is that the capitalization of agriculture, without any actual transformation in the conditions of production regarding land-holding, has remained a central plank of the postcolonial model of economic growth. Thus while India’s cotton exports increased two and a half fold in one decade between 2000 and 2010 (from 140 lakh bales to 352 lakh bales), this overall explosion of yields masks the monetary losses borne by individual producers—the material risks of
production—which are individually borne by cultivators who have land but no means to profitably farm it. There are steep fluctuations, year by year, in the net profitability of cotton cultivation and the ability of producers to recoup their costs, much less turn a profit. The risks of cultivation have been newly exacerbated through the adoption of genetically modified transgenic seeds (Bt-cotton) and the entry of international bio-capital (via Monsanto) into the Indian seed market in 2002. This has resulted in the emergence of a paradigm of production wherein success depends on an individual’s ability to take, or absorb, risks. James Scott’s famous characterization of the risk-averse peasant must be revised to account for a contemporary situation wherein risk (materialized in cash-debt for cotton-cultivation cultivation for capitalist market-exchange) becomes a structural feature of agrarian production. The figure that is able to assume risks and gamble on chance in the rural economy is exemplified in the new moneylender.

**Sabukar (Moneylender)**

One of the first people of whom I heard tell in connection with payvari was Das Bhai (Brother Das). A resident of Kadam, Das Bhai is a powerful man in the small network of villages that comprise Tirjhada (my field village), and the rural block headquarters. Kadam consists of a small residential neighbourhood, a subdistrict hospital, three bank offices, a police station, two high schools, an engineering college, an agricultural extension office, the Tehsil office, the tehsil land-revenue and land-title divisions, and a bazaar. Villagers from Tirjhada and neighbouring villages come to Kadam,

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41 All the narratives in this section derive from conversations in my field-sites. These conversations include those with moneylenders themselves, with payvar and with others who tell stories of how they came across their wealth. In the manner of stories that are shared, and circulated, speakers often speculate on, and assume, the speaking position of those whom the stories are about. I have retained this sense of polyphonic intimate narration, and their story-like quality, in which it is not always clear whether the teller is speaking about themselves, about others, or in speaking of others is also speaking of him/herself. The moment at which the speaking position shifts, indicates something about the relative power-relations between those who are speaking and those who are being spoken about, and the desires and fears that the narration evokes.
the block head-quarters, to visit the weekly market (haat), buy implements and agricultural inputs, sell their cotton, and borrow money.

Das Bhai owns two agrochemical shops and has several semi-legal businesses going on the side. He is also a successful sabukar (moneylender). Das Bhai’s father, Mohan Bhatia, was also a moneylender. He too was a ‘big man’ (mothamanai), but his son is much bigger. How did Das Bhai get this big? As the story goes, Das Bhai was supervising the breaking of ground for a new shop. At one point the man digging stopped, laid down his shovel, and refused to go any further: ‘There is something here. My arm hurts. I won’t do it.’ Try as he may Das Bhai could not convince him to resume digging. All the worker would say was there was something in the ground and he would not dig further unless Das Bhai called a shaman (jhadphookvala). Word quickly spread and no other worker would enter the site, so Das Bhai called in a sorcerer (mantrik) and a payvar. They confirmed what Das Bhai had suspected: there was wealth here.

Das Bhai suspended work, instructed his men to fence off the site, and set a guard on watch. Then Das Bhai went to his father for guidance and instruction. Mohan Bhatia, now an old man, told him to leave the wealth alone. Their businesses were doing well; there was no profit to be had from too much greed. In such matters, ‘Lene ke dene pad jayein’ (a cautionary saying in Hindi on the dangers of greed that roughly translates as ‘one never knows when instead of taking one will instead be giving’). So Das Bhai left the wealth alone, but it would not leave him alone. The wealth began to appear in his dreams, he lost sleep, he could not focus. Walking in the town or sitting in his shop, he would suddenly startle as if from a trance, not sure of where he was or how he had gotten there. People began to whisper and talk. They began to say that Das Bhai was going mad (yeda zhala aabe to). Indeed some days he himself felt as if he was not fully in his senses. The efficacy of a loan

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42 Shaman-like figures who wander villages and towns. They often carry a broom made of peacock feathers and are called upon to ‘brush’ those, such as a sick child, who are believed to have been ensorcelled or suffering from nazor (evil eye).
shark depends on his charisma (*tyancha power*), on his ability to inspire dread and fear in others, and keep his men in control. Das Bhai could feel a weakening of his strength; it was as though his energies were being sapped by a desire that had taken hold in him despite his intentions: ‘He began to feel like this…my power is slipping. This greed is taking my capacity for reason (*Tyaile asa vatu laagla…mazha power jaun jaate. He lobh mazhi vicharsbhakti ghet aabe*)’ as one person described it. So Das Bhai went to his father again. He said to him, ‘You are an old man. You have lived your life. What more is left now for you to experience. You touch the wealth (*tu dhan ghe*). You claim it. It will kill you (*tuza jiv ghein*), but you will leave behind an inheritance and abundance for your children (*aamche sansarasaathi je lagan te milel*).’ This story was told me by Atma Ram Moon, himself an ex-moneylender from the dalit Baudh Dharmi community. So Mohan Bhatia did. They called the *mantrik* and the *payvar* back and resumed digging. The final four inches of earth, Bhatia’s father dug with his own hands and grasped the pot of gold. That same evening he sickened and took to his bed. By morning he was dead. What did Das Bhai do with this bounty that last touched his dead father’s hand? First, he converted the gold to cash. A small portion of gold he kept with himself, hidden away, so people say, in a locker in his house—as a token and a reminder of the hidden wealth from which his current prosperity derived. The cash he lent out as loans, and diversified into the lottery (*satta*) and BC (chit-fund) businesses.

A similar tale is that of Gaikwad (also from the dalit Baudh Dharmi caste) who went from a no-account small seller of chilies to a ferocious loan-shark overnight when wealth came to him from a Kolam. Kolams are a formerly nomadic tribe who entered the colonial economy of cotton (described in chapter 2) in the late nineteenth-century, but who continue other occupations such as herding, hunting alongside cultivation.43 This Kolam was a *payvar*. According to this account, he had powers that caste people do not have because he was an *adivasi* (a tribal). A forest-dweller recently

43 This typology derives from colonial ethnological classifications whereby social groups were designated as hereditary criminals. See Bayly (1995).
settled to cultivation but who still practiced shifting agriculture, the Kolam could touch the wealth and it could exercise no hold over him. But being adivasi he was also ignorant of the wealth’s power. This innocence (‘adivasi bota - tynanna mabut nubotu paiybe kaya be mbanayche’ – ‘he was adivasi - he didn’t quite know the potential of this wealth’) that enabled him to touch the wealth also foreclosed from him the possibilities of accumulation it promised. He found twenty kilograms of gold and not knowing what to do with it, disclosed this find to Gaikwad.

Gaikwad knew the Kolam through his chili business. The Kolam cultivate a variety of small red chili prized for its fiery pungency in the local markets. Gaikwad had a roadside stall in the weekly Kadam bazaar where he sold chilies bought from the neighbouring tribal villages. Historically suspicious of the state and its functionaries, the Kolam asked Gaikwad, in this account, what to do with the gold. For with no clear notion of how to leverage his find, the Kolam saw the gold more as liability than as promise. Gaikwad convinced the Kolam that not only would the police (whom tribal communities fear for good reason) throw him into jail on charges of theft, but the minute people heard of his discovery he would be set upon by every thug and criminal in the area, not to mention his own neighbours. Instead, Gaikwad would take the gold off his hands and ensure he was looked after. So Gaikwad took the gold (now neutralized by the Kolam’s primary claim), sold it to the Khoja Muslim jewelers of Kadam, gave a fifth of the money to the Kolam (and built him a house besides), and entered money-lending (sahukari).

These figures I mention above do not come from traditional moneylending castes, such as the Marwari or the Komti. Gaikwad is a dalit Baudh Dharmi, a lower-caste man from a family of barbers formerly known as Mahar. Two decades ago the fathers of these men, who today wield such power in their local communities, would have been in subservient social relations of service to the land-owning dominant Kunbi caste group, their erstwhile patrons. It is amongst this traditionally
dominant land-owning community that the vast majority of suicides have occurred, and it is to them, the Kunbi, that the new sabukars lend today.

**The Failure**

But is moneylending (sabukari) itself without risk or the possibility of failure? Is the moneylender always able to deflect the maledictions of won wealth to his own advantage? Or, might the structure of accumulation, which he has now entered, trap, rather than violently free, him? It may be instructive, then, to consider a case in which the magic falters. A man called Bhurbure in Tirjhada, again a dalit Baudh Dharmi, ran a small-time business, lending sums of money out to his neighbours. But he did not have any real social power. He was a ‘chilladmanus’ (lit. a dealer in small-change) not a sabukar—his usurious activities evoking contempt rather than awe. People went to him to for a few thousand rupees, demanding, rather than asking, for the cash. He cut a pathetic figure, the butt of insults and jokes, forlornly returning from the house of a debtor who had refused once again to pay back the principal with interest. ‘It’s a rubbish business (bekaarcha dhanda), this sabukari. These people are stubborn (hatti). This is what they do, take money and not return it, and what can I do?’ as I was told on occasion. ‘So why do you still lend them money if you know they won’t pay back?’ To this he would shake his head noncommittally and walk off, muttering imprecations on the cheating, lying natures of his fellow villagers.

This man too was the recipient of payvari wealth, but it had come to him through a particularly circuitous route. A friend of his told him that he had heard of an old man in Vani (a nearby village) who refused to leave his kbaat (woven cane cot). All day he sat on this cot, come rain or shine, refusing to get up even for meals. Since he refused to leave this cot for any reason, which included even basic tasks such as bathing or going to the fields to perform ablutions, his long-suffering family poured water on him and emptied a chamber pot kept nearby for the purpose. He had been this way for the last five years and had acquired a reputation as the local madman. But
since his self-imposed imprisonment affected only him, his family had built him a shed so he would be protected from the rain and left him to his solitary vigil.

Bhurbure’s friend was convinced the old man was not mad at all. Rather, he was rich. There was something hidden in the ground under his cot that he was guarding with his life. Deathly afraid of being robbed, the old man had become his own jailer and prisoner. So Bhurbure and his friend, who was a vegetable vendor (I did not learn the friend’s name), started going to Vani on the pretext of selling vegetables and befriended the old man. At first he was suspicious, but they were patient and careful to never ask the old man why he sat so persistently on his cot. Little by little his guard dropped. He was a lonely old fellow and he began to welcome their visits. One night they offered him a cup of tea spiked with opium (afu) and drinking of it, the old man fell into a deep sleep. They had come prepared with shovels and, on digging in the ground beneath his cot, struck gold. A pot of gold sat there, the secret of the old man’s long captivity. Perhaps they then called in a mantrik, or perhaps the old man’s (who soon died thereafter) withdrawal from ordinary life had satisfied the conditions of the sacrifice, on this point the narrator who told me the tale was not certain. Regardless, Bhurbure and his friend divided the gains and the by now familiar cycle began—Bhurbure entered the moneylending business.

But with a difference. He had taken the wealth, and it made him very rich, but it did not quite work for him. To be sure it was not an enormous sum when compared to the booty of Das Bhai or Gaikwad, but nonetheless five kilos of gold is a large sum by any reckoning, and certainly vast compared to the fortunes of his neighbours and his own. He became a moneylender but it did not quite garner him the fear and awe that sahukars inspire. If anything it had the opposite effect—he became the target of envy that took the form of people snorting with contempt of a man ill-suited to largesse. Not a ferocious loan shark who had to be repaid at all cost, but an easy touch
harangued to turn over the cash. He did not have the styles of a *sabukar*. He was rather a small, and cheap, imitation of one.

Why did the wealth, which brought such a windfall to Gaikwad and Das Bhai, sap rather than vivify Bhurbure? Because, as someone snorted, ‘The man is a thief! (*chor abe to!*)’ Why should this matter? Because the contemporary *sabukar* is precisely not a thief. Unlike the colonial moneylender, the contemporary moneylender is never described as a thief, or usury as thieving. Rather, the moneylender is a man of power who is able to turn a potentially dangerous form of wealth to his own advantage. We could argue that Gaikwad too had thieved, in so far as he had tricked the Kolam out of his treasure. But this suggestion did not have popular traction in Tirjhada: Gaikwad had offered terms, there had been a negotiation, and perhaps the Kolam had thought he had gained something too. Whatever it was, there was a distinction to be made between Bhurbure and the others, and this distinction turns on what he himself had done, not what had happened to the other party. In village talk no one seemed unduly concerned about the fortunes of the old man who anyway was at the end of his life; his neighbours despised Bhurbure for what the theft said about him. Bhurbure came to the money through trickery and lies. He stole the wealth. To his neighbours this demonstrated that Bhurbure was a weak man who was unwilling to pay its price, to face down the possibility of death that it demands. He did not have the courage to stake his own life or to exert the will to stake another’s in its place. Like the old man who could neither claim nor escape it and so remained trapped in an endless event-horizon of neither refusal nor embrace, Bhurbure was trapped in a cycle of exchange which produced social exhaustion even while it offered economic accumulation.

**Rites of Power**

Of course not all moneylenders are deemed to have received their money from *payvari*. *Payvari* is not a sociological explanation nor is it offered as one by villagers. *Payvari* is a historically constituted
narrative of power. The wealth found through *payvari* is a fetish object properly speaking (Pietz 1985; Morris 2004 v.2): it has animate qualities (such as the ability to seduce and posses through speech) and a dangerous power that can kill or confer bounty on the person who claims it. Which it will be is determined through a contest of force—in wrestling the wealth the person establishes his claim to the powers it possesses, which now speak through him. The newspapers, and police reports, comment on the arrogance of Munna Pathan who believed that the powers he imbibed by eating the child’s organs now rendered him invisible. Speculatively inhabiting the speaking voice of an insouciant killer the newspaper writes, ‘Now I have *aghorisbakti*, convinced of this fact he [the killer] left his house. Now no one can do anything to foil one (me). No one’s suspicions will fall on one (me), with this belief he began to wander about the town (*Aata aaple konich bighadvu shakat nabin. Kunalabi aaplyavar sansbay yenaar nahi, asha padbatine shabarat vavaru lagla*).’  

44 The wealth gained through *payvari* extends the person who has the courage to claim it. By tying others in debt-bondage to himself, it makes him more than he is. Zombie narratives such as described by the Comaroffs mark a mutilated humanity—under the thrall of another’s power the zombie cannot speak, it is robbed of its tongue, its voice, the ability to hear, respond, or reason. In *payvari* the wealth itself is speaking: to be possessed by this non-human agency, this non-human entity, makes its possessor all too human. Whether the child knew it or not, others could sense his power and were drawn to it. Munna Pathan did not put the child to work for him; he did not harness his powers. Instead, Munna Pathan killed Rupesh because he wanted what the child had; to regain what Pathan feared he had lost. In eating the child Pathan renewed, and expanded, his own self.

In linking human sacrifice to wealth *Payvari* resignifies the ritual logic of sacrifice. Human sacrifice as a rite of power is an old practice in many parts of India, particularly prevalent in the

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medieval Deccan and Bengal. Traditionally human sacrifices were conducted by, or at least the logic of such sacrifice was claimed by, Kshatriya (warrior) and military caste groups, such as the Rajput and the Maratha, in consecration rites of political sovereignty and kingship. As Anupama Rao has shown, in the medieval Deccan the sacrifice of a human, often a Mahar, consecrated claims to land and patrimonies (Rao 2009: pp.258-260). This trope is also to be found in Bengal where Shaivite (i.e. Shiva-worshipping) Zamindar families conducted human sacrifices, or claimed the ritual logic of such sacrifice, when laying the foundations of a house or fortification. It was believed that the strength of a structure derived from the sacrificial body buried in the foundation. Further west, Bhrigupati Singh has described Rajput rituals of kingship where the rite of consecration was not considered complete till the king was ritually marked with the blood of a Bhil (a tribal group with long agonistic relations with Rajput clans) (Singh 2015:pp. 135-147).

Human sacrifice is specifically ritually distinguished from dealings in money: historically trader and moneylender castes embraced the cult of Krishna Gopala, the cowherd, which substituted a cult of milk for the warrior’s cult of blood (Singh 2016: pp. 235-270). Amongst these caste groups (Marwari; Maheshwari; Bania) the logic of sacrifice was ritually rejected: the violence of warfare sublimated in dealings in the abstraction of money. Eschewal of ritual sacrifice accompanied practices of vegetarianism, the refusal to kill animals, abstinence from foods considered heat-generating (rajasic) such as onions garlic and alcohol, and the refusal of substances that mimicked meat (such as jackfruit). The cult of Krishna Gopala distinguished trader and moneylender castes from sacrificer Kshatriya clans. Payvari takes this logic of human sacrifice and ritually reinscribes it as a rite of power for wealth.


**Gold and Money**

The resignification of the sacrificial ritual as a rite of power for wealth is marked within the rites of payvari itself, which narrate a conversion of gold (a very significant store of value, the symbolic mark of political sovereignty, kingship and women’s domestic wealth in South-Asia) into money. Thus the phenomenal form of the hidden wealth is always narrated as discovered in gold (dhan), never as money (paisa; rupya; rokda). What is found is gold, in the form of gold coins (mohar) and women’s jewelry (dagine, pathi), which must then be converted to money. This narrative conjunction is not random; it occurs at a particular historical juncture of production for exchange wherein cash becomes an indispensible component of the productive process, as well as its product. It is only very recently that it would have been the case that enough wealth could have potentially been generated from a field to be advanced further in the form of loans. Consequently, rumours of hidden wealth hinge on the decline of an older model of caste-specific moneylender, and the emergence of a new class/caste of agriculturalist and trader lenders through the cotton cash economy. As a limited phenomenon first noticeable in the last decades of the 19th century in the colonial cotton economy in Berar, and then re-emerging in intensified and generalized form through the mid 1990s and early 2000s with the large-scale adoption of genetically modified hybrid cotton-seeds in Vidarbha. The new moneylenders, persons like Gaikwad, Atma Ram Moon, Bhurbure who come from shudhra, dalit, or OBC castes, deal only in cash; they only entered moneylending at the time when money, as cash, began to be widely available in the rural economy. These new moneylenders operate parallel to, and alongside, an older economy of caste-specific moneylending in which transactions in kind still occur, or did occur till very recently. Thus till ten years ago many Marwari trader-moneylenders would accept loan repayments in grain; older jewelers (sonar) who also act as pawn-brokers and advance loans on gold, do not set a fixed date of repayment after which the debtor’s gold is sold. The gold, which is usually deposited as women’s jewelry (bangles: patiya or gold chains: pathi) is held till the customer pays back, occasionally after a span of some years. For older jewelers gold is
security on the loan, but it is not viewed simply as a convertible store of value in the form of precious metal that is (or can be) immediately converted into money for further investment; nor will those pawning gold to the sonar simply accept a replacement of equal monetary value for the objects they have deposited. Chabbu Bai, a woman I knew in Tirjhada, could not understand my question when I accosted her on her way to retrieve some earrings a year after she had pawned them—

AS: ‘Will the sonar give you back your earrings? The same ones you gave him (thesch je tu girvi thevles boti)?’
CB: ‘Of course he will. I have the money now.’
AS: ‘But will they be the same ones?’
CB: ‘Obviously! He’s not going to give me someone else’s jewelry! (amuk tamuzech dagine tar nahin denaar jit)’
AS: ‘But what if he gave you money instead?’
CB: ‘Money instead? But I only borrowed Rs. 2000. My earrings cost much more. They were given to me at my wedding. The motherfucker better return my earrings or I know where his father lives (tyanchawala kuthe rehto mala mahit abe)!’

This older model of moneylending, and pawning of gold, worked through patron-client relations between the sabukar, landowners, their tenants, the sabukar’s clansmen, his hereditary village, caste-networks and so on. In these transactions, which operated through interlocking intergenerational acquaintance, several generations of a peasant, or landowning family, family might be indebted to a specific moneylender family. The moneylender himself would raise capital through his own kin networks: in my own field village the hereditary village moneylender, a man called Gangamvar, borrowed money at 2% interest rates from his extended clan located in Digras (a subdistrict about 200 kms away), and lent it out in Tirjhada at rates between 7% to 10%. There is no necessary causal transition between this model and the activities of the new moneylenders in the new cash economy: the new moneylenders are not just new versions of the old sabukar. They do not occupy the same locations in the rural economic and social structure nor does the latter supplant the former in its entirety. Instead, as new caste-groups entered moneylending at the moment at which the structure of
production was changing with the intensive capitalization of agriculture through the late 80s and early 90s, these formerly untouchable caste groups (such as the Mahar), and the new moneylenders arising from within them, located themselves nodally within rural cash flows. This flow of cash-debt is not a simple continuation, or conversion, of the older forms of lending and borrowing in metals, gold and grain. Rather, it marks the emergence of something new alongside it. The older sabukar knew money because his caste, social and kin relations marked him as one who handles money. The new sabukar is a moneylender because he lends money. Guptidhan/Hidden-wealth is a name that marks this newness as a potential emergent in the conversion of gold into money.

There is another thing the wealth marks through its quality of being hidden: it marks the invisible character of the contemporary moneylender. As I show in chapters 2 and 3, one of the most significant historical shifts in the rural caste and kinship order, attendant on the recent financialization of rural life, is the disappearance of the ‘moneylender’ as a socially determinate figure. The contemporary moneylender has lost his caste and occupational referent. Consequently, as cash-debt has become an essential component of the productive process, and the condition of indebtedness ubiquitous, relations of economic transaction are not external to, but provide the vocabulary through which, social and familial proximity are negotiated. Kin now lend to each other at usurious rates. A nephew may lend to his maternal uncle at a sawai (i.e. quarter) rate, while a moneylender (from a different caste) will lend at a ‘percent’ (i.e. half) rate. As someone remarked—‘Now what has happened, the moneylenders have been hidden (Atta kay zhala, sabukar lapvun gele).’ The generalization of the moneylender’s functions, with the concomitant loss of his social location, are linguistically marked: I have been using the word sabukar to translate ‘moneylender’ as it is sometimes used, when someone is pushed to describe a particular individual, with he from whom money can be obtained. However the new moneylenders are usually not called by this name. Sabukar is usually a socially determinate, caste-specific figure. Instead, people usually
describe a person from whom they have borrowed money, and who also does this alongside his other occupations, not as a collective noun ‘sahukar’, ‘the moneylenders’ but through what he does—they will simply say, ‘He, the one who gives money (to, je paishe deto)’. If anyone can perform the moneylender’s function, including one’s own kin, then the source of wealth cannot be located within a socially determinate person, and by implication, its presence and the desire for it may potentially infect anyone.

We have also seen that the gold is mobile—it moves and where it is at any point cannot be determined without the intervention of a person with access to occult power who also has the capacity to bind it. But here we already have a strange doubled character: this mobile dhan is actually fixed, in so far as it is gold qua gold nothing much can be done with it; it must be converted into money. The conversion of dhan into money as the source of value is a historically and socially acquired capacity. Thus in the story above of the Kolam, the treasure in itself is narrated by caste-cultivators as meaning nothing to him, or he could do nothing with it, because as an adivasi he is thought insufficiently schooled, insufficiently interpelled we could say, into the strictures of a monetary economy. Yet note that it is not as though the Kolam is unacquainted with a market or the logics of transaction, or even indeed of money, for it is through his chilies business that Gaikwad met the Kolam in the first place—the history of the market, and money, far predates the history of capitalism. We can revise this further to say, that in order for payvari wealth to be realized, a certain kind of financial-sense is required, one adivasis are thought not to possess. And yet in all the narratives I heard of payvari two categories of people are thought to be especially receptive to inhabitation by the power of payvari: women and adivasis, and by extension (and intensification) adivasi women. In the account of sacrifice with which this chapter began the child Rupesh is a

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45 Atma Ram Moon is convinced there is a pot of gold currently hidden in his fields because an adivasi woman in the village, a woman called Mayari, told him so. He claims he tried on three occasions to retrieve the wealth, but for some
Wodar, a member of a formerly criminally denotified tribe. The man who killed him a Muslim, the persons in the payvari gang on whose behalf Pathan acted all middle-caste land-owning Kunbis, and the farmer whose field was the scene of Pathan’s first failure also a middle-caste Kunbi. It is the Kunbi caste-group who, through their control of land, are the traditional patron castes in Vidarbha. It is this caste-group that adopted new modes of cultivation and are the primary producers in the economy of cotton.

At first level the location of payvari power within women and adivasi bodies may appear as a simple relation of extraction: namely the persons most able to access payvari wealth are those who themselves, as per their location in the social structure are ideologically constructed as marginal to agricultural production and thus cannot actualize it. Which is to say that those who are able to sense the wealth’s presence cannot themselves make use of it. But one does not acquire but is born into payvari. It is due to one being breech-born (garbhi pay-var aale) that one acquires divinatory power. In locating the powers of payvari in the bodies of women and of tribals (adivasis) a split is thus rehearsed, and then sutured over, between an economy of the domestic (inhabited by women and adivasis) as the source of secret value, and an economy organized around money as capital.

In the domestic economy wealth (in the form of women’s gold) can only be discovered; not produced or exchanged. In order for the dhan to be activated something else beyond its externalization must intervene. Interestingly, it is not agricultural labour that produces or valorizes the wealth. Rather it is a magic derived from the market that valorizes the wealth: wealth that is found through coincidence

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46 Such groups have been redesignated as ‘Nomadic Tribes’, what are locally known as ghumantu jati, in the 6th Schedule of the Indian constitution.

47 I say ‘ideologically constructed as marginal’ because in actuality women are central to agricultural production. The gendered character of agricultural labour is discussed in chapter 6.

48 Social relations of patronage and agonism between caste groups and tribes are discussed in chapter 3.
and chance, and then immediately lent out and invested. The *dhan* is activated precisely in its dispersal as monetary debt.

**Debt as Surplus; Debt as Prophylactic**

Against these stories of success and one of failure, I want to suggest what rumours of hidden wealth amongst peasants in a set of remote villages in the center of India may have to tell us about contemporary capitalist accumulation in agrarian worlds. In turning my attention to these practices around wealth and beliefs about money, I am intervening in a discussion of the entry of capitalist relations in rural worlds, powerfully articulated by Michael Taussig in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. In his work Taussig (2010) draws attention to practices amongst two sets of peasant-workers—those working on the sugarcane plantations in the southern Cauca valley in Colombia, and displaced Indian peasants employed in the tin mines in Bolivia. Two practices around money are the subject of his ethnography—a pact whereby miners enter into secret contracts with the devil in order to increase productivity and thus wage (96). However the money so earned is infertile: it can only be spent on expendable consumer goods and cannot be reinvested in productive activity (94). The other is the baptism of the bill: at a child’s baptism its godparent hides a peso note in its hand resulting in the baptism of the note not the child. This note, if circulated, is believed to come back to the owner with interest and bring misfortune to the other party (126-128). In marking what happens to exchange with the entry of capitalist relations in a rural ecology, Taussig brings, as I have done, two discussions together—Mauss’s theorization of exchange, in the figure of ‘the gift’, as a ‘total social fact’ in ‘archaic’ (by which we may take to mean non-capitalist) societies (Mauss 1990: p.3), and Marx’s discussion of the commodity-fetish under capitalism. Briefly, Taussig argues that as practices the devil pact and the baptism of the bill, respond to and exemplify the emergence of alienated wage-labour and the production of use-values for exchange in a society, which does not
organize itself around the fetish of the commodity, and where the economy is not viewed as an impersonal alienated arena of monetary transaction (36). These practices express the logic of a capitalized market economy (thus the circulation of the interest accruing currency note) and wage-labour as bondage in gold chains (the devil pact that increases production but also dispenses death). They mark the essential inequality of the capitalist mode of production—the worker may increase his wage via the devil pact, but he may only consume; he cannot accumulate.

However the peasants of whom Taussig writes are very different from the peasant cultivators of contemporary central India. Displaced from their lands, working in the mines or the plantations, the peasants of Colombia are violently inserted into wage-labour. The practices of the devil pact and the baptism of the bill, which enjoin consumption but forbid accumulation, recognize the injustice of the mode of production in which they now find themselves—that the increase in wages can only produce more consumption, indeed a consumption which eventually consumes the worker-consumer, but not the accumulation of surplus value (Taussig 1980: p.14). However the life-world of the Indian peasants who are the subjects of this dissertation is entangled in a structure of production that enjoins (foreclosed) accumulation for survival. The peasants of whom Taussig writes work for the owner of the plantation or the mines. The peasants who speak of hidden wealth in central-India work their own lands. They are the subjects of a historical absurdity wherein the peasant is a rural ‘entrepreneur’—the rural target of micro-credit and bank credit; the presumptive consumer of new agrarian technologies, willing to assume current risk on the promise of future abundance. James Scott’s formulation of the risk-averse peasant (Scott 1977) must thus be revised to account for the peasant proprietor who has no choice but to assume risk as a structural condition of agricultural life. However with an average holding of 2.7 acres of rain-fed non-irrigated land, what does it mean to enter capitalist farming without capital?
In this chapter I have engaged rumours of sacrifice and hidden wealth to arrive at a conclusion rather the opposite of Taussig’s. As we have seen, the wealth is dangerous and exacts a price. This price, differently dealt with by Gaikwad (through harnessing the occult force of the *adivasi* body) and Das Bhai (through the sacrifice of his father) can never be paid in full. It can only be displaced through an endless cycle of deferral in the form of debt. Each of these three figures enters the moneylending business. In doing so they do not keep the wealth with themselves. They lend it out in the form of loans, passing on the risk that inheres in it, to others. The ‘devil compact’ here is not the refusal of but the injunction to accumulate surplus value through debt. In wresting a source of tabooed wealth the moneylender continues to lend out this money (as loans, and as speculative capital in pyramid schemes, chit-funds, etc.), through an endless cycle of the displacement of risk onto the borrowers of money, deferring through displacement the moment at which the wealth returns to him.

Rumours of hidden wealth express an essential truth of contemporary capitalist agriculture—the only way to succeed in this economy, to win, is to access a store of value that lies outside the system, but which is, nonetheless, the grounds of its activation. *Payvari* rehearses what Marx called *ursprünglich akkumulation*, usually translated as ‘primitive accumulation’, better translated, as Morris has noted, as ‘originary accumulation’ in so far as ‘originary’ marks not a historical stage to be surpassed, but a recursively recurring structure of displacement in all capitalist societies (Morris 2016: pp.31-32). We seem to have moved very far now from murder and sacrifice. However, in this supposedly most teleological of philosophers there appears again a ‘heterogeneous term’, a kind of magic that serves to define through negation: Marx acerbically notes that in the writings of bourgeois political economics ‘primitive accumulation’ performs the function of a theological fable (Marx 1977: p.667). Instead, Marx marks it as a negative moment: primitive accumulation is not accumulation at all. Rather ‘originary accumulation’, as concept and not merely as historical
description (Morris 2016:pp.31, 41-42), is offered by Marx as a means of thinking an essential conundrum that lies at the heart of the emergence of capitalism—namely, that in order for money to become not simply capital but capitalism there needs exist a store of surplus-value that can only be produced by capitalism (Marx 1977: p.667; Morris 2016: p.30). So the problem appears as Marx notes in the form of a ‘vicious circle’—that which capitalism produces as its presumed result (a store of surplus-value) is required at its origin (Marx 1977: p.667). Or to put it another way, in order for the cycle of capitalist accumulation to get going, a store of value is required that does not emerge from within this structure, a potencia, in other words, which exists as a necessary outside, one on which the circle nonetheless depends. For Marx ‘originary accumulation’ is the long historical process of enclosures, disposessions, enslavement and conquest through which producers are expropriated from the means of production (Marx 1977: p.668); for peasants in central India, cash-cropping without cash, it is the secret of payvari wealth. It is this hidden ur-source of value, itself not given within the mode of production, that the moneylender seems to access. Das Bhai and Gaikwad, Isu Pathan and Atma Ram Moon do not distinguish themselves from other peasants through conspicuous consumption. It is not their ability to buy more things, or consume more objects, in which their power lies. It is rather their ability to enter capitalized cash cropping and turn a profit.

**Magic, Accumulation, Production, and Reproduction**

To return finally to where I began: the magical thinking expressed in rumors of hidden wealth marks a radical confusion between material production, accumulation and social reproduction. Bloch and Parry’s registers of a short-term cycle of material acquisition and the long-term domain (famously theorized in the collection *Money And The Morality of Exchange*) wherein the contradictions of such acquisition are supposedly pressed into the service of social reproduction, cannot here be reconciled at the level of discourse and representation, or indeed within social life (Bloch and Parry 1989: 67).
Contemporary rural society in Vidarbha presents the peculiar situation wherein the valorization of debt, an insistence on its necessity by debtors and creditors alike, accompanies a simultaneous assertion that it pushes persons to suicide. No moral opprobrium attaches to usurious lending as kin now lend to each other at usurious rates, rather monetary debt itself becomes the means whereby social proximity and distance are negotiated. Debt becomes the gift like the Maussian gift it arrives from nowhere, and something in it impels its receiver to circulate it further in ever-widening circles of transaction (Mauss 1990: pp.10-11, 43-49). But this gift that is debt does not produce reciprocal obligation, and thus a stable social order, through exchange. Instead it is the true gift: a bivalent term that Marcel Mauss recognized as encompassing both the remedy and the poison (Derrida 1992: pp.47-49; Mauss 1990: p.63).

This ambiguity is expressed in people's struggle to establish what exactly this rumor is, what is its provenance and to what does it refer: is it from Vidarbha or elsewhere, is it just a tale or is there actually something there? The rumors seem to partake of all of these at the same time. The same person avers, apparently without contradiction, that hidden wealth (guptdhan) is nothing but a superstitious belief held by ignorant persons, while claiming in the next breath to know someone who found such wealth in his field. This confusion between rumour and reality does not exist at the level of discourse and interpretation alone: it is not as if those attempting to understand and describe what is occurring (villagers; state officials; community leaders) lack knowledge or the interpretative tools at their disposal are inadequate. The confusion between the registers of material accumulation and social reproduction now exists, to use a crude term for lack of a better one, within the structure itself. The emergence of individual suicide as a collective cultural form in contemporary peasant society marks the limit of the belief that society reproduces itself through mutual recognition via exchange, since staggeringly large numbers of persons choose to end their life every year, a large number of them who are not necessarily personally monetarily indebted.
‘Social breakdown’ (as much sociological analysis avers) however is not a helpful
description of what is happening in these regions since it assumes that such a thing as a coherent
integrated rural society once existed, and is now coming apart, this destruction, symptomized in
mass self-deaths, producing monstrous forms as persons struggle to reestablish relations through
which social positions can be made mutually comprehensible (See Jodka 2003; Mohanty 2005 et all).
Instead, in subsequent chapters I describe the much more difficult process through which
something now retroactively called ‘rural society’, organized around stable configurations of caste;
community and occupation, tied to specific forms of non-industrialized capitalist agricultural
production in a non-capitalized social structure, was itself contingently produced first under colonial
rule, and then under the postcolonial state. Magic, like mass suicide, marks this limit at which the
distinctions between subjects and objects, persons and things, accumulation and redistribution,
‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, debtor and creditor begin to break down. This opacity is not simply the
analytical limit of the anthropologist attempting an explanation. It is the experiential bewilderment
of the persons who inhabit this world.

A final word on rumour as historical imagination: the rumours around payvari wealth mark
this specifically as Zamindari wealth—the gold Mughal coins found in the ground historicize the
bounty as generated from within a colonial economy dependent on the rack-renting of peasantry by
local chieftains and sabukars, given rights to revenue collection by the colonial state (see Satya 1997).
The Akola District Gazetteer published by the colonial state in 1910 has this description. It is worth
quoting in full:

‘Treasure and the Payalu: By one branch of the black art called kusli a witch can cause any
quantity of grain or money to be transported to her own house; when she combs her hair a spirit appears and obeys her orders. A payalu, a boy born feet foremost, especially if he is the
eldest son of his mother, has also magical powers; this belief is most widely repeated. He is
constantly watched and pursued by evil spirits, to circumvent whom a little bibha, marking-
ut, is kept applied to his body. When he reaches the age of puberty he has the faculty of
seeing where treasure is buried. The chief method seems to be for him to look at some anjan,
lamp-black, placed in his hand by a jadugar; by another device the jadugar sacrifices the payalu to the earth-god (a snake) and applies some of the fat to his own eyes; the service roll of a retired police inspector shows that a youth was killed in 1891 with the object of discovering hidden treasure. Such treasure, dhan, is the subject of many other beliefs—almost every village having perhaps its own story; in fact money is constantly being buried in small quantities. It is a well-known practice to make the image of a snake or a demon out of wheat-flour and set it to protect the money; but buried treasure is said sometimes supernaturally to become invisible even to the owner. Some people in the District are said to know of wealth buried in their houses but to be afraid to dig it up because of the spirits that guard it. Sometimes on the other hand it calls to a passer-by, ‘Ye, ye, come, come’; if he listens it will probably bargain, promising to come to him if he will give it his son or some other prized object. Should he agree the son is to be placed on a certain night in the doorway of his house, when suddenly the floor will be covered with gold, but the son will fall dead. A story is told of a cunning man who made the bargain, but set up instead of his son a figure made of wheat-flour; a shower of gold fell in the room and the figure toppled over on the ground, but the spirit immediately discovered the fraud and the gold turned to coal. The image of Maroti in a deserted village is said often to have treasure hidden under it; people go at the proper time and with suitable sacrifices to search, but success is difficult of attainment. People tell of the wrong man trying to take the treasure and finding that he had thrust his hand into a nest of snakes and scorpions.’

Through the rest of this dissertation I will describe the means by which the contemporary hunt for hidden wealth from cotton in Vidarbha was forged through the colonial economy of cotton in the late nineteenth century. This strange description in the Akola gazeteer from 1910 speaking of a murder for secret treasure in 1891 replicates almost to the letter the murder I happened to be present for in 2014. The sudden appearance of this wealth as rumour and murder, at a moment of the (re)intensification of cotton-farming, cleaves to a prior moment when the region was settled to the cash-cropping of cotton under the colonial government in the late 19th century. To articulate the past, for Benjamin, ‘does not mean to recognize “how it really was.” It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger’ (Benjamin 1968: p.255). This prior moment appears now, exactly a century later, in the rumour of treasures buried in the earth that he who so dares may win.
CHAPTER TWO: A POLITICAL-ECONOMY OF COTTON IN VIDARBHA

The mono-cropping of Bt-Cotton, the ostensible cause of massed suicide events in contemporary Vidarbha, was not a break with earlier modes of production as has usually been represented in the scholarly literature, this assertion magnified through iteration in the mediatized public realm of political, activist and civil society discourses. Rather, the introduction of Monsanto’s Bt-Cotton hybrids as the crops of choice in the economic realm precipitated a sudden cleavage in rural socio-productive relations. The accelerated blanketing of the agrarian landscape under Bt-Cotton hybrids heightened, redoubled, and concatenated tendencies (economic and social, which anthropologists would argue are aspects of the same integrated reality) that had already emerged within the material-productive social arrangements of peasant societies undertaking the cultivation of cotton as a cash-crop in this part of central-India. None of the phenomena I mark at various points in this dissertation as symptomatic of fractures in social and domestic relations in the wake of recent capitalist agrarian change—the emergence of moneylenders from within agricultural castes (See Guha 1987); kin-lending at usurious rates (also Guha 1987); money as the currency of village-level transaction (Perlin 1983a; 1983b); cash-cropping and production for a futurity of exchange (Catanach 1998; Hardiman 1997; Satya 1997), the collapse of caste-based forms of prestation (see Berar District Gazetteers 1884-1911); and indeed suicides by cotton cultivators—were new. They were already emergent in disaggregated fashion, through the specific regional and national history of the alignment of peasant agriculture in Vidarbha first with the trajectories and infrastructures of colonial-capitalism and then the developmentalist imperatives of the modern Indian state.

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1 There is a vast technical, industry and social scientific literature on Bt-Cotton in particular, and genetic interventions in agriculture more generally. For a good overview of the agri-science and social science debate on the introduction and success of Bt-Cotton in India see Stone (2005a; 2005b, 2012). Also see Herring (2006) for an interesting perspective which locates, as I am doing, the problem in the legal regime not the technology and details the illegal Bt-Cotton seed-sharing networks in Gujarat, this also discussed later in this chapter. For an overview of the specific debate on hybrid cultivation and agricultural skill see Stone and Flachs (2009). In India Vandana Shiva is the most prominent anti-GM activist and public thinker. For her position and an overview of the India debate see Shiva et al (1997; 2001; 2002).
Suicides in Vidarbha have come under intense scholarly and public scrutiny in the last two decades. Some analysis, particularly from within the disciplines of sociology, agrarian economics and occasionally psychology and psychiatry (see Assayag 2006; Assadi 1998; Behere and Bise 2009, 2016; Mohanty 1997), have sought to locate suicides and access to economic resources for cotton production within specific re-arrangements of caste, land and/or political relations in the preceding two decades of neoliberal structural reform. However there has been no systematic attempt to locate Vidarbha’s recent tragedy either within a longer political-economy of this region on the one hand; or in relation to the material role agriculture has played as the hyper-invested quasi-protected site of state interventions into the structures of agrarian life in postcolonial India.

This scholarly choice is perhaps explained by the national mood: as should be the case with a tragedy of the scale unfolding in Vidarbha, the aim of analysis has been to suggest a coherent picture of current market-producer relations such as may be addressed through policy interventions. Necessary though such interventions are, in coming to the question of agrarian life through suicides such an exercise is overdetermined from the start: since it begins with the assumption that monetary debt ‘causes’ suicides, and since debts are ‘caused’ by Bt-Cotton (whatever may be the merits or issues of the technology), it is to the technology that one must eventually look for an answer. The scholarly imperative in turn responds to a public realm of discourse and action, subtending fractious debates between farmer’s groups, NGO circuits, the international anti-GM movements, national and state politicians, the agrarian scientific, statistical and economic establishment, scholars and academics, international aid and development lobbies—in which Bt-Cotton is personified either as the ‘seeds of suicide’ (Shiva 2013), or then presented as a long-awaited green miracle (See Ellsworth et all 2013; also Manickam, Gururajan and Gopalakrishnan 2012).²

² Interestingly these two citations are from studies conducted by the agricultural science and technology departments of Arizona State University and Tamil Nadu Agricultural University both of which affirm the efficacy of Bt-Cotton to control boll worm infestations with lower pesticide use. The Arizona study may be accessed here:
However the hyper-fetishization in national and scholarly discourses of Bt-Cotton as either the sole agent of change, or determining in the last instance, reflects an ideological and analytical myopia shared between seemingly opposed factions. On the one hand activists and farmer’s organizations have urged the Indian government to ban the entry and sale of GM cotton seeds in India; and on the other economists, agricultural scientists and large sections of farmers insist on the vital necessity of this same technology to cotton-yields (See Herring 2006 and Stone 2007 for both sides of the debate). Having taken Monsanto and Bt-Cotton as its unifocal target, the two-decade national controversy around the suicides of farmers is of a piece with a longer national discussion on what is to be done with agriculture in India. However this singular focus on Bt-Cotton precisely stymies such a discussion—the wider crises in agrarian social and market relations in postcolonial India—since it has produced either the affective fiction of rupture of a ‘traditional’ peasant society, or then a re-valorization of the ‘agriculture as vestigial’ paradigm whereby suicides will cease once agrarian production chains have been fully financialized and rationalized towards production for the market (Bhagwati and Panagria 2012, 2014; also see Doberman and Nelson 2015).

Public discussion on the suicides of farmers thus exhibits two opposed, but essentially non-contradictory, positions. Many critiques, particularly those circulating in the public realm of activism, social movements, media and state policy, consolidate themselves around the fantasy of disruption of a presumed prior ‘agricultural society’ supposedly once cultivating for subsistence, now devastated by the debt-trap of the mono-crop capitalist market selling ‘seeds of death’ (Shiva 2013).4


4 The most well known critic-activist-theorist is of course Vandana Shiva.
Or then, from the opposite camp, the conviction of economists that what is needed is not less but more institutionalized credit—more debt in other words—such that peasants can leverage currently restrictedly mobile assets (land, the family home, animals) for credit lines in the open money markets (private banks, micro-credit) towards input costs. In either case it is Bt-Cotton not the cosmos of agrarian production in the firing line.

While no full account is possible of an event capable of rearranging the lines between life and death such that self-chosen death is now a part of everyday life, assigning a magical agentive force to Bt-Cotton alone will not get us very far. Bt-Cotton produced a conjectural moment, but it did not initiate the transformations that have given it this catastrophic social form. The suicides had already begun before Monsanto’s Bt-Cotton seeds entered the Indian seed market. On the contrary, and much more problematically, for a brief period Bt-Cotton resurrected the same fiction that three decades prior had fuelled the Green Revolution: technology as remedy for a structural political question. In the first few years of its introduction Monsanto’s Bt-Cotton hybrids were hailed as a miracle panacea to solve the twin problems of pest-attacks and low yields—in the space of just four years average cotton yields in Vidarbha (which has the lowest yields in the country and thus the world) went from 158 quintals/ha in 1999 to 308 quintals/ha in 2003. These increases were achieved through the same methods in new garb that had once pushed up rice and wheat yields in Punjab during the Green Revolution: reliance on the infusion of expensive technological inputs into unproductively small plots of land which could not be economically farmed since land redistributions had failed. Bt-Cotton farming is thus the completion of the Green Revolution project, and it is the long history of that project and its pre-runners that demands attention (Frankle 1985; Gupta 1999). That Bt-Cotton hybrids arrived hitched to international capital (Monsanto) has

5 See data collected by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India. The DES plot-level data sets for these districts from 1995 till 2015, and the surveys are available on the DES website: http://eands.dacnet.nic.in/
made it an easier target for nationalist and activist critique across the political spectrum (Herring 2007: 12), however these critiques fall short of a robust account.

The governing assumptions of the postcolonial agrarian experiments to harness agricultural surpluses through a vast technical and administrative infrastructure which linked household peasant production into the ambit of a national techno-political economy, and the final interlocking of domestic peasant production with the market now even for seeds with the entry of Monsanto, are extensions of the same paradigm. The postcolonial state hoped that through state monopsony, protected markets, minimum support price, subsidies on chemical inputs, incentives for cash-crops and the development of high-yielding variety seeds, it would be possible without any transformations in actual land-relations, to profitably engage in industrialized farming in a non-capitalized rural structure primarily dependent on the labour of households. The agrarian catastrophe that took four decades to unfold with the Green Revolution, its consequences daily evident in the poisoned wheat fields of Punjab, unraveled in Vidarbha’s cotton fields within one scant decade.  

Modern Agriculture in Modern India

This current concatenation stretches, as I have said, back to 19th century colonial policy, and the centrality of the agrarian countryside, and agrarian production, as the generators of postcolonial national wealth. As colonial policy had sought to funnel the region’s cotton to Lancashire; so the postcolonial developmentalist state hoped to harness cotton—the economic and affective fiber of

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6 Prior to undertaking this project in Vidarbha I had briefly considered a project in rural Punjab. For various reasons I eventually decided against working in Punjab at that time. In one preliminary field visit I visited a small town where there were 12 reported cases of cancer in a row of perhaps 25 houses. Four decades of chemical-driven farming have poisoned the land and the water, and the most deeply affected are lower-caste and dalit landless communities who till the fields of upper-caste Jat landowners. For Punjab’s experience with the Green Revolution see Randhawa 1977 for a laudatory assessment addressed to the country-wide grain shortages of the time, and for a critical sociological study that studies the impacts of the Green revolution on the agrarian structure of Punjab see Jodhka 2006. For a study of Green Revolution rice farming and impacts on village society and caste in Andhra Pradesh see Harris 1996.
Indian nationalism—towards building the nation’s exports. The crucial difference between the colonial and postcolonial state is that unlike an Imperial state whose primary relationship to agriculture was the extraction of land-revenue (and primary goods)—and thus the bewilderingly complex structure of subinfeudation (which also established production for Imperial market-exchange) produced through colonial land policies (See GOI/Nanekar 1968; Satya 1997). The postcolonial Indian state is an electorally democratic state that engages with, and extracts surpluses (primary goods) from its populations through welfare and market mechanisms (Sanyal 2013). The process of forging the national Indian economy through direct state intervention in production was not unique to agriculture by any means, infrastructure and heavy industry being the prime focus of postcolonial state outlays.

Primary agricultural producers in post-Independence India were now undertaking production for market-exchange within the newly-bounded space of the national economy. For agrarian India, this was a long slow process of extraordinary scale and complexity that involved rationalizing currencies across the subcontinent, establishing whole-sale and retail markets for agricultural produce, licensing of rights to village produce, the establishment of agricultural procurement boards and acquisition mechanisms, financial technologies (loans, subsidies); massive infrastructural investments—dams, irrigation canals, roads, tubewells; transport and processing facilities—trucking networks, storage silos, ginning, threshing etc. On the eve of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second prime minister of India, promulgated the slogan ‘Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan’ (hail the soldier, hail the farmer), exhorting the nation’s farmers to be soldiers against hunger in a war that threatened national sovereignty and self reliance, five decades later to appear cited in the words of Gajendra Singh, a farmer’s sons from Rajasthan who killed himself before two thousand people in New Delhi. In the early post-Independence decades, agriculture was
to both feed the nation, and also produce the primary goods (cotton, jute, spices, tobacco, tea) that would build cash reserves for infrastructural and industrial outlays.

At the level of the household, this marshaling of agriculture into the ambit of a national economy had specific consequences for agricultural producers and agrarian worlds. Since without the socialization of farming the raising of labour and capital outlays for cultivation are entirely reliant on the household unit, it consequently means that no aspect of domestic life is left untouched by the imperative of production for the market. This has certainly been the case in Vidarbha for at least the past three centuries. However, it is the nature of that market and its relation to the social unit that undertakes such production that has changed. This dissertation makes the argument that under the imperatives of current practices of cotton cultivation in contemporary Vidarbha, the peasant household has been made a productive corollary of the capitalist market. Relations within the household, and the wider social order, have somewhat re-arranged themselves around the demands of production for that market.

A detailed treatment of postcolonial agrarian policy and its implications for peasant politics is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What I wish to mark here is that these two processes are not contradictory as current discourses, which call on the national state to protect peasant communities from international capital, aver. These two movements, which take the appearance of prior enfolding and current abandonment, are part of one and the same historical process. In order to understand the crises unfolding in Vidarbha today, it is crucial to understand the recent political and social history through which these sets of peasant cultivators, in this region of west central-India, come to crop a specific kind of cotton in this particular way. This chapter traces one part of this story of the household and the market through three interlinked histories: a political-economy of land and caste in colonial Vidarbha through which I demonstrate the modernity of the rural caste, occupation and landowning order, this agrarian structure consolidated through the colonial era
having a direct bearing on land and caste in Vidarbha today; postcolonial agrarian science and the
technological engineering of the cotton-seed; a contextual analysis of the Bt-Cotton controversy and
finally these histories mesh in a concluding analysis of the actual processes of cotton-cultivation.

It is thus in the economic re-arrangement of production, but in this expanded sense as
composing the entire arena of social exchanges which make production possible, that the destructive
psycho-social force of Bt-Cotton is to be situated. In order to circumvent India’s Seed Act, which
legally protects the rights of farmers to their seed, Monsanto nested their proprietary Bt-gene
construct within hybrid seeds that cannot be re-sown and must be bought afresh every season from
the market. In order to sow Bt-Cotton hybrid seeds, which by now (late 1990s) were required since
almost 50% of standing crop was being decimated by annual boll-worm attacks, cultivators
abandoned the saving and production of their own seeds, manures and the host of techniques that
cultivation requires, and acquired cash-debts from private moneylenders and banks so they could
buy the seeds and the chemical inputs for this kind of input-driven agriculture.

The technological artifact Bt-Cotton here becomes powerful only because the thing it re-
engineers—the cotton-seed—is somatically, culturally and economically coded in this specific milieu
as the primary means of production on which daily life depends, as well as a hinge of the entire
realm of rural productive relations, forms of social authority, ritual life and gendered organization of
labour that subtends the cultivation of cotton. Once the cotton-seed too came from the market, an
arena of social reproduction hitherto somewhat still provisionally buffered from the wider realm of
economic exchanges (domestic, clan and caste-relations for instance), was suddenly enfolded into,
and consequently frayed under, exchanges in the capitalist market. What is currently happening in
Vidarbha thus has consequences for our understanding of the nature of postcolonial transformation
in agrarian India more generally.
Social-Relations and Market-Relations

The reigning paradigm for understanding this unfolding crises in rural society has been, as I have said, an economic one: economists and public discourses more generally, locate spiraling suicide events as emerging from the psychological desperation of farmers trapped in debt-cycles attendant on the cash-cropping of transgenic Bt-Cotton (Behere 2009). This dissertation seeks to show that this singular focus on cotton disallows a consideration of death. However the economists are not wrong. There has indeed been a fundamental restructuring of rural social and economic relations in the preceding two decades in Vidarbha, precipitated by monetary reforms, privatization of state functions and economic liberalization in the early 1990s and the entry of international agri-business with Monsanto in 2002. Instead of an economic analysis of production, this chapter undertakes a technological history and political-economy of cotton and debt-relations, situated within the longer agrarian history of this region.

While cultivators across the country share certain common experiences in regards to cotton cultivation, there are significant regional variations. The historically variegated nature of colonialism and post-colonial development in the sub-continent, differentially entangled peasant communities with the market, the colonial and post-colonial state. The phenomenon of peasant suicides is tragically no longer limited to Vidarbha or the farming of cotton. The states of Punjab, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, which farm wheat/cotton, rice, tea and spices respectively, have rates of peasant suicides almost as high as those in Vidarbha. This means that while resonances of the logics explored in this chapter and dissertation may, at a certain scale of

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7 Regional variations in the agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions of cultivation in a country such as India are immense. Thus in the irrigated large fields of Punjab and Gujarat cultivating cotton can be a lucrative enterprise as farmers can access credit sources and raise capital for inputs. In Vidarbha, which is entirely rain-fed and composed of small landholdings cotton is a risky enterprise. Data and statistics are provided later in the chapter.

8 Tragically the phenomenon is no longer restricted even to India but engulfing agrarian communities around the world reflected in the death of Lee Kyung Hae a farmers’ leader from Korea (See NYT report 16 September 2003) and the New York Times (20 August 2017) also has a report on an epidemic of suicide deaths amongst farmers in France who can no longer compete with falling milk and meat prices in integrated European markets.
analysis, under similar conditions be discerned in other contexts wherein domestic and social
relations have also been mutated by enmeshment within a national agrarian economy. However it is
only through extended ethnographic attention to a specific local case—in this instance one that has
assumed almost the status of the originary in India—that the embodied lived process of empirically
experienced but often conceptually imprecisely deployed things such as ‘capitalist change’ or
‘neoliberalism’ can be described.9

My attempt to ground this exploration ethnographically, using anthropological tools of
analysis, in a specific political-economy aims at de-linking the agrarian history of Vidarbha from a
national narrative in which Vidarbha has come to be a sign for the agrarian crises at large.10 The
iconic relation of the suicide in Vidarbha and the ‘the Indian farmer’ has acquired the status of a
national cultural myth. Farmers are committing suicides in all the regions of India where small
producers are cash-cropping without cash and land reforms, yet every monsoon it is to the cotton-
fields of Vidarbha that journalists trudge to sense what the coming agrarian year will bring. The
metonymic identification of a cotton cultivator in Vidarbha with ‘The Indian Farmer’ is expressed in
how villagers experience their region’s grizzly renown. When I first visited Tirjhada (my field village)
the Sarpanch (village headman) commended me on having fortuitously arrived at the right place.

In all of India, which state has the most suicides? Maharashtra. And in Maharashtra, which place has the most suicides? Vidarbha. And in Vidarbha, which district has the most suicides? Yavatmal. And in Yavatmal, which tehsil (sub-district) has the most suicides? Kadam (block headquarter). And in Kadam, which manja

9 Besides this dissertation there is only other ethnographic study of peasant suicides in India that I am aware of. In a thesis titled Egoism Anomie and Masculinity: Suicide in Rural South India (Andhra Pradesh) (LSE 2011), K. Nilotpal analyses suicides amongst ground-nut farmers in Andhra Pradesh. His thesis argues that while one end of farm-suicides are caused by indebtedness, there are a range of suicides caused by familial disputes as peasants adopt class-enhancing lifestyles. My work aims at de-stabilizing this distinction between ‘true’ suicides caused by debt, and other suicides explained by ‘local etiologies’ in locating the suicide event in Vidarbha as emerging from a social world entirely transformed by cash-cropping and debt. The dissertation argues that the distinction between individual cases is to be read not as a distinction between ‘debt-related’ and ‘non-debt related’ suicides; but as emerging precisely from the analytical inability to see suicides in Vidarbha in terms of social and historical processes unique to Vidarbha. For the Andhra Pradesh case-study see Nilotpal 2011.

10 As reflected in the Suicide of Gajendra Singh at an AAP rally discussed in the introduction.
(village) has the most suicides? Tirjhada (32). So you see, you have come to the number one suicide spot in the country.¹¹

I lived in Vidarbha for the next two years. That Vidarbha has become a synecdoche for a national agrarian crisis, even while enmeshed within a specific local history of crop-specific cultivation, makes it a particularly compelling site from which to reflect on the nature and form of agrarian capitalism in India.

**Part I**

*First as Tragedy: Pre-Colonial and Colonial Vidarbha*

*A Region Called Vidarbha*

Comprising eleven districts and an area of 37,576 square miles, Vidarbha lies on the eastern inland edge of the western sea-facing state of Maharashtra.¹² Ideally suited to the dense black lava soils of the Deccan, cotton is an ancient crop. Archaeological evidence dates cotton cultivation in this region of the Deccan plateau back about 3500 years (Fuller 2011). Hardy, sturdy, able to withstand long periods of water scarcity, with few natural insect and animal pests, cotton from this rain-scarce region has been making its way to international markets from the mid-1700s traded through a network of peasant cultivators, Marwari traders; merchant bankers; tax farmers; sub-continental financiers; grain traders and East India Company officials. In 1853 Vidarbha, known in the colonial period as Berar, was formally annexed from Hyderabad state and brought under company rule. With the international supply of cotton falling in the wake of the American civil war, the English East India Company began the process of settling this region to the cash-cropping of cotton. The forced

¹¹ The headman’s description is sadly not inaccurate: Maharashtra has the second highest number of suicide deaths in India, and alone accounts for a quarter of all peasant suicides in the country. In my field village 32 persons have committed suicide in the span of 15 years out of a population of 2,830. Of these I have case-files for 14 deaths, the others having occurred prior to the village-wise collation of suicide deaths that began in 2004.

¹² When friends asked where my field-sites were, I told them I lived 700 kilometers and a two-day journey east of Bombay.
cultivation of cotton—enforced through military means as well as cash-rents—radically altered land relations and the position of the peasantry (See Satya 1997). This period also witnessed the in-migration of Marwari and Gujarati trader and Bania castes from the states of Jodhpur, Jaisalmar, Marwar, and old trading cities like Surat. These caste-groups acted as traders and lenders, middle-men between peasants and British cotton companies (Banaji 1977a; 1977b). The cotton-tracts of Berar were the primary reason for its annexation: raw cotton was an important export commodity from the colony to the metropolis, and cotton as such was of vital interest to the colonial state.

Amalendu Guha and Peter Harnetty, in their estimates of the production and export of raw cotton over a 100 year period before and after annexation show that the export and production of cotton tripled between 1759 and 1876 (See Guha 1972; Harnetty 1971).

British annexation resulted in a radical restructuring of land relations and extant systems of land use and tenure. Most of Berar was brought under the ryotwari or the malguzari systems of land tenure (Nanekar GOM 1974: 80-83). The colonial issued titles to land as an (partially) alienable commodity to cultivators as lesse-tenants/owner-proprietors, a politico-legal and ideational innovation of epoch-making proportions for the subsequent history of South-Asia. In ryotwari, each individual ryot (cultivator) held land as a lessee of the colonial state as long as he was able to meet the yearly assessment. These khatidars (lit: holders of a ‘khata’ – a number on the revenue roll corresponding to a parcel of land) either cultivated the land themselves, or rented it further to landless bhagindars (lit: holder of a ‘bhag’, a share) who cultivated land at the pleasure of the khatidar. In the malguzari system, the malguzar was given rights to revenue collection and paid a fixed amount to the state. Cultivators thus became the tenants of the malguzars. In one of the only historical studies of the region for the colonial period Laxman D. Satya describes the web of subinfeudation and peasant indebtedness that obtained as a result.
**A Peasantry for Capitalism**

British colonialism created a monopsony in the cotton market in Berar (Guha 1987). Since the yearly revenue was to be paid in cash, and peasants relied on traders and moneylenders for it, the latter advanced loans for agricultural inputs and implements to cultivators before sowing and bought up the field’s produce in advance at a fixed price (Guha). The practice of crop-lien for cash-rents both destroyed pre-colonial cotton-markets, and prevented the emergence of a real market in cotton as cultivators sold almost the entirety of their produce to local traders and dealers in repayment of loans for inputs and rents (Banaji 1977; Guha 1987: A-131). It is in the colonial period that cotton becomes the primary cash-crop of the region and domestic production is intertwined with mercantilist trade-relations. From Satya’s account and in the writings of Jairus Banaji, Frank Perlin and others for the same period and broader region, it can be discerned that the emergence of capitalist trade and productive relations in this period, produced and intensified a capital-induced peasantization of Berar. Acting to preserve mercantilist interests, the colonial state strove to extend acreage under cotton in an anything but non-violent process (Harnetty). Nomadic pastoral and trading communities such as the Banjara and Dhangar, bardic castes like the Lambani, and tribal communities in north Berar such as the Kolam, Gond and Kond, were settled to the forced cultivation of cotton (see *Berar District Gazettes*; also Satya 1997). With the rationalizations of extant Mughal and Maratha systems of land-tenure, village officials and holders of hereditary titles such as the Patil, the Kulkarni, the Izhdar, the Zamindar, the Tehsildar were brought into the emerging bureaucratic apparatuses of the colonial state. These officials had essayed various roles in the rural social and political order from accountants and lawyers (Kulkarni); the titular village chief (Patil); the holder of Mughal titles to the revenues of several hundred villages (Izhdar); revenue officials (Patwari), they now became the lowest rung of the colonial administrative apparatus, and some continue to essay these functions as administrative officers of the Indian state today.
Like in Bengal, so too in Vidarbha, large landlords were given Malguzari rights to villages consolidating, and in some sense creating in this specific form, manorial relations between landlords/title-holders and tenants. People in Tirjhada still identify the clan of Ruikar as their Izhardar. In many districts in Vidarbha, tribal communities that have been cultivating cotton for well over a century are to be seen a few miles from ‘caste’ cultivator villages. These processes, initiated in the unsettled decades of the mid-nineteenth century are ongoing today as nomadic communities—the **ghumantu jati** (wandering jatis)—of Vidarbha such as the Pardi, the Mang Garodi continue to come to cotton cultivation.\(^{13}\) The destruction of older towns and urban centers, as the newly constructed railways re-routed the cotton trade towards the central wholesale markets established by the colonial state, resulted in weavers settling to cultivation (Satya 1997: 187-210). The picture of agrarian life as a dense and mobile composite of groups, castes and communities, practicing very different forms of cultivation, artisanal, trade and ritual exchanges, is reflected in the Gazzetteers of these districts compiled a half a century later which note that of the 1736 or so revenue-villages in the Yavatmal district (1908), the Patelki office (i.e. village headship and revenue-officer) of 765 villages was with Kunbi, Bhramin Patels held 301 villages, Dhangar Patels had 138 villages, the Patelki of 25 villages vested with Andh, 11 with Kolam and ‘Mohamaddan’ Patels (here mentioned without a caste-identifier) held 103 villages. Thus we see that caste status in the ‘varna’ hierarchy, social and political authority, and control over land, has always had a loose connection in Vidarbha. In this chapter, and dissertation, I will argue because the ‘caste’-structure in Vidarbha is a modern social formation, one stabilized and forged through the colonial economy of cotton.

\(^{13}\) On interesting form this is taking is not sanskritization as in the classic MN Srinivas paradigm (Srinivas), rather the enthusiastic participation of ghumantu jatis in the annual Moharram procession as Taziya bearers. I only have ethnographic evidence for this. In a personal conversation the historian Anand Yang has said this is a common form in which diasporic lower-caste and Dalit indentured communities across the British colonial world claimed urban space, and adduces evidence from the West Indies.
No Caste Without Class; No Peasantry Without Capitalism
Extending into one of the oldest and most mysterious landscapes of the subcontinent—the Deccan Plateau—Vidarbha has always occupied the status of a wild internal frontier zone in the mythic and material imaginations of this region. The mobility of adivasi/tribal, cultivator, pastoralist and artisan communities; coupled with its inaccessible terrain and unstable political history, have given Vidarbha its specific agrarian character. Reflecting, for instance, in modern caste as a relatively weakly constituted axis of social differentiation when compared to western Maharashtra. Vidarbha is a primarily Marathi-speaking region, however it’s social organization, political character as compared to regions like Khandesh to the north, Marathwada to the south and then the historical centers of political power, the districts of Western Maharashtra and the Konkan coast. There is almost no secondary work (in either the English language or Marathi language academies) on this region, studies of Maharashtra being dominated by the rich political and cultural history of Western Maharashtra, its economic and political clout in contemporary India reflected in the scholarly attention. So we do not have very much information about the everyday forms of social life and politics in colonial Vidarbha. Even so, there is some historical evidence when read against ethnographic data that can be adduced for the claim that caste was always class-ed in Vidarbha. Let me provide one example, since it also reflects on a topic that will feature prominently in this dissertation—the relative weakness of caste as a structuring logic of the contemporary social field when compared to its ferocity as a normatavizing institution in Western Maharashtra. This discussion will also shed light on a very basic question at the heart of this manuscript—what can an engagement with history yield for an ethnographic analysis of the nature of agrarian productive life.

While in contemporary Vidarbha the Kunbi (meaning simply ‘cultivator’) are supposedly the dominant land-holding castes—the social group comprising the large mass of the ‘peasantry’—the emergence of a class-caste of small Kunbi owner-cultivators is a historically datable and recent
phenomenon. As is, I would aver, ‘Kunbi’ as a caste formation itself. One of the first things that struck me when I began living in Tirjhada, the referent of most of my ethnographic data, was an omission: persons rarely made explicit reference to caste when describing themselves or others, and particularly those belonging to the ‘Kunbi’ caste almost never referred to themselves as such. A socially prominent family might claim ‘Maratha’ or ‘Patil’ or ‘Dani’ – ‘Giver’ status. Or then persons might refer to themselves as, ‘ambi OBC abo (we are OBC)’, i.e. ‘Other Backward Castes’, a designation that derives from the postcolonial naming practices of the Indian state. The 1980 Mandal commission constituted by the Government of India recommended extended reservations in state jobs and educational institutions to communities designated OBC ‘Other Backward Caste.’ The Mandal commission findings (which recommended an expansion of 27% to OBC castes) became the center of heated anti-reservation upper-caste political mobilization across north-India in 1990, when V.P. Singh the Congress Prime Minister attempted to legislate the commission’s recommendations. The specificities of postcolonial naming I will address further on. But it does beg the question: what is ‘caste’ in Vidarbha? How recent is this supposedly stable social formation? What is the connection between the historical consolidation of ‘caste’, clan control over land and the recent devastation of the countryside with the capitalization of agrarian production in the specific ways I have detailed elsewhere (Chap 2)?

While this is not an argument I can make at any length here, nor trace the historical processes of the consolidation of what Sumit Guha has recently called ‘caste-like formations’ in Western India, I would aver that ‘Kunbi’ does not mark a stable caste identity as much as it does a historical process, a scant two centuries old, reflecting identity-formations in a recently sedentarized cultivator class tied to the cash-cropping of cotton for colonial markets. Indeed twentieth-century ‘caste’ (and I will argue the ‘peasantry’) are not only modern social formations, as provisionally stable referents in contemporary Vidarbha they cannot be thought of outside of the process of
encompassment of peasant societies first by colonial capital, and then through the long time of the postcolonial state. The colonial land settlements and postcolonial land distribution to landless cultivators produced a caste-class that came to be called the ‘Kunbi’, further redesignated as OBC (Other Backward Classes) in 1988. The postcolonial state of Maharashtra currently has 52% reservation in government jobs and state-funded educational institutions, of which OBC castes are entitled to 19%. The present-day politics of Maharashtra, electorally dominated by what political scientists term the ‘Maratha-Kunbi’ combine in western Maharashtra; the ‘Kunbi-Teli’ combine in Vidarbha (See Palshikar et all 2015), reflects the twentieth century influence of a group/ caste that constituted itself into a sort of landowning rural gentry caste-class through the colonial cotton economy.

I am not suggesting that ‘Kunbi’, the term, itself was new or had never described a ‘social group’ prior to colonial capitalism, or that this process applied only to the ‘Kunbi’. I am suggesting, like other have done (see Deshpande 2004; Guha 2013), that the semantic content of the term changed—the persons it designated (as a self-designation, as well as a term used for a group) transformed to mean a social formation we now term ‘caste’. This occurred in the context of a consolidating colonial economy of cotton with its specific forms of cultivation, land-holding (and thus organizing laboring for) the market, a historical process that continues today. The traces in contemporary social formations and ritual practices, as well as linguistic evidence, support such a claim. Let us first consider the linguistic evidence.

Who is the Kunbi?
In the Molesworth dictionary (1831) ‘Kunbi’ is simply described as, ‘an individual of the agricultural order, a cultivator or peasant,’ (p. 181). The next edition published in 1857 (four years after the annexation of Berar in 1853 and on the cusp of the colonial land settlements) proceeds to give
definitions for derivative nouns such as ‘Kunbava’—‘The business of a Kunbi, agricultural work,’ and very interestingly, ‘Lands held as perpetual estate under acknowledgment and payment to Government,’ and, ‘also such tenure; also the rent paid: land-tax’ (p. 181). First, there is no mention of ‘Kunbi’ as ‘a’ caste. Further, by the late nineteenth century we can begin to see the close association between the emergence of a social category of the cultivator, the ‘Kunbi’, that comes to be so only in institutional relation to the state and/or political authority more generally. This is a claim made for Maharashtra (and western India more generally) by Sumit Guha in his provocative new work Beyond Caste. The ethnographic evidence supports his insight. To the best of my knowledge there currently exists one published monograph on Vidarbha and it is to this single secondary source, as well as writings on specific topics by Harnetty, Banaji, Wink, Guha etc for the broader region, that we must turn for an account of the agrarian economy of pre-colonial and colonial Berar (as the region was then known). In Cotton and Famine in Berar, as also cited above, Laxman D. Satya details the transformations in land and caste relations in the context of an expanding colonial economy of cotton on the Deccan frontier. In Satya’s account pre-colonial agrarian production in this region was organized around what came to be called the alutedari/balutedari system. Under this caste-based system cultivation was distributed across hereditary caste-groups practicing occupations (cultivator, ironsmith, leather-worker, carpenter, jeweler, astrologer etc) to, cultivation was undertaken by clans with title-holdings to land and the labour of a tenant-caste/class. Satya notes that the balutedar was, ‘usually from the Brahmin, Maratha, Rajput, Kunbi and/or Bania caste,’ (35)—the ‘upper-castes’ (71)—but in assuming these nominations to be stable, does not attend to the dimension of caste not as identity but as social practice. There are no indigenous
Bania (trader) castes in Maharashtra (and their presence in this typology is thus interesting),

‘Maratha’ itself is a highly unstable category (see Deshpande 2002) that emerges through military service in the Maratha armies and Kunbi’s claiming Rajput (and so Kshatriya) lineage, and as Kunbi are Shudra (ritually fourth and lowest in the varna order) and therefore not upper-castes, what to be ‘upper-caste’ meant in this context at this time in this place. Against the ‘upper-caste’ balutedar, Satya mentions twelve ‘asami’ castes. The asami castes were, according to Satya, service-tendering castes entitled to an annual share of millets (jawari) from the balutedar on a sliding scale with Mahars claiming 110 seers of grain, Sutar claiming and so on. The arrival of the colonial state (with law courts and army) put an end to balutedari, and the balutedars. Every ryot was now assigned an individual survey number on the revenue rent-roll (khata) entering an individual contractual relationship with the colonial state. The colonial land settlements thereby created a new class of tenant proprietor-cultivator—the khatedar; kbat-e-dar (lit: ‘holder of a khata, i.e. a survey number)—who held his/her land so long as they were able to meet the annual revenue assessment; and a new class of bhagin-dar—landless tenants cultivating the lands of khatidars, entitled to a ‘bhag’, a ‘share’ of the agricultural produce. What became of the erstwhile powerful balutedar and subaltern asami? On this Satya is unclear: in his account it appears as though with the legal proscription, military suppression by the colonial state of the balutedari clans, these erstwhile dominant social groups simply faded from the rural order.

Regardless, armed with this insight I went to Tirjhada and began making enquiries: ‘What is balutedari? Who are the balutedars/alutedars?’ And each time I received the version on this answer with the caveat that this term had fallen out of use: ‘No one says that anymore. We say ‘Dani’ (giver) instead. But since you’re asking, the balutedars/alutedars are village servants (naukar), those you give

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14 The indigenous trader caste is called Komti; the gazetteers state the Komti are a Telugu trading caste/community, who migrated into Vidarbha from now-Andhra Pradesh sometime between the 15th and 17th centuries (See Berar District Gazetteers 1894-1911). There is one Komti clan in Tirjhada, the Gangamvar who appear often in this dissertation.
grain at year’s end, at weddings and festivals, for doing work,’ i.e. those entitled entitled to a share. When I further pushed informants to identify who the balutedars are/were, I received a list of castes—Nhavi (barber), Koli (fisherman), Sutar (carpenter), Lohar (ironsmith) and so on—i.e. the same lower-caste groups that in Satya’s typology are marshalled into the ‘asami’ category.

Today this term has fallen out of use: no one I spoke with had ever heard the word ‘asami’ used as an appellation for low-caste status. And this is not surprising because the direction of prestation has been exactly reversed from the one Satya identifies, and balutedar was not employed to designate caste identity. Thus Tulpule and Feldhaus’s A Dictionary of Old Marathi (1999) gives the definition of ‘balauta’ with reference to the holder of ‘balut’ as, ‘balutedar; a public servant of a village entitled to a share of the village’s agricultural produce,’ and adduces as evidence the appearance of the term in the 13th century abhangas (songs) of the Bhakti poet-saint Jnanadeva. This definition receives sociological heft in Molesworth’s detailed entry in 1831 which notes that the balutedar is, ‘a public servant of a village entitled to balute’. ‘Balute’ and balutedar being co-emergent terms, tautologically defined through reference to each other—balute is, ‘a share of the corn and garden produce for the subsistence of the twelve servants of a village’, i.e. the share claimed by a balutedar (p.614). Being an administrative officer in the employ of the EEIC as well as the preeminent modern lexicographer of the Marathi language Molesworth then proceeds from his own ethnographic data to give a detailed description of which castes/groups are entitled to what shares across the ‘Maratha country’, and in his definition marshals into the master claimant category of balutedar ‘caste’ groups, salaried positions, titled positions, and occupational groups, so here from the Molesworth: ‘public servant of the village’, the balutedars entitled to a share of the produce are Mahar, Patil (village chief and revenue-officer), Kulkarni (accountant), Sutar (carpenter), Deshpande (similar to Patil in role), Joshi (astrologer), Nhavi (barber caste) etc. and so on (Molesworth, pp.614). So first, balutedar obviously cannot designate caste in any simple sense since the Patil (political chief), the Kulkarni
(administrative officer), the Sutar (occupational social group and caste), and the Mahar (dalit caste) are all grouped together into one category of claimant. And second, the castes Satya identifies as the ‘balutedar’ castes seem to have transformed into the ‘asam’ or receiver castes within a short span of fifty years. Or rather, such would have been the case if ‘asam’ were a caste designation.

Marathi dictionaries trace the word ‘asam’ to the Arabic; I have been unable to trace the etymology back to the Arabic root. In Marathi the term ‘asam’ designates an interlinked constellation of meanings and usages, none of which have anything to do with caste. Instead, asami means something much more interesting; the Molesworth and the Aitibasik Shabdakosh (Marathi Historical Lexicon) define ‘asami’ as being a person entitled to a salary, at this time a person in the employ of the Marathi armies, or in the personal retinue of a powerful clan, or as a person on the pay-roll of political authority more generally. So, here from the Aitibasik Shabdakosh: ‘asami/asamdar, nemnook, varshik vetan ghenaara – a stipendiary, one entitled to an allowance or a yearly wage.’ And by the time asami enters the Aitibasik Marathi Shabdakosh (Standard Marathi Dictionary) (1970) it simply means ‘person’, ‘individual’—‘isam’, ‘vyakti’, ‘manus’ (p. 35)—while ‘asam-dar’ continues to reference the older valance of being in the service of, and receiving a salary from, the state or political authority more generally. The meaning of asam-dar being given as, ‘the one receiving a salary from the government, Inam-dar etc.’—the definition further clarifying the association with an anachronistic form of political authority in aducing the figure of the Inam-dar with that of the asamdar.

Now, we may say that Satya’s account is speaking of a time almost two centuries ago—there is no reason why signifiers and signifieds may not part ways, recombine and come to mean different things, designate different social relations, in the intervening centuries. This precisely is my point: if we take the semantic transformation of the term seriously then ‘balutedar’ does not mark a specific caste or clan formation; neither does ‘asam’. Both terms exist independently but begin to acquire their meanings in relation to each other at this specific historical moment when political and social
relations in the central Deccan were transforming under military conquest and colonial rule. The terms do not designate stable caste identities, rather they mark the direction of the exchange-relation and the form it takes in social practice—a balut-e-dar is someone entitled to a ‘balut’: a share in produce; an asami is someone who is paid a salary. An asami thus is precisely someone who does not have a hereditary claim and is paid in cash.\textsuperscript{15}

Further than this I cannot go at this stage since it would involve looking at the colonial archives myself, which I have not done. But a re-reading of the historical evidence Satya provides, suffices to show that both these terms—balutedar and asami—which appear as indicators of caste identity in his account need to be embedded in the historical categories and identities being forged at this time in the cauldrons of the colonial economy of cotton, and the wars of conquest being fought between the British, Marathas and the Hyderabad state, and the movement of artisanal, cultivator and pastoralist groups in the interior Deccan. In other words, ‘caste’ in its modern iteration in Vidarbha always appeared ‘class-ed’ (see here Banaji 1977a; 1977b). It is not as though in the slow emergence of capitalist-relations that transformed land and caste relations, there was first something called ‘caste’ and then there appeared proper ‘classes’ predicated on wage-relations, alienation from the means of production, and so on. Caste and class emerged together; as two imbricated formations in the same social reality, the existence of one crucially dependent on the other. Indeed this doubled movement—caste in class as class in caste—is revealed in changing relations of cultivators to this old crop in a new form of market exchange.

\textsuperscript{15} Or whatever token stands in for abstract-value for that exchange: for this region of central India many different objects have acted as stores of value- cowrie shells, copper coins, gold, silver, Mughal tankas, grain (rice/wheat).
The Colonial Economy of Cotton

Harnetty notes that by the 1875 peasants were taking up cotton cultivation not only under colonial duress, but also because the high price of cotton compared to other crops (such as millets) afforded peasants greater bargaining powers with moneylenders and traders (Harnetty 1971). The British Law Courts, while giving moneylenders another mechanism by which to seize peasant’s land, also gave peasants a legal means to contest such seizures, and at least some did use these new channels opened by colonial rule. Through the 1880s high prices continued to make cotton a profitable crop for cultivators and in these decades changes began in the mercantilist structure of Berar: significantly Guha notes reflected in the disarticulation between ‘commodity and credit’ i.e. a loosening of moneylender control over cotton production. This is reflected in the abandonment of the practice of crop-lien, i.e. advance buying (Guha A-133) as an emerging land market, occasioned by the British court system and revenue settlements that had made land an alienable commodity provided another security besides crops to lenders. Throughout this period the acreage under cotton steadily expanded.  

Not only were cultivators planting cotton on a greater proportion of their land, but more people were settling to cultivation and planting cotton. The forms of social and political authority as formerly distant social groups assumed the identity of cotton cultivators alongside, or near by, each other has already been remarked on. R.V. Russel makes the same point in an account which states that the Kunbi comprise the large mass of ryots (also mentioned in the District Gazetters); and the boundaries of the group itself (revealed in boundary-making practices such as rituals, deities, marriage-customs, funerary rites, ritual status etc.) in his description is amorphous with the capacity to absorb new waves of cultivators. The Kunbi cultivators of Vidarbha, a caste-class who social being was given by the churnings of the last century, stand at the center of the suicide epidemic in today’s Berar.

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16 Insert data from Guha and Harnetty – increase in raw cotton production (Guha) and lint exports (Harnetty).
There is enough historical evidence then for me to provisionally suggest that the ‘peasantry’ in Vidarbha, if we wish to still aver this category as useful, is a recent social formation, one that bears the mark of this new birth. Such an argument has been made in parts for different regions of India (See: Bates 1997; Breman 1982; Skaria 1997). It is only with the forced sedentarization, peasantization, of cultivator communities to the cultivation of one crop—cotton—on debt to mercantile capital (indigenous and/or colonial) in the late nineteenth-century that a true settled peasantry—one whose ritual forms, domestic and social life, and trade exchanges bear the traces of the logic of capitalism almost at their core—emerges in this region of central-India, a process that is ongoing, and undoing, today. I will now shift gears a bit and come to the crop in question. Having sketched an image of the social relations forged in the colonial economy of cotton, the second part of the chapter attends to a technological history of cotton seeds, cotton production and postcolonial agricultural science. These two histories will meet in an integrated analysis in the concluding sections of the chapter when I turn to the actual practices of cotton cultivation in contemporary Vidarbha.

**Part II**

*Cotton: A Technological History*

With independence won in 1947, maximizing agricultural output became the first task of Nehru’s new government. At independence India was faced with the classic problem of many postcolonial agrarian countries: how to achieve economic growth and development with 80% of India’s population reliant on agriculture and no industry to speak of. On the model of state-directed planned economic growth, outlays for rapid industrialization were to be raised through increasing production in the agricultural sector (Frankel 1985; Gupta 1997). This necessitated the reconciling of

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17 There is of course the influential ‘de-industrialization’ thesis of economic historians of India.
sometimes contradictory goals: increasing agricultural efficiency while attending to social inequality and the extreme poverty of rural Indians, most of whom did not have title to their fields and were too poor to raise surpluses to invest in improving cultivation (Frankel 1971: 3-11). The first two five-year plans focused on land reforms as a crucial component in vitalizing the agrarian sector: it was hoped that production would be incentivized by giving tenant cultivators title to their fields, breaking up feudal land relations, coupled with encouraging the socialization of production through cooperative farming and community development programmes (Frankel 2005: 26; Herring 1983). Predictably, land reforms met with significant opposition from rural landed interests, a class that comprised the political base of the Congress party in the countryside. Initially conceived as radical transformations of the rural social order, by the mid 1960s land reforms were all but abandoned as a viable strategy to increase agricultural production. Instead, faced with an impending food-grain crises, under the country embarked on a technocratic program to transform agricultural production through adoption of a complex of new technologies, aimed at the modernization and intensification of agricultural production, a process now known as the Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution was a technological solution to a political problem. By the mid-60s it was clear that the land reform program had run aground. Land being a subject under the control of states, it was predictably difficult to push legislations through State legislatures dominated by rural landed elites, the main base of the Congress party in the countryside. Instead focus now shifted to increasing output through the intensive application of new technologies such as high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice, and chemical fertilizers and pesticides. While land reforms were extremely limited in scope and result, what did occur, at least in the case of Vidarbha, was the creation of a new class of smallholder farms and peasant proprietors with title to their land.¹⁸ These

¹⁸ For an 8 volume study assessing the impact of land reforms across India see Shah 2002. For Maharashtra see the 1974 report by the Government of Maharashtra, and specifically for Vidarbha see Nanekar 1965.
erstwhile tenants, now given occupancy rights, became a class of small landholders, primarily comprising Kunbis and Telis, the dominant land-owning castes of the region, which embraced new modes of cotton-cultivation through the decade of the 1970s. The Green Revolution was aimed primarily at food grains, however the turn to science and intensive technologies had cumulative effects across the agrarian landscape. Given the centrality of cotton as an export crop, governmental measures to improve cotton cultivation have a long history in India, including colonial cotton improvement projects in the late nineteenth century. The postcolonial state expanded outlays on agricultural research through the creation of agricultural universities and institutes of scientific research.

*Cotton Science in Independent India*

In 1967 the All India Coordinated Research Project on Cotton (AICRP) was founded as a permanent government body tasked with improving the production and processing of cotton. The AICRP is a network of 21 public institutions comprising the 15 agricultural research universities, the Central Institute of Cotton Research in Nagpur, and its regional centers across the major cotton-growing areas of the country. Its mandate is the improvement of cotton production, both the quality of cotton grown and the mode of its cultivation. Entomologists, pathologists, biologists and agronomists create new cotton varieties and hybrids and engineer solutions to problems raised by cultivators.

It is under the edifice of the postcolonial public institutions of agricultural research and science, that the world’s first cotton hybrid seed was developed in 1967 by a C.T. Patel, a crop scientist, at the Surat Agricultural Research Station. We will come to the mechanics of what exactly a

19 The Green Revolution has been an intensively studied subject for Indian social scientists. See Frankel 1974 for a comprehensive study and Gupta 1997 for an ethnographic study of wheat cultivation, indigenous agrarian knowledge and the Green Revolution in North India.

20 The agricultural universities and research stations in Punjab, Pusa, Surat being some of the prominent ones.
hybrid is a little later, but for now it suffices to note that all commercially grown cotton around the world comes in two forms: what is known as ‘straight-line’ or ‘variety’ cotton; and hybrid cotton. The first is a genetically stable parent plant whose seeds can be saved and re-sown by a cultivator. The resulting plants will display exactly the same characteristics as the parent plants. Hybrid cotton seeds, which give far higher yields than cotton varieties, cannot be re-sown and must be purchased afresh every season. The commercial developments of cotton-hybrids by Indian agricultural scientists in the 1970s, entirely transformed cotton cultivation. Hybrids had two major commercial advantages over the extant cotton varieties. The first was yields: the first generation hybrids demonstrated an almost four-fold yield increase over cotton varieties.\textsuperscript{21} The second was staple length: indigenous varieties were diploid cottons of medium and short-staple length, which produce a softer finer fabric and are spun on handlooms.\textsuperscript{22} The new hybrids were bred for long-staple cotton, which fetched much higher prices on the international market and can be spun to high counts on mechanized power looms thereby enabling the production of cheaper cloth.

In a curious historical irony, it is during this period of hybrid development for longer staple lengths, that American Long Staple Cotton (ALS Cotton), which a century ago the colonial government had once tried, and failed in the attempt to, force cultivators in Berar and Khandesh to sow over indigenous varieties of short staple cottons, re-entered India’s cotton-fields. Since most

\textsuperscript{21} H-4, the first commercially viable hybrid, demonstrated substantial yield increases over its better parent G 67. In trials conducted on maximization plots from 1965 to 1970, H-4 produced a mean average of 46.8 quintals/hectare, while G67 produced 19.8 quintals/hectare, with yearly differences ranging from 69 quintals/hectare in 1970 (H-4) compared with 22 quintals/hectare (G67). In large-scale trials, H-4 achieved an average yield of 18.3 quintals/hectare, while G67’s average yields were 6.7 quintals/hectare. H-4 also produces a substantially larger boll than either parent (Basu 1994; Basu and Paroda 1995:6). Since then, several hundred hybrids have entered the seed market. Some of the newer hybrids claim to yield up to a 100 quintals/hectare on suitable plots. One should not view these numbers as reflective of what is obtained on an actual farmer’s fields, though they do indicate the yield capacity of a cultivar. Maximization plots are exactly that: plots designed with ideal conditions in order to assess the maximum yield potential of a seed. The ‘demonstration plot’ model of agricultural research in India has come under severe critique from agricultural scientists because it does not simulate actual field conditions and thus gives a distorted picture to cultivators about the behaviours of the seed they are purchasing.

\textsuperscript{22} The famed muslin fabrics of Dhaka, to which Vidarbha exported cotton from the 1600s, can no longer be produced not just because the weaving skills have been lost, but also because it was spun from short-staple cottons which are no longer commercially cultivated.
Hybrids were bred for long staples, varieties and hybrids of ALS Cotton were soon widely adopted all over the country. The introduction of this new crop invited certain agro-climatic consequences. The most devastating being the emergence of a fearsome new, and hitherto unknown, pest in India’s cotton-fields—the pink bollworm.

**Helicoverpa Armigera: The Pink Bollworm**

Until 1980, *Helicoverpa armigera* was not listed as a major cotton pest in India; a 1974 study notes that where it was to be found, it was restricted to the H-4 hybrid (Mahajan 1974; cited in Kranthi 2014). With the intensive adoption of ALS cotton, the bollworm went from being a minor pest in cotton fields to having an enormous expanse of land under its preferred crop (Kranthi 2014: 5). To combat these sudden infestation, farmers began to spray their fields with ever-increasing doses of synthetic pyrethroids, a class of pesticides introduced in the 1980s, and subsidized under the pesticide policy. This model of intensive input use was linked to the planting of cotton varieties, in density, on the understanding that cotton is a long-duration crop. ‘Desi Kapat’, i.e. indigenous cotton, grows almost into small trees, and like a fruit orchard, the plant flowers, fruits and bolls for months.23

With their large yields per plant as compared to varities, hybrids were touted as an indigenous technological breakthrough that would enable cultivators to vastly expand yields on small plot sizes. However in order to give yields the plant stayed in the field for a long duration attracting pests all the while. Thus increased yields came with more pest attacks, which prompted ever-increasing doses of insecticides, which eventually attracted more and worse pest-attacks as, under the pressure to evolve defenses to environmental toxicity, from a once choosy eater of chickpeas the bollworm mutated into a voracious eater of over 80 boll-bearing plants including tomatoes, brinjals,

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23 The horticultural term for such a plant is one of ‘indeterminate inflorescence’ i.e. a plant that will grow indeterminately as long as it receives adequate sunlight, water, air and soil nutrients. Most garden plants, many flowering plants such as roses, and many kinds of fruit trees are plants with indeterminate inflorescence. Plants at the opposite end of the spectrum would be grain plants such as wheat or rice.
cotton, etc. The bollworm attacks, now no longer restricted only to ALS cotton, were destroying over 50% of standing crop by 1997. It is then that the suicide rates began to mount, and in this overheated national environment Monsanto arrived in India with its Bt-Cotton field trials in 1997. But first, a necessary re-tracing over the economic and institutional landscape since it is crucial to an understanding of the contours of the Bt problem.

The Commercial Seed Market
Until 1988 the commercial seed market in India was tightly controlled. The National Seed Corporation and State Seed Corporations were established in 1963 as public sector companies to meet the Green Revolution demand for seed. The first Seed Act was passed in 1966. On the model of planned economic growth and import-substitution, legislation through the 1960s banned the commercial import of agricultural inputs (including seeds) that were also produced in India and the 1969 Industrial Policy Act restricted private firms with assets worth more than $1 billion to ‘core’ industries (Pray and Ramaswami 2013: pp 409-410). The seed industry was not a core industry, thus restricting international firms’ access to the Indian market. Private Indian seed companies relied in this period on the commercial manufacture of seeds developed through the state public institutions.

The release of new cotton varieties and hybrids occurred through a well-established institutional process. This model still governs research and development in the public sector. Each year scientists, fieldworkers, and officials meet in April to review developments in the cotton world. These include sharing seeds for the field-testing of new hybrids and varieties, new pesticides and fertilizers, solutions and problems raised by cultivators in their own zones, cultivator-developed varieties, and new soil mapping techniques. In this process, the top five cotton varieties and hybrids

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24 For this reason, at the time of this writing, there is a heated ongoing battle over the introduction of Bt-Brinjal in India, an issue of heated scientific debate since genomic plants are usually not introduced in their countries of origin for fear of permanently contaminating native seed lines. India is the currently accepted country of origin of the brinjal/eggplant.
are designated for release in specific regions. This process takes about three years. Scientists first cultivate the seeds on laboratory farms, review its performance; they then distribute the seed to farmers, re-review its performance before the AIRCP validates it for release. During this time the seed is observed for a range of things: yields, how much water it requires, the soils it likes, pests it attracts (or demonstrates resistance to), and disease vulnerability among others. Once this process is concluded, the top five hybrids and varieties are designated for release in specific zones and further licensed for commercial production to private seed companies.

In the mid 1980s restrictions on agricultural imports were loosened, and three reforms heralded the emergence of private sector research in the seed market: first, seed and biotechnology companies were re-designated as core industries, allowing foreign firms and large Indian businesses to enter the seed market. Second, the New Seed Industry Development Policy of 1988 allowed the import of commercial seeds and foreign varieties, making it easier to access germplasm for research (Pray and Ramaswami 2013: p 410). And finally, the liberalization of the Indian economy following structural adjustment in 1991 allowed the entry of domestic and international players into several sectors, including agriculture (Pray and Ramaswami 2013: pp 412-415). Significantly, private firms began conducting agricultural research, till now the preserve of the public sector.25

It is in the context of a newly liberalized economy that the international seed and agricultural firm, Monsanto, entered into negotiations with the Indian government and began conducting field trials of Bt-Cotton in Saurashtra (Gujarat) in 1998 through a local franchise company, Monsanto-MAHYCO. By the time Monsanto approached the Indian government for permission to begin field trials, the company and its technologies had already become the target of international controversy and opposition from farmers’ rights organizations, peasant movements and anti-globalization activists. Opponents of genetic interventions in agriculture, such as the activist Vandana Shiva,

25 For details on the relative contribution of public and private players in the research market for seed see Pray and Ramaswami 2013.
urged the Indian government not to allow the technology into Indian markets for fears of the impacts on small cultivators and traditional agriculture. However before the trials could be concluded, the results published, or permissions received, a scandal broke which eased Monsanto’s entry into the Indian seed market.

I have said that the entry of Monsanto is to be located within a longer political economy of Vidarbha on the one hand; and a history of postcolonial agrarian science on the other. Having laid out this terrain in Parts I and II, the third part of this chapter now moves directly to a consideration of the controversy at the heart of this dissertation—the national and international debate over the introduction of Monsanto’s genetically modified Bt-Cotton hybrids in India’s cotton fields. The fourth part will then conclude by integrating these histories in examining the practices of cotton cultivation and laboring in the fields in contemporary Vidarbha.

Part III

Bt-Cotton

Stealth Seeds
2001 saw one of the worst bollworm depredations in Indian cotton history. Field after field stood ravaged across central India, leading to crop losses of over 50% of standing crop (Kranthi 2015: 4). Except that amidst this devastation some fields remained inexplicably unharmed. It turned out that the intact fields had been sown with a seed produced by a local seed company in the state of Gujarat (Herring 2007: pp 132-140). In 2001 a Gujarati laboratory and firm, Navbharat Seeds – New India Seeds, had somehow managed, by accident or design, to introduce the Bt. gene event into its own cotton hybrid before Monsanto had concluded its field trials or received GSEAC clearance.26

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26 It is not clear how exactly the company got their hands on the germplasm. The breeder, Dr N.P. Mehta who created NB 151, has stated the seeds came to him by chance: his scout found an unusually resistant cultivar in a field, which was then cross-bred to produce the seeds (See Herring 2007; Mehta 2005). In private conversations quoted in Herring, the breeder claimed he did not know that his seeds contained the Bt gene. At the time Monsanto was conducting field trials
Consequently some cultivators had already accessed the Bt-gene technology long before Bt-Cotton had been approved for local cultivation or before any Bt-Cotton seeds were formally available in the Indian market (133). With the liberation of seed by theft or gift (farmers began circulating the seed to other farmers), producers had begun experimenting with creating their own cotton cultivars, and some lucky ones now had bollworm resistant plants in their fields. As for the vast majority of farmers their crop losses mounted and cultivators across Gujarat watched their crops laid waste, as a few feet away whole fields stood miraculously unscathed. Clearly something was going on; what else explained uneven damage to plants standing side by side on the same fields?

These oddly resilient seeds, sold under the brand name of ‘Navbharat 151’, raised the specter of the gene technology circulating outside the proprietary property regime that ostensibly governs its use. Monsanto-MAHYCO complained to the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) in Delhi claiming that the company’s proprietary seeds had found their way into the grey market and were illegally circulating in cotton fields, and demanded state enforcement of its proprietary rights (132). Seed samples were sent to the Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR) and testing confirmed that the seeds did indeed contain the CryAc1 gene event in Monsanto’s construct (Herring; 133).

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27 This minor victory (for farmers) and major scandal (for Monsanto) in the annals of biotechnology received much attention in governmental, scholarly and public domains. For a wonderful essay locating the event within agrarian struggles, and the political implications of the diffusion of genomic technologies outside governmental and industry control mechanisms, see Herring 2007 for a lively and erudite account.

28 The GSEAC is the central government regulatory committee on genetically modified crops. All crops must receive clearance from the GSEAC prior to commercial release. Currently Bt cotton is the only genetically modified crop to have received such clearance and as such cotton is the only GM crop currently cultivated in India.
In response, teams of scientists fanned out across Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh, armed with a portable protein test developed for the purpose by the CICR. Trucks transporting sacks of seed across state borders at night were stopped and contents tested for the Bt-gene. Seeds found carrying it were confiscated, leading to incidents of violence. Notices in the papers warning against cultivation of the ‘illegal’ seeds had the unintended, and predictable, result of publicizing their existence. News spread that transgenic seeds were to be had and cultivators activated their own networks to obtain them. By now the ‘stealth seeds’, as they came to be called, were not only circulating in local markets, but variants were being back-crossed, bred, and sold by farmers and local seed companies. A host of de-centralized, what Herring calls ‘anarcho-capitalist’, experimentations began involving traders, cultivators, seed distributors, ginning factory owners. Ingeniously labeled packets (‘BesT Cotton Seeds’ is a personal favourite) circumvented the legal stipulations by indicating to cultivators that these seeds contained the Bt-gene (Herring 2007: pp 135-139; 143).

Back in Delhi, the GEAC recommended stringent action, including burning fields planted with ‘illegal’ Bt-varieties, retrieval of seeds from farmers’ homes, and confiscation of cotton bales. This state governments flatly refused to do. Nor did they agree to destroy cotton bales at the point of sale. India is an agrarian country with 70% of its people (and voters) reliant on agriculture as a primary occupation. No government can afford to burn standing fields, uproot germinating crops, or confiscate cotton bales from peasant households without producing revolt in the countryside. While the ‘crises’ has passed, much to Monsanto’s relief, there is no consensus on what the eventual extent of the spread was. Rogue Bt-varieties are still floating around cotton fields from Gujarat to Andhra Pradesh. A fieldwork based study claims that almost 75% of cotton acreage in Gujarat is under illegal Bt-varieties and back-crossed hybrids (Ramaswami et al 2007). There are fewer studies for other states. One shows high illegal plantings in Punjab (Shah 2008). A farmer will not know, unless she gets the seeds tested, whether the fields are carrying the gene. She may simply think that these particular plants display a resistance to bollworms, as some of the older varieties do.

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were not to blame. They had acquired the seeds in the ways they do: from the market, other cultivators, kin, seed distributors, local merchants. The Seed Act (not to mention hoary tradition) legally protected all of these channels of transmission.30

Meanwhile public anger (for and against Bt-Cotton) was mounting. The state governments of Gujarat and Maharashtra publicly announced to Delhi that no action would be taken, and the Union Minister for Agriculture threw his weight behind them noting that further delays in approval would be unconscionable given the severity of bollworm predation. On 25th March 2002 at a mass show of strength by farmers’ groups, Sharad Joshi, the charismatic leader of the Shetkari Sangathan - The Farmers Alliance, threatened to launch an all-India civil disobedience movement if the seeds were not cleared, KCC representatives from the 5 cotton-growing states announced cultivators would plant transgenic seeds, approved or not. The next day, on 26 March 2002, the GEAC approved three Monsanto-MAHYCO strains for local cultivation in India (Herring: 133).

Thus the originary moment of Monsanto’s entry into India was the disciplinary capture (by state law and bio-capital) of a technology that had already produced anarchic experimentation in the Gujarat countryside (Herring 2007).31 In a historical irony that few now are willing to discuss, the formal entry of Monsanto into the Indian seed market, the opposition from civil society and activist groups notwithstanding, occurred under pressure from, not despite the opposition of, a section of farmers. It was farmer’s organizations, such as the powerful Maharashtra-based Shetkari Sangathan (Farmer’s Alliance) lead by the international bureaucrat turned cultivator and mass leader Sharad

30 The incident also served to reveal the illegibility of a bio-proprietary rights model in seed in India. Politicians simply could not understand what the fuss was all about: the seeds had been sown, there seemed to be nothing wrong with them; cultivators wanted them and there was no question of appropriating cotton-lint on the grounds of bio-theft. See Herring 2007 and Stone 2009 for details.
31 There is an important distinction here to be made between Gujarat and Vidarbha vis. irrigation: Gujarat, like Punjab, is a state with 100% irrigation. Cultivators in Gujarat thus have access to water and can experiment with hybrid seeds without jeopardizing harvests, unlike cultivators in Vidarbha where 95% of land is rain-fed.
Joshi,\textsuperscript{32} that demanded the seed in the face of a devastating bollworm attack. These first Bt seed renegades never went away. There are still variants of the Navbharat 151 strains floating about local markets from Gujarat to Andhra Pradesh (Herring 2007: 137).\textsuperscript{33} What is also true, however, is that once they formally entered the Indian market in 2002, Monsanto’s Bt-hybrids (legal and illegal) have overtaken the seed market and cotton cultivation in Vidarbha.

\textit{The Biology of Bt. Cotton}

Bt-Cotton entered India shrouded in controversy. Accusations ranged from ‘playing god’ and Frankenstinean meddling in natural processes, to claims that Bt cotton was poisonous to humans and animals. A series of rumours claimed that goats feeding on the foliage of Bt-cotton plants had sickened and died; another group of shepherds in Andhra Pradesh claimed that over a 1000 heads of sheep grazing on Bt. crop foliage developed signs of poisoning and died (Ho 2006).\textsuperscript{34} What is not clear, however, is whether the animals died due to pesticide poisoning (an event that sadly occurs often enough) or due to a toxic reaction to the plants themselves. Shepherds, and local veterinarians,

\textsuperscript{32} The Shetkari Sangathan, (the Farmer’s Alliance) was a militant peasant movement that emerged in Vidarbha in the late 1980s. Lead by the charismatic Sharad Joshi, a metropolitan bureaucrat turned farmer, the Sanghatan organized a cross-class alliance of cultivators, comprising capitalist farmers, small peasantry and traders, on the question of remunerative prices for agricultural produce. The movement demanded the ending of state-procurement of produce in Maharashtra so cultivators could sell on the higher prices in the open markets. The movement is considered in chapter 7: for a full-length treatment that delves into the organizational character of the movement, particularly why small peasants allied with it in apparent contradiction of their class interest, see Youngblood 2005.

\textsuperscript{33} The stealth seeds include a rambunctious diversity of transgenic variety F1s, transgenic hybrid F1s, less effective but usable hybrid F2s, F2 transgenic hybrids back-crossed with local varieties, ‘loose seeds’ collected post-ginning and re-sold, and combinations of the above sold under hundreds of different brand names. Indeed Herring notes the emergence of a new hybrid Gujarati word, ‘Navbharat variants’ in peasant lexicon. See Herring 2007; Ramaswami et all 2005. I do not mean to suggest that these seeds are agronomically better than the ‘legal’ Bt-hybrids. Not being a cultivator or a scientist I am entirely ill equipped to judge. They are most certainly cheaper, ranging from Rs 10 a packet for F2s to Rs 250 for F1s, compared to the ‘legal’ hybrids that currently retail between Rs 850 to Rs. 1400 per packet. My point, following Herring, is that one way to situate the issue of technology, control and regulation in third world contexts is in the context of other debates on piracy and intellectual property, such as the circulation of media materials, and the social forms of use they engender, see Ravi Sundaram 2006.

\textsuperscript{34} The first time I ever saw a cotton-field planted with Bt tranengics I realized I must have come to believe some of the lore myself and lord knows what I had been expecting. It was just a field of swaying green plants. This “study” may be accessed here: \url{http://www.i-sis.org.uk/MDSGBTC.php}
insisted it was the latter; Monsanto produced clinical study after clinical study to prove Bt-Cotton is completely non-toxic to humans and animals, that appreciable quantities of Bt-toxin had been ingested by animals in clinical trials who were none the worse for it.

Part of the controversy around the technology, and the real fears surrounding the social consequences of its use, is the semantic slippage whereby descriptions move across linguistic registers: scientific, public, and governmental. Teflon fumes are highly toxic to parrots. Parrot owners do not keep non-stick utensils at home for fear overheating might kill the birds. Humans can be around similar quantities of Teflon without sustaining lasting harm. Likewise, while Bt-Cotton is certainly toxic to the larvae of Helicoverpa Armigera, the pink bollworm, it is not ‘poisonous’ in quite the same way as arsenic is poisonous or pesticides are poisionous.

Bt-Cotton is a plant that has been genetically modified to resist predation by Lepidopteran pests such as bollworms. It was developed by inserting a transgene extracted from a soil-borne, spore-forming bacterium called *Bacillus thuringiensis* (hence the acronym ‘Bt’) into the cotton genome. The action of Bt proteins on insect species is not a new discovery, and dates to the early 20th century. Bt-Cotton acts like this: The female grey-winged moth lays clusters of eggs on cotton stems and buds. Eggs hatch in four to five days and the larvae begin to bore through flowers and

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35 Lepidoptera are the moth family.
36 The bacterium produces crystal proteins (Cry proteins) that bind to specific receptors in the gut-wall of insects. Spores are a special kind of cell, which enclose and transmit bacterial DNA, produced by bacteria facing starvation. Originating from strains of the bacterium, Bt is a family of more than 200 different protein toxins that affect specific insect species. Bt cotton plants contain genes that express the Cry group of endotoxins, which are activated in an alkali environment in the range of Ph 7 to 8; the alkali range of a bollworm’s digestive tract.
37 The Japanese biologist Shigetane Ishiwatari first isolated *Bacterium thuringiensis* as the cause of sudden death in silkworm populations in 1901. In 1911 Ernst Berliner discovered that Bt killed the Mediterranean flour moth, and by 1920 farmers in France had begun using Bt-based formulations. In 1938 a commercial spore-based pesticide called Sporine was used against flour moths. By 1956 biologists had discovered that Bt acted through parasporal crystals, and in 1958 Bt-based formulations began to be used commercially in the United States. In 1961 Bt was registered as a pesticide with the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). Spore-based Bt formulations have been in widespread use as spray pesticides but sprays have certain limitations however: they cannot affect bollworms once the insects enter the boll, and they are washed away by rain and degrade in the sun. Advances in molecular biology made it possible to implant the genes that encode the crystal toxins in the plant genome. In 1995 the first genetically modified crop (Bt corn) was released for commercial use. Monsanto patented Bt cotton in 1996.
bolls. When a bollworm eats plant tissue containing the Bt transgenes, Cry toxins are expressed in the alkali/basic environment of the caterpillar’s digestive tract. The toxin crystals bind to specific proteins in epithelial cells of the gut, lacerating the gut lining and creating lesions through which Bt spores enter the body cavity. Once ulcerated, the bollworm stops eating, and Bt spores proliferate across the organism. The bollworm dies of starvation and internal infection as gut bacteria invade the insect’s body. Bt cotton acts entirely within the intimacy of an insect’s viscera.38

When first introduced in India, this species specificity of Bt-Cotton was marketed as a ‘green technology’ and its biggest advantage over conventional pest-management strategies. Unlike chemical pesticides, which indiscriminately poison an unknown quantum of organisms (besides the target species) across an undifferentiated expanse of soil, land and water, the Bt gene event induces an organic interaction between three specific organisms—plant, bacterium, and worm. There is no external toxin that is introduced into the environment. Nor is there interaction (at least this is the scientific claim) between Bt and other inhabitants of the cotton ecosystem. The bacterial spores quickly disintegrate in the soil and since the Bt crystals require ingestion and a specific alkali environment to express, it is non-toxic (again, this is the claim) to non-target species. Part of the attraction of Bt-Cotton was the promise of non-chemical means to deal with one class of insects, lowering the need for insecticides in general. Monsanto had proprietary rights over the technology and its revenue model worked through individual contracts with cultivators. Producers bought a limited use license from the company and contractually undertook not to save or re-sow their seed.39

38 The biological technicalities of how Bt-cotton works were explained to me at great length by Dr. K.C. Kranthi, an entomologist and Director of the Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR) in Nagpur.
Monsanto and the Legal Regulation of Genetic Technology

When in 1996 Monsanto began negotiations with the Indian government to enter the largest potential seed market in the world, (estimated at over 4500 cr. Rupees per annum), the company was entering an agrarian environment that presented certain structural barriers to its revenue model of individual cultivator contracts. Monsanto’s revolutionary gene technology aimed at solving two of the primary problems besetting cotton cultivation in India: bollworm attacks that were devastating standing crop, and spiraling input costs on insecticide sprays. Marketed as a ‘green’ technology, Bt-cotton promised a non-chemical solution to bollworm predation.

But Monsanto’s model of individual contract ran into a potentially serious barrier to market entry in India. The first was the variety of overlapping tenure systems (formal and informal) where it was difficult to determine, for the specific purposes of contractual obligation, who had legal title to the land. Take Vidarbha for example: a 1966 study by Nagpur university to examine the implementation of land reforms identified eight extant land tenure arrangements, each dating to various moments in the settlement history of the region (Nanekar 1966: 16-32, 225-233; Satya 1998). The M.P Abolition of Proprietary Rights Act abolished these divergent tenure systems in 1950. Instead these different arrangements were rationalized under two forms of legally recognized ownership: the Bhumiswami (which recognized outright ownership and long-term tenants and lessees

Nagpur is the winter capital of the state of Maharashtra and one of the largest cities in the Vidarbha region. It is also the name of the district in which Nagpur city (the geographical center of India; milestone ‘0’) lies. Nagpur is about 156 kms northwest of my field sites located in the district of Yavatmal.

On the variegated land tenure systems in Vidarbha, including the khalisa, zamindari, rayatwari, izhara, mokasa, jagir and palampat systems see Nanekar 1966; Government of Maharashtra 1975 and Satya 1997. Most cultivators became owners via the land-ceiling legislations passed in 1962, and acquired land (from the state and through private purchase) through the decade of the 1970s. I specifically discuss the social and community aspects of land reforms in chapter 4.

In the churning that produced the modern administrative and political units of India, Berar first went to the mammoth state of Madhya Pradesh (which has been split four times since). After the linguistic re-organisation of states in 1956 since a majority of Vidarbha’s people speak a version of Marathi, Vidarbha went into Maharashtra, which had laid historical claim to it. However Vidarbha’s inclusion into Maharashtra has been contested from the start, and since 1932 there has been a demand for separate statehood for Vidarbha, a political struggle that has seen many phases. It is currently entering a new phase of militancy with reports of violence on the issue of statehood now reported as a feature of political rallies and electioneering.
now given ownership status), and the Bhumidari (which recognized those currently cultivating the land but who did not have full ownership). Yet this clear-cut definition excludes the variety of locally prevalent usufruct rights to land: jotai (in which a cultivator begins to cultivate unclaimed land); batai (wherein a cultivator informally leases land); deedhi (whereby two cultivators jointly cultivate a plot on a crop-sharing basis); adheri (a section of a plot is leased from the landowner). Who, in other words, was the ‘cultivator’ for purposes of contractual obligation? Who was able to enter into a legally enforceable cultivation contract with the company?

The second issue was the large number of producers. To compare: the United States has about 1600 cotton farmers cultivating a mid-point acreage of 1,090 acres. India has the largest acreage under cotton in the world (9.4 million hectares in 2010-2011), distributed over 4 million farm-holdings. Ensuring individual legal compliance would be difficult, if not impossible. And finally the Seed Act of 1966, which legally protects the rights of farmers to their seed, would not permit a general prohibition on seed sharing. Under the act a farmer is entitled to save, sow, gift, distribute, and sell the seed produced in her fields. Thus instead of relying on the unstable fiction of a proprietary right to seed (a legal obligation no cultivator would honour because she would simply not recognize it) the company, like the designers of the Green Revolution, chose a techno-legal solution to use law nested in seed to govern social practice. It enforced its proprietary claims over the gene technology through bio-technological means by introducing the Bt. gene construct in a

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43 People in my field-village still refer to the Izardar, a family known as the Ruikars, indicating that Tirjhada was under the Izardari system. From their accounts, notwithstanding the legal proclamations of 1950, the Izardar still exercised his hereditary authority, including rights to a share of produce, till the early 1970s. Ruikar then seems to have sold, or gifted, his lands and the family currently live in Nagpur. A district court judge, he is famous around these here parts for supposedly sentencing a man to death for stealing. This is improbable, given that stealing is not a capital offence in independent India. Vidarbha did, however, under the British Raj, and several ‘thugs’ were publicly hanged in central India. Thieves occupy an interesting place in the village structure; they make cameo appearances in chapters 3 and 4.

44 Source:

45 See the ‘Indian Cotton Fact Sheet’, published by the International Cotton Advisory Committee, which may be read here: https://www.icac.org/econ_stats/country_facts/e_india.pdf
cotton hybrid (which cannot be re-sown), rather than a cotton variety (which can). It entered into a franchise agreement with a local seed company created for the purpose Monsanto-MAYHCO and in 2002 the first legal Bt-cotton hybrids entered the Indian seed market.

**Terminator Seeds**
Before I go any further a brief clarification is in order: The reason Indian Bt-Cotton cannot be re-sown is because there is no guarantee that the resultant crop will display desired characteristics. It is the hybrid nature of the seed, not its genetic alteration, which is at issue. Bt-Cotton hybrids are not sterile. Bt-Cotton hybrids are not, what have been dubbed in the popular press, ‘terminator seeds’, i.e. seeds that cannot be re-sown because a genetic alteration renders them unable to germinate. What the industry formally refers to as GURT's (Genetic Use Restriction Technology) certainly exists: Monsanto currently holds three patents with the United States Department of Agriculture, and two patents in Europe and Canada. However public opposition from farmers’ organizations and national governments, including submissions that terminator seeds would not be allowed into several countries have, at least as yet, halted further commercial prospects. Terminator seeds are currently not commercially cultivated anywhere in the world. A cultivator could certainly re-sow saved Bt-hybrid seeds if they wished to, but given the risks cotton farming is beset with, Monsanto gambled on the belief that no farmer would. And they were right. Not many farmers did. After all it was precisely the unpredictable nature of hybrid seeds that had thus far limited the spread of cotton hybrids in India. As we will see, the technological decision to introduce of high-yielding Bt-Cotton

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46. India is currently the only country in which Monsanto sells Bt-hybrids. All of the other major cotton producing countries exclusively cultivate Bt-varieties. This is discussed later in the chapter.
47. India preemptively banned the non-existent seeds in 1998.
48. The company’s website claims that Monsanto has no future plans, or ongoing research initiatives, for the commercial development of terminator technology in food grains. It is silent on future prospects regarding fiber and oilseed crops such as cotton and canola, genetically altered versions of which are widely cultivated around the world.
hybrids, which could not be re-sown, eventually resulted in a whole-scale shift to hybrid cotton cultivation, astronomically raising seed and input costs, as well as yields, on tiny plots of fragmented land, thereby locking peasant producers into downward debt-spirals they could not escape.

The Biology of Commercial Cotton: Hybrid Cotton and Variety Cotton
All commercially cultivated cotton today is of two kinds—variety cotton (also known as ‘straight-line’ cotton) and hybrid cotton. Farmers around the world have been creating new varieties by intentionally cross-breeding plants for almost as long as settled agriculture. The process of developing a new variety for cotton is much like creating a new kind of apple or rice or tobacco or daffodil or cannabis or any other crop. My grandfather creating a new variety of tomato in his garden undertakes essentially the same process that agro-companies or agricultural research institutions conduct on mass scale on test farms. The difference between variety cotton and hybrid cotton relates to whether, and in what proportion, the plants will reproduce specific characteristics across subsequent generations of plants. 49 This means that while a variety seed can be saved and re-

49 Say we have two straight-line parent plants, one with large bolls (A) and the other is drought resistant (B). A pure-line, or a straight-line, is a plant which, if self-pollinated, breeds true. Namely, that the resultant plant will be genetically identical to the parent plant. A farmer wishes to create a drought-resistant plant with large bolls. 49 She takes (A) and (B), and designates one line as the pollen parent (say B) and one line as the seed parent (A). Cotton is a self-pollinated plant. Its flowers contain both stamens (the male reproductive organs with pollen-bearing anthers) and the pistil (the female reproductive organs comprising the stigma and the ovary). 49 In order to ensure that the plant does not self-pollinate, a breeder first emasculates the flowers (by removing the stamens) of (A). She then brushes plant (A)’s stigmas with pollen from plant (B). To ensure that (A) is not cross-pollinated, she covers the pollinated flowers with a small plastic bag. Once (A)’s flowers mature into fruit and the bolls split open, the resultant seeds are collected. This is known as the F1 or first filial generation. This first F1 cross is called a ‘hybrid’. Say the gene for boll size is (b) and drought-resistance is (d), then each seed will inherit a gene for both from each parent. When sown, the resultant plants will (or should) display both drought-resistance and boll size. They should also display ‘heterotic vigour’, i.e. the resultant plants will be bigger, better, more prolific than either parent. We will come to this curious quality in a moment.

The actual commercial cultivation and development of hybrids is obviously not so simple. Common traits for which cotton is bred such as yield, pest-resistance, drought-resistance, boll-size, number of bolls, plant size, duration to maturation, synchrony of flowering between cultivars do not depend on single inheritable genes and often involve several gene sequences, in interaction with specific agro-climatic conditions. There is also the matter of how gene sequences interact with each other, which traits are inheritable, which are not, and that not all strains display heterotic vigour. Thus the creation of new hybrids is a hit and miss task: breeders cross several different combinations of pure-line parents to see which combinations work and which do not. Secondly, a hybrid is a one-generation event. Gene inheritance works in this way only for the F1 generation, not beyond. This unpredictability of hybrids has historically been the major impediment to the commercial cultivation of hybrids.
sown, a hybrid seed cannot and must be re-crossed every season. Though commercial hybrids are a recent 20\textsuperscript{th} century invention, it is easier to understand the difference between a variety and a hybrid through hybrids.

Since hybrids cannot produce more hybrids, their production requires straight-line cotton varieties which can be back-crossed and bred. Second, hybrids cannot be re-sown as there is no guarantee the plants will display desired characteristics. When it comes to Bt-hybrids, this is a particularly tricky problem since a farmer will simply not know which plants have inherited the Bt-gene (and are thus protected from pest attack) and which have not (and thus attract pests) in the same field. The only way to be sure is to buy a seed packet from the market. It is this unpredictability that Monsanto relied on when it introduced Bt-cotton into a hybrid not a variety. This meant that cultivators could neither breed new cotton varieties of their own, nor save the seeds produced in their fields for the next sowing season. The question of course is why the attempt to create hybrid seeds in the first place: because hybrid organisms (i.e. the offspring of two genetically distinct parent lines) display a curious biological quality called heterosis, one that breeders of plants and animals have implicitly, and explicitly, exploited over the millennia of experimentation with sedentary agriculture and animal husbandry.

If the hybrid (F1) seeds thus planted are allowed to mature and the seeds saved and re-planted, this is called the F2 generation. Or, the second filial generation, once removed from the pure-line grandparents. In this F2 generation a reversion occurs, a process of genetic segregation, in which the seeds in the F2 generation will inherit genes from their own parents (the F1 generation in which all plants carry both (b) and (d)) in a ratio of 1:2:1.49 Some plants will thus carry both genes (b)(d), some will carry only (b), and some will carry only (d). In order to create a plant that displays boll-size and drought-resistance consistently across a population, a breeder must examine the resultant plants, discard the plants that have only (b)(b) or (d)(d), segregate just the (b)(d) plants, and cross-breed them again and again till a stable variety is achieved through elimination and selection. A new ‘variety’ is created when, if self-pollinated, the resultant plants are genetically identical to its immediate parents without reversion or segregation.

I am simplifying, for sake of explanation, an extremely complex and laborious process. For not only is it not easy to determine the relationship between a ‘trait’ and the gene sequences that determine it, in actual field conditions it is extremely difficult (and time-consuming) to determine which complex of traits a plant seems to be displaying are gene-dependent and which are not. In order to identify, and control for, dominant and recessive genes, an F1 generation may be crossed back with just one parent in order to intensify a desired trait. Further for the development of plant breeds for commercial cultivation, inter-generational crosses are made at different points and phases between several different parents. Creating a variety is a prolonged affair. It takes time and generations upon generations of large populations of plants. If a hybrid is a one-time event, a variety is the labour of cons.
**Hybrid Heterosis**

First systematically described for maize by George Shull and Edward East in 1908, heterosis is a quality possessed by hybrid plants that makes them especially attractive for commercial agriculture.

Heterosis, the exact biological mechanisms of which are not entirely understood, is described in the literature as:

Heterosis or hybrid vigour is a phenomenon that describes the survival and performance superiority of a hybrid offspring over the average of both its genetically distinct parents. In plants, heterosis is known to be a multigenic complex trait and can be extrapolated as the sum total of many physiological and phenotypic traits including magnitude and rate of vegetative growth, flowering time, yield and resistance to biotic and abiotic environmental rigours; each of them contributing to heterosis to a certain extent (Lippman and Zamir, 2007).

It means that generations of breeders know that for some reason a hybrid offspring of two genetically distinct pure parent lines tends to be bigger, better, more vigorous, more vital than either parent. This has far-reaching consequences for commercial agriculture, reflected in the hybridization of modern twentieth century food and fiber cultivation. While the phenomenon of heterosis in plants has been known since the late 19th century, and agricultural scientists around the world made efforts to commercially develop hybrid crop strains, the major impediment (with crops like cotton for instance) was their commercial production, since producing hybrids requires vast reserves of labour power to manually pollinate and emasculate individual flowers on a mass scale. For these and other reasons (which I will come to in a moment), commercial hybrid cultivation did not take off until the mid-sixties when in 1967, C.T. Patel, an agricultural scientist at the Cotton Research Station of the Gujarat Agricultural University, created the first commercially viable cotton hybrid in the world. Known as ‘H4’, this first-generation intra-hirsutum hybrid was created by crossing G-67 (a pure-line) with American Nectariless. This first cross was followed by several new hybrids developed and released for different zones across the country. It would not be wrong to say that, in a historical
irony, it is Indian public laboratories that first developed the logic of a true agrarian capitalism, i.e. making the producer dependent on the capitalist market for her means of production, in the seed itself.

However hybrids are capricious plants. They are greedy, thirsty, and temperamental. Hybrids will perform but they require carefully controlled nutrient-dense habitats. Bred for a purpose, in order they exhibit heterotic vigor, they must be watered continuously and fed often.\(^5\) Hybrids are designer plants. Quite literally, they are manually designed to express certain characteristics, in specific agro-climatic environments. A hybrid bred for the rich loose alluvial plains of the Malwa plateau in Punjab will have difficulty germinating in the dense black soils of the Deccan. A hybrid bred for the laterite red soils of Andhra Pradesh will absorb too much water and rot in the irrigated fields of Saurashtra.\(^6\)

It is this unpredictable and high-input paradigm of hybrid cotton that historically restricted its adoption in India’s cotton-fields. Though cotton hybrids have been around since 1971, all hybrids taken together never crossed more than 35% of total hectares sown since they were first introduced (Kranthi 2014). Those cultivators farming large irrigated fields and who could afford the costs of chemical fertilizers and insecticides sowed hybrids; the large number of farmers cultivating small rain-fed plots without the financial cushion to invest in inputs cultivated cotton varieties. This meant that the structure of production afforded cultivators some leeway as regards its scale: cultivators who could invest in intensive input use did so; those who could not (a majority of cultivators), continued to cultivate with improved cotton varietals which did not require intensive input use, and since all

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\(^5\) There have been periodic efforts to breed cotton diploid hybrids for rain-fed conditions. One of the first DH7, also created in Surat, demonstrated quite spectacular yields in rain-fed conditions: yields of 11.7 quintals/hectare compared to 4.8 by V797, its stronger parent (Basu and Paroda 1995). However these hybrids are rare, and being diploids their staple lengths are shorter, thus not favoured by cultivators. Hybrids as a whole need water.

\(^6\) The agro-specificity of cotton strains is reflected in the institutional structures through which the state scientific establishment validates and designates cotton hybrids and varieties for commercial production. Seeds used to be formally, and legally for seeds developed in the public sector, are licensed for release in specific regional zones, not for the entire country.
Bt + Hybrid = Bt-Cotton Hybrid
The introduction of Bt-Cotton hybrids has entirely transformed cultivation. Since Bt-Cotton is available only as a cotton hybrid, regardless of the financial capacity or local agro-climatic conditions of an individual cultivator, all cultivators are now cultivating within an intensive input use paradigm, even though the vast majority of farmers do not have the financial resources, or infrastructural foundations (such as irrigation), to do so. The wholesale shift to hybrid cultivation, in a context where a majority of cultivators cannot afford to cultivate them, has had the consequence of making cotton cultivation an extremely risky enterprise for individual cultivators, while increasing yields as a whole at the all-India level. Average yields have expanded two and a half fold after the adoption of Bt-Cotton, because hybrids are high-yielding plants, and Bt-Cotton does protect (for the first 120 days) against pest depredations.

However this general increase in overall cotton yields masks the increased risk and losses borne by an individual cultivator. I cannot stress this point enough, one also marked by the public scientific establishment, as it cuts to the heart of the current debate on Bt-Cotton; a conversation that myopically often centers entirely on the question of yields. The assessment of economists that Bt-Cotton has demonstrated yield increases over conventional varieties is correct: data collated by the Department of Economics and Statistics demonstrate that post the adoption of Bt-Cotton yields increased by over 67%, tapering off to by 2012. There is nothing remarkable about this insight: hybrids are high-yielding plants. What the analysis do not reflect on are the consequences of this form of high-risk production on the vast majority of small peasant producers who do not have the
financial capacity to absorb losses in the years when harvests fail. Bt-Cotton has forced all farmers into cultivating hybrids, a form of production that requires inputs most farmers cannot afford, and when they cannot afford the inputs and the rains fail, they cannot recover the costs of production much less make a profit.

The capital to pay for the costs attendant on this kind of farming must be raised through cash-debt. The issue, as I have sought to clarify, is not the efficacy or construct of the gene technology itself. Rather it is the techno-legal, which is to say political, form through which the Bt-gene construct has entered cotton cultivation. Nested within a hybrid seed, it has both stripped cultivators of control over the production and behavior of seeds by making sowing dependent on hybrid seeds purchased from the market; alongside it has also made cultivators dependent on that market for every other input—manures, fertilizers, insecticides, weedicides—that the cultivation of hybrid cotton demands. Alongside, since Bt-genes in India come nested within hybrids which are high-yielding plants, their adoption has also magnified (the risks of) cotton-yields—the sheer quantity of cotton that can be reaped from an acre of rain-fed land. It is this sudden yield increase on small plots of land that explains why despite the manifold risks, cultivators continue to take their chances with Bt-Cotton hybrids today.

\[
\begin{align*}
Dhond & \, dhond \, paani \, de \\
Dhai & \, konta \, piku \, de \\
Dhondi & \, geli \, varta \\
Paani & \, aala \, khalta \\
\end{align*}
\]

Dhond dhond give the water
Send a harvest of two and two quarter
The dhond goes up!
The water comes down!
This four-line chant is recited in villages across Vidarbha during a rain-calling rite performed when the monsoon is unseasonably delayed.\textsuperscript{52} The rite is interesting in itself, but for now what is to be noted is line two: ‘\textit{dhai konta piku de}, Give us a two and a half quintal harvest’.\textsuperscript{53} If this was the aspirational horizon of an abundant yield not so long ago, then today even the smallest landholder, cultivating the poorest rain-fed soils, expects a harvest at least three times greater.

This facet of the issue—the entire paradigm of input-heavy, output-driven, market paradigm of agricultural production which was potentized but not caused by the adoption of Bt-Cotton hybrids—has received almost no attention from activist attacks, or it must be said, scholarly critiques. Without understanding why cultivators may wish to undertake an exercise so fraught, the cultivation of hungry thirty cotton hybrids on rain-fed land for an uncertain cotton market, because in some very crucial senses \textit{it works, it has been made sensical now in this agricultural milieu}. What is the form of this sense, what are its material and economic supports, this is what I am attempting to analyze in this chapter.

\textbf{Public Research for Private Seeds}

In 1999 on the cusp of Monsanto’s entry into India there were, across the country, only about 40 cotton hybrids for sale. Each hybrid had been validated and designated for release in a specific zone (there are three in India) by the AICRP. Given the inflamed political context in which Monsanto entered India, the Ministry of Agriculture, under pressure from farmers organisations, politicians and the company, decided to lift all restrictions on the release of commercial seeds, barring basic biosafety validation. On the argument that it should be left to cultivators to decide what seeds to sow in

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{52} This rite finds mention in the \textit{Berar District Gazettes} (1898-1911) and I also saw versions in Vidarbha during 2014/2015. It consists of two men carrying a pole – the ‘\textit{dhond}’ – to which are tied two frogs ritually married for the occasion, leaves of the bel plant, and rushes and grass. The rite also featured in a \textit{Times of India} report (2015) on rain-calling rites, including fasting, by villagers in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh.

\textsuperscript{53} The standardization of weights and measures for cotton is taken up in chapter 3.
\end{small}
a general climate of removing trade restrictions, privatizing the economy, and dispensing with bureaucratic red tape. All hybrid seeds were now designated for release, as long as they passed basic bio-safety tests. The slow process of public scientific evaluation through which seeds had thus far been released did not stop. It continued, however now it was no longer a barrier to market entry. With this barrier gone, the number of private seed companies creating their own hybrids went from 38 in 1999 to 230 in 2003, and a dizzying number of franchises, sub-franchises and sub-sub-franchises, flooded the seed market with Bt-cotton hybrids, local Indian seed companies licensing the Cry1Ac gene in Monsanto’s construct from its local shell company MAYHCO, and developing their own hybrid seeds from the pool of publicly available straight-line seed varieties.

What is viewed as a capitulation of the Indian government to the demands of international bio-capital, in fully opening the Indian domestic seed market to saturation by Monsanto hybrids, is a sore spot with the Indian scientific community. What enrage agro-scientists are not doubts about the gene technology, which all are agreed is a revolutionary breakthrough. It is that the pool of straight-line seed varieties on which Monsanto’s hybrid production depends are themselves public goods created through public investment. It is a policy of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) to license hybrids developed through the public sector available to private seed companies at no extra cost. On the mandate that advances in agronomic research in the public sector must translate into immediate material benefits for farmers, the policy aimed at ensuring that seeds reached the cultivator in time for the sowing season. Thus the public sector developed seeds and licensed them for commercial cultivation to private players. All the Bt-Cotton hybrids currently on sale across India have been bred from straight-line parents developed by public research institutions, not to mention cultivator-developed varieties of which there is no record or count.54

54 Institutions such as the CICR, the Pusa Agricultural Research Institute, the Surat Cotton Extension Station, and the 15 agricultural research universities.
This is also why many agro-scientists in the Indian scientific establishment believe cotton cultivation is nearing the end of the Bt-Cotton wave, as a senior scientist and entomologist who has spent 30 years researching cotton in India, told me, ‘The Bt-wave will crash in the next four years.’ The pool of straight-line Indian varieties developed through 6 decades of state-funded research, is now exhausted and running out. Without the public sector developing new cotton varieties there will soon be, according to this scientist, no more varieties for Monsanto to exploit. So, sticking Bt into a hybrid in 2002 struck agro-scientists as particularly perverse because it sequestered, for private company profit, over six decades of state funded agricultural research conducted under the aegis of the post-colonial scientific establishment and the social labours of farming communities themselves. Monsanto’s insistence that it be remunerated for investments in research via exorbitant royalty payments is somewhat odd, given that the pool of varieties which its revenue model exploits and the available hybrids created by the AIRCP, are themselves public goods made available to the company’s local franchisees apparently free of cost. But if as Monsanto claims the Bt-gene technology is not free of cost citing the millions spent in R&D, nor are the seeds which en-flesh it: this cost is borne by the Indian public.

55 The new seed act, currently facing stiff opposition from farmers movements, proposes to create a centralized registration mechanism for all varieties, including those created by cultivators. While this is ostensibly aimed at regulating spurious and low-quality seeds from entering the market and thus 'protect farmers', farmers organizations rightly suspect this is a move to better align the seed-market with the interests of big capital. The act would require that all cultivators get their own varieties validated and registered by centralized state institutions before they can sell them in local markets.

56 There is some dispute regarding exactly how much Monsanto takes per packet of seed, since its local company MAYHCO does not release revenue figures detailing its share in the company revenues. Information compiled by the Seed Sharing Forum and Navadanya on Monsanto’s royalty place the figures between almost 75% in 2002 when first introduced, and then through a series of price caps enforced by the central and state governments to about 15% in 2015. See here: http://seedfreedom.info/monsanto-vs-indian-farmers/.

57 There has historically been a division of labour between the public and the private sectors when it comes to seed research and production. Historically, the public sector invested in R&D and licensed new strains to the private sector for commercial release. All the cotton varieties currently cultivated in India have been created either by cultivators themselves or by the public research sector. The private sector does not invest in varieties since they can be saved and re-sown. It only produces hybrids. The first hybrids were also created through public institutions. With the advent of Bt-cotton a large number of seed companies have entered the market, and now develop their own hybrids, while also licensing the commercial production of hybrids developed in the public sector. For an institutional breakdown of the seed market in India, see Pray and Ramaswami 2005.
So Many Many Many Hybrids

Today there are more than 1400 cotton hybrids for sale across local seed markets in India, a 35-fold increase from 1999. Consequently, each year the cultivator is confronted with a cornucopia of hybrid seeds with no real means at her disposal to choose between them. Because the cultivator neither knows the parents of the hybrids nor what specific characteristics this hybrid has been bred for. All the farmer knows is that this hybrid contains the Bt gene. Since hybrids disappear from the market just as rapidly as they appear, a cultivator cannot test or experiment with the seed on her own field (Stone 2007). The hybrid she sowed this year may not be around next year. She cannot predict how it will behave in her fields: she does not know if this hybrid works in shallow dry soils, black lava soils, or sandy red soils. She does not know how much, and what particular combination of chemical nutrients, it must be fed. She does not know the maturation duration. She cannot predict how tall the plant will be, how many bolls it will have on each plant, or their size. She does not know what diseases it is susceptible to, which pests prefer its flowers, and which naturally beneficial insects it attracts. And most importantly, she does not know if it is drought-resistant or water hungry. Since 95% of all cotton cultivating land in Vidarbha is rain-fed, she can only

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58 See Stone et al’s 2007 study on agricultural deskillling and the introduction of Bt-Cotton in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh.

59 In one study by Stone there was a 69.2% turnover in seed brands in the space of 2 years (Stone 2007). See also Stone, Flachs and Diepenbrock’s (2014) study of seed adoption ‘fads’ in one of the only long-range studies of the adoption of Bt-Cotton, in Warangal, Andhra Pradesh where it was first released for commercial cultivation.

60 One of the most serious critiques of the adoption of Bt-Cotton nested in hybrids in India, from social scientists who are also essentially sympathetic to the technology is that by transferring seed choice from the cultivator to the seed the widespread hybridization of cotton cultivation has lead to a rapid de-skilling in agricultural communities reflected in what they call ‘herd behaviour’, backed up time-series data gathered over 10 years in 5 districts in Andhra Pradesh which also farms cotton, namely a faddish choosing by cultivators of the cotton hybrids everyone else is planting since now there is no experimental practical way for cultivators to test seed performance season to season in their fields. See Stone, Flachs and Diepenbrock 2014: ‘Rhythms of The Herd’.
anxiously await a monsoon that arrives (or fails) with greater unpredictability every year and hope that the seeds she has chosen to plant this year are of tenacious disposition.\footnote{There is also the not insignificant issue of soil quality. Hybrids require rich soils. Thus even though everyone is cultivating hybrids, yields vary widely from field to field. In the two years I conducted surveys just in Tirjhada, yields ranged from more than 18 quintals of cotton per acre (irrigated, black soils) to less than 4 quintals of cotton per acre (non-irrigated, light soils) from similar seed.}

When Monsanto formally entered the Indian seed market with their Bt-Cotton hybrids in 2002, they had hoped to capture that proportion of the market that was already cultivating hybrids, between 30 to 35%. Instead something remarkable occurred: in the span of 14 years the acreage under hybrids expanded exponentially. From being cultivated on only 30% of land, today 95% of all land under cotton in India is planted with Bt-Cotton hybrids. Why did farmers suddenly take to hybrid cultivation with such unfettered, and in retrospect, catastrophic enthusiasm? After all, India is a diverse country with large regional variations in climatic conditions, soil, agro-ecologies and modes of cultivation. Why did farmers from Punjab (eventually) in the north to cultivators in Andhra Pradesh in the south all adopt hybrid seeds?\footnote{As I mentioned the release of varieties and hybrids occurred in a phased manner for different zones and regions: Bt-Cotton hybrids were cleared for release in central and south India in 2002 and in 2006 for North India. However cultivators in North India had already accessed the seeds somewhat earlier through non-institutional channels of transmission, see: Deshpande and Kumar 2005; Kranthi 2006; Parthasarthy 2008.} Because, at least in its early years, Bt-Cotton worked.

\textit{Bt-Cotton (Provisionally) Works}

Cotton cannot be eaten. It is not a subsistence crop. Cotton is, and always has been, a crop cultivated for sale. Particularly in Vidarbha, where cotton cultivation has been linked with a global commodity market since the mid-1700s, increasing cotton yields is an old concern in peasant communities. Hence a technology that improves yields and salability is to be welcomed not feared. The claims advanced on behalf of Bt-Cotton were, at least for a few years, true. Scientists cautioned that Bt-Cotton was a technology that protected against pest depredation, not one that increased
yields. Except that the specific agro-technological mode through which Bt cotton entered India, nested within cotton-hybrids, it initially did both. It combined the heterotic vigor of hybrid yield increases with the benefit of pest protection without chemicals. This meant lower costs on pesticides, less crop-loss to bollworms and higher yields. In the first five years after the introduction of the first-generation Bt-Cotton hybrids, pesticide use fell by almost 33% while the total acreage under cotton expanded by 30%. Average yields rose by over 67% and all India cotton production tripled in the space of 10 years. While these gains have tapered off since, they have never fallen to pre-Bt levels.

More importantly, cultivators now had no choice: if they wished to sow Bt-Cotton, then they had to cultivate hybrids. The choice to rapidly switch to Bt-Cotton in the early years reflects the efficacy of the technology. While these gains eventually dissipated, and there is debate as to whether yield increases can be attributed to Bt-Cotton alone, by then the structure of production itself had decisively altered. So we could say: first farmers needed the seed; then farmers wanted the seed; and now farmers are trapped in the seed. Bt-Cotton fortuitously entered a seed market and agrarian environment historically receptive to cotton hybrids, and vulnerable to pest-depredation, due to the specific nature of cotton cultivation in India, one centered not on scale but on duration. What I have stressed through this chapter is the inter-connections between political-economy (land, caste, means of production), the techno-political institutional apparatus (agricultural science, the international bio-property regime) these logics potentized and enmeshing in the event-field of a bio-legal scandal. In Part IV I move to the dovetailing of these three histories as they meet in the field, are embodied in the material practices of cotton cultivation in Vidarbha.

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63 Yield increases in Vidarbha were particularly dramatic: an increase of 103% as reflected in data available from the Department of Economics and Statistics and cited in Kranthi 2014.

64 The initial efficacy of the technology is reflected in the figures. Not all cultivators moved to Bt-hybrids immediately. However, in the space of 6 years, everyone began cultivating Bt-cotton. By the time yields began to fall, and pesticide costs rise, it was too late to go back to an older mode of cotton cultivation.
There are 81 cotton-producing countries in the world. The five major producers are, in descending order of productivity: China, India, the United States, Pakistan, and Brazil. While India is the second largest producer of cotton in the world, this hyper-production is a function of scale not efficiency. There are more people farming cotton in India than anywhere else. Indian farmers have the highest cost of cultivation (almost Rs70,000/ha) and the lowest yields per hectare (568 kg/ha)\textsuperscript{65} compared to every other major cotton-producing nation.\textsuperscript{66} Indian cotton is cultivated in a manner entirely unlike how cotton is produced anywhere else. All of these countries also, and exclusively, farm Bt-Cotton. But they cultivate straight-line, variety cotton; only India cultivates hybrid cottons. Why?

The issue is one of the choice of technique.\textsuperscript{67} If the goal is to increase yield, then this may be achieved through several means: by increasing the amount of land under cultivation, by consolidating the land under cultivation and exploiting economies of scale, or by intensively cultivating given land. Unlike other nations, the United States for example, where cotton was cultivated on thousands of hectares of land and mechanically harvested, agrarian India did not have machines or collectivized farms. Instead the rural countryside composed a large number of

\textsuperscript{65} Of this, Maharashtra has the lowest yields (308 kg/ha), the highest cost of cultivation (Rs 61, 907/ha) and the lowest return on investment (3.5\%) of all the cotton-producing states in India. The district of Yavatmal, where I did my fieldwork, averaged 171 kg/ha in 1999, which rose to 280 kg/ha in 2010. Cultivators in Vidarbha thus occupy the unenviable position of producing the least cotton at the highest cost in the world.

\textsuperscript{66} For a comparison of Indian yields compared to yields in the rest of the world see the USDA figures for 2015/2016. On the USDA figures, India has the lowest yields and Australia the highest (2047 kg/ha). The difference between India, and the country with the next lowest yields, Pakistan, is a difference of a 100kg/ha. Cultivators in Pakistan, which has an agrarian structure comparable to India with small landholdings and non-mechanized cultivation, only cultivate varieties. Monsanto has repeatedly attempted to stop the practice by complaining to the Pakistani government. The government has thus far refused to accede to Monsanto’s demands to discipline cultivators. Given the political turmoil in Pakistan Punjab, it presumably has bigger concerns on its plate. China too relies on hand harvesting and picking on non-mechanized farms. However Chinese producers were vertically integrated into communal agricultural units by the 1950s (See Malcolm 2002). See also Cotton Statistics and Figures 2016, published by the Cotton Association of India for average yields and costs of cultivation compared between the 10 major global cotton producers.

\textsuperscript{67} The phrase is of course a repurposing of the title of AK Sen’s famous monograph.
cultivators (over 8 million) farming very small plots of land (an average of 2.7 hectares). Since cultivators could not exploit economies of scale, they needed to intensively cultivate given land. Through the 1960s Green Revolution technologies encouraged the adoption of high-yielding variety seeds and chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Linking domestic cotton production to export-oriented agriculture, and monopoly state-procurement by the Cotton Federation, this period saw the widespread adoption of American long staple cotton (henceforth ALS cotton), a staple length that fetched much higher prices in domestic and export markets than the indigenous medium and short-staple varieties. The first hybrid H-4 is a long-staple strain. By 1990 ALS cotton covered almost 50% of domestic cotton production, and today accounts for over 95% of all cotton grown in India. However ALS cotton, unlike indigenous varieties, is particularly vulnerable to bollworms. From being a minor and relatively unknown pest, the bollworm became a major crop-destroyer. To combat these infestations, farmers began to spray their fields with concentrated doses of synthetic pyrethroids, a class of pesticides whose production, and thus consumer-cost to farmers, had been subsidized under populist agricultural policies aimed at encouraging rural industry (Frankle 1985; Gupta 1999).

High-Density Cultivation vs Teen Pawli – 3 x 3 - Cultivation
In the field, this model of intensive input use was leashed to the traditional method of planting of cotton varieties in density. In this method a field is densely sown with small cotton-plants packed together leaving empty rows for pickers to walk through. One cultivator in the neighbouring village of Parsodi Digdhe gave me a description of cotton-cultivation that mirrors the ones to be found in

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68 The All-India Rural Credit Survey notes that ‘small cultivators’ in the western cotton region were cultivating an average of 2.9 acres in 1955, but at the time comprised only 5% of all cultivators. Large landowners held an average of 94 acres, but comprised over 72% of cultivating families. Today the figures are exactly the reverse: over 50% of all cultivators in Maharashtra are small cultivators. This change is reflective both of the land legislations in 1962, which created a class of small owner-cultivators through the 1960s, and farm fragmentation as rural households partition at earlier and earlier stages. The fragmentation of land-holdings into ever-smaller parcels of land is reflective of a change in rural kinship structures, and is taken up for discussion in Chapter 6. See AIRCS (Reserve Bank of India: 1954).
the *Agricultural Ledgers Berar and Hyderabad Districts* (1874-1897) and the *Berar District Gazetteers* (1898-1911) in which cotton-seed is dribbled into furrows in the field like grain through the conical wooden *sarta* attached to the top of the plough (*nangar*). From such a field crowded with plants, the boll expectations of each individual plant are low, on the understanding that cotton is a long-duration crop.⁶⁹

In 1967, C.T. Patel, the scientist we met above, invented another method for increasing yields: commercially viable hybrid cotton. Besides technical know-how, the commercial exploitation of hybrids required an element that no other country possessed on quite the same scale as India: a vast reserve of rural labour that could be underemployed to painstakingly sprinkle pollen on stigmas for a dollar fifty cents a day.⁷⁰ The commercial production of hybrid seeds is a delicate and labour-intensive process. Women workers walk through rows of cotton on vast factory farms, pulling out stamens with tweezers, gently brushing pollen onto stigmas, capping the fertilized plant with a white plastic bag and red-tagging each completed plant. This process is repeated every year to produce seeds for the market. In this one instance, India’s ‘over-population’ seemed to bestow a competitive advantage.⁷¹ Hybrids were touted as an indigenous technological breakthrough that would enable cultivators to vastly expand yields on existing farms. Accounting for the traditional cotton harvesting season, commercial Indian cotton varieties were developed to spread over a 250 day maturation duration; varieties in all the other cotton producing nations spread over a 150 days.⁷² This 3-month difference is of great significance for the cultivator.

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⁶⁹ The reports on a cotton-harvesting ritual in Vidarbha/Berar discussed in the concluding chapter says, ‘cotton is picked from the trees and offered to the Devi’, see: *Yavatmal District Gazetteer* 1894.

⁷⁰ It is over ten times more expensive to commercially produce hybrid seeds. See Mehta 2003.

⁷¹ Hybrid production was explicitly lauded as a means of generating rural employment in scientific and government documents of the time (1970s). See Joshi 1978.

⁷² For the different maturation duration of varieties and hybrids see Sharma 1982. For a comparison between the maturation durations of the most commonly cultivated varieties and hybrids in India with those cultivated elsewhere see Ahuja 1994.
**On Duration**

First: the longer the duration of the growing season, the more inputs a field requires: this includes costs incurred on fertilizers and pesticides, and outlays on labour expenses for tasks such as spraying, weeding and harvesting. This is especially true of hybrids, which need constant feeding and tending. Secondly, the long duration of Indian cotton hybrids has significant consequences for pest attacks. Say a farmer expects 40 bolls per plant. The plant does not produce 40 bolls at a time – no plant can. The plant produces 5 bolls today, 6 tomorrow, 8 a week later, and so on. And the plant continually branches, buds, and flowers while it does so. Consequently at any time there are, on the same plant, flowers, green bolls, and ripe open bolls. All insects, including bollworms, are attracted to flowers. Indeed this is why plants have flowers: to attract potential pollinators. A plant that is flowering and fruiting continually is continually attracting pests. Since the plant is continuously flowering, a farmer must keep spraying (K.C. Kranthi 2014). At one point farmers in Guntur, in Andhra Pradesh a major cotton-growing region to the south, were spraying over 40 times in a single season to combat pests, creating more pests that were resistant to pesticides. The bollworm is one such pesticide-produced pest. Even after the introduction of short-duration hybrids, farmers continued to cultivate them as long duration crops. It simply did not seem logical to cut down a plant while it continued to produce bolls.

Secondly, since a hybrid must branch in order to fruit, the seeds cannot be sown in density. Instead the field is marked off into a grid, and the seeds are individually sown at a 3 x 3 - *teen pawli* –

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73 Cotton comprises only 22% of the total area under crops in India. However over 75% of total pesticide use is on cotton.

74 This whole tragic cycle was explained to me at great length by Dr. K.C. Kranthi, and entmyologist and director of the Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR) in Nagpur. Dr. Kranthi explained the intricacies of cotton science over many patient hours to a non-specialist. The CICR has been at the forefront of public cotton science in India for three decades, and scientists are currently developing an indigenous gene event that will enable cultivators to buy locally produced Bt-Cotton varieties at low cost compared to the astronomical costs of privately produced hybrid seeds as currently obtains in Vidarbha.
three-footstep distance to account for the branching of the mature cotton-plant. Fewer cotton-plants are planted per acre. So then the boll expectations from a single plant go up, further prolonging the duration of the growing and harvest season. The very concept of a hybrid is to have large numbers of bolls on a single plant, on the reasoning that since a farmer cannot exploit scale harvesting across a large number of plants, each individual plant must be a font of cornocopic abundance.

**It Happens Only In India**
This is a situation unique to India and Indian cotton cultivators. In the United States, for instance, the entire cropping season lasts for about 150 days. The plants take about 3 months to mature, they then flower, and the boll matures in 30 days. Since Bt-Cotton provides the most effective pest protection for 120 days, and efficacy wanes after that, a farmer may need to spray a single time once the plant begins to flower. Once the bolls are ripe, the plant is mechanically harvested, a process that destroys the shrub. A single harvest obtains and the plant is terminated. In India, farmers will take up to three pickings from a field. Since fields had large plants that kept flowering and fruiting, consequently they suffered cyclical pest depredations, to manage which farmers kept spraying, and creating ever more pests as they did so. By the time Bt-Cotton arrived in India, farmers were losing up to 50% of standing crop to bollworm attacks (see Kranthi 2014). By 1999 the bollworms were resistant to even the most concentrated doses of pesticide including pyrethroids, which had thus far been effective. It is no wonder then that in 2002 farmers welcomed the Bt-Cotton technology.

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75 In the 7 years prior to the introduction of Bt-cotton, repeated bollworm depredations resulted in a negative net annual average return of -5.26 on every Rs 100 invested in cotton cultivation in Maharashtra. In the 9 years post Bt-cotton the returns increased to a meager Rs 3.82/Rs 100 a year. This has to be kept in mind in analyzing what the introduction of Bt-cotton effected: from a situation wherein cultivators were losing money every season, to making a slim profit (for a few years). See Kranthi 2015.

76 As a class of poisons goes, pyrethroids have lower organic toxicity than other pesticides of their ilk. The resistance of bollworms to this class of pesticides has lead cultivators to adopt a cocktail of poisons including organophosphates,
The Poison in The Gift

Except that, quite soon, not only did the gains evaporate but the situation worsened. Pesticide usage went up by 92% after 2006, four years after the introduction of Bt-Cotton, and the cost of cultivation increased precipitously. Why? Because farmers still kept cultivating by the old method. Or rather, we should say, a new hybridized method of cultivation emerged in which the old relationship to duration now cathedect to the seductive vitality of hybrids. Since suddenly everyone was only cultivating hybrids, most cultivating them for the first time, in the first few years average yields exploded. But then cultivators kept the plants in their fields, and continued to harvest bolls from them, as they had always done. Given the small size of plots and the difficulties that cotton farming is beset with, farmers were understandably unwillingly cut down a plant in its prime. The entire practice of cultivation in India was one centered on duration, variety or hybrid.

In this way, cultivators found themselves confronting a bizarre situation: in order to harness the yield potential of a hybrid seed, the mature plant has to branch. Thus plants could not be crowded; they had to be planted at regulated distances resulting in fewer plants per field and higher boll expectations from an individual plant. This meant that each plant had to be exploited for its

monocrotophos, phorate, methyl parathion, dichlorvos, carbofuran, methomyl, triazophos, metasystox and phosphamidon pesticides which are far more toxic to human and animal life. Two vernacularized Marathi words obtained by splitting the English—‘indo’ and ‘salphan’—have now entered peasant lexicon marking this substance as a favoured suicide method.

77 Costs of cotton cultivation increased almost two and a half-fold in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh in the space of ten years, see: Department of Economics and Statistics data cited in Kranthi 2015).

78 Yield increases were particularly dramatic in Maharashtra at 103% post the introduction of Bt-cotton in 2002. The average yields for 11 years prior to Bt-cotton were 152 kg/ha, and for the 11 years after Bt-cotton 308 kg/ha. This means that large numbers of cultivators would have reaped far higher yields (and many much lower) than these numbers.

79 In India the recommended spacing for hybrid cotton is 90 cm x 90 cm (cultivators call this ‘teen pawli’ i.e. 3 steps) apart. This spacing results in only 10,000 plants per hectare. In the United States, the recommended spacing is 80 cm x 10 cm, resulting in 1,00,000 plants per hectare, i.e. 10 times the Indian case. In China, cultivators plant 3,00,000 plants per hectare, i.e. 30 times more plants per hectare than their Indian counterparts. In the latter instance, since there are more plants, the cultivator expects only 3 to 4 bolls per plant. A cultivator in India expects over 40 bolls from one plant.
maximum potential and it was encouraged to flower and fruit as long it would give. The long duration of hybrids meant that after the initial 120 days of Bt-protection lapsed, the insects came back. As a result farmers once again began to spray ever-higher levels of insecticide on the supposedly pest-resistant Bt-Cotton crops.\footnote{After an initial decline in pesticide use by 33\%, pesticide use increased by 92\% post the adoption of Bt-cotton. The adoption of Bt-hybrids resulted in an increase in chemical fertilizer usage by 70\% compared to non-Bt cotton. These figures obtain from the Department of Economics and Statistics, cited in K.C. Kranthi 2015 and I have also seen the plot level surveys from which the percentages derive.}

\textit{Uber Worm}

Eventually there was born a bollworm resistant to conventional classes of pesticides as well as Bt-Cotton. In 2009, a scant seven years after the introduction of Bt-Cotton, Monsanto acknowledged a worrying development that farmers in Gujarat had been reporting: \textit{Helicoverpa armigera} was now ‘officially’ resistant to Bt-Cotton. Undaunted, between 2009 and 2012, Monsanto released three more cotton-strains with 5 different gene events stacked in various combinations, including a version which had three gene events stacked on each other, with an additional supplement of Roundup (a glyphosate weedicide) tolerance.\footnote{Indiscriminate fertilizer usage feeds all vegetation, not just the cotton plant. From an agricultural task done perhaps twice in the growing phase, weeding is now a continuous activity done entirely by women. Continuous weeding (\textit{nindan}) requires outlays on labour further pushing up the cost of cultivation. Likewise yield increases have increased outlays on picking costs, again a task done only by women. This transformation in the gendered composition of agricultural labour has had the interesting consequence of liquid income entering women’s hands. The consequences of this transformation on domestic relations is examined in the next chapter.} This new generation of Bt-Cotton strains cost 30\% more than the first generation hybrids. Given the pace of technological change season to season, it is difficult to assess their by farmers in their fields. The new generation Bt-strains are attempts to out-evolve in toxicity an insect that has co-evolved in its resistance. This is to say that today not only are cultivators back to spraying insecticides, they now can no longer save their seed and must buy packets that can cost over 800 times the price of a local non-Bt variety.\footnote{In 2011 cultivators spent Rs 3595/ha on seeds, compared with Rs 1086/ha in 2003.} Between 2002 and 2013,
the cost of cultivation in Vidarbha rose from Rs 20,990/ha to Rs 61,907/ha, a 2.95 fold increase. This is reflected in steep fluctuations in the net profitability of cotton across just a ten-year period. Looking back at the transformation of cotton production in the preceding two decades, the re-signification of cotton is striking. From a stolid sturdy crop, able to withstand climatic extremes and a range of soils, cultivated by peasant families in rain-fed regions as a reliable generator of cash-reserves, cultivating cotton today is a high-risk gamble.

In the opening chapter of this dissertation I examined a particularly fearsome materialization of the ideology of risk—making money from debt—in Vidarbha. I argued that the centering of monetary debt in cotton cultivation has resulted in the valorization of money as a generator of surplus-value through cotton production and showed its ritualization, its fetish, in the cosmology of contemporary Vidarbha by examining a murder for elusive wealth. In this chapter I have attempted to show why and how risk materialized in the financial object of market-debt, cash-debt, has entered the operating system of the contemporary agricultural productive order. I showed the recent historical process through which the economy of cotton in modern Vidarbha comes to look this way. In the next chapter I turn to the realm of social reproduction, to consider how in the economy of cotton market-debt enters social exchanges. This is the undertaking of the dissertation as a whole. Here, I examine three sites as exemplary of the intersection of the economies of social reproduction with the economies of cotton: caste relations examined in the breakdown of grain prestation; the replacement of land by cotton as an axis of social authority; and the absorption of new groups of cultivators into the economy of cotton.
CHAPTER THREE: A PROXIMATE ECONOMY OF COTTON IN VIDARBHA

The Gift-Debt relation occupies a vast subfield within social anthropology. Though I do not specifically engage that debate here, this disciplinary conversation subtends the entire manuscript. Instead, I turn to an early piece in which Franz Boas shows us that the acquisition of social authority, and recognizability, as one able to act in society as oneself, occurs through the redistribution of wealth acquired through debt mediated through the contest (gift prestation) to acquire a social name (Boas 1930 pp. 77-103).¹ Boas evocatively clarifies the social function of debt in a text on the acquisition of names amongst the Kwaikuitl, where, in order to receive a gifting name, the young man of age borrows blankets from others in the village, distributes them during the feasting ceremony, and repays the loans with 25% interest within a year. In that year he continues to trade for and acquire more blankets through intra-regional exchange networks, which are redistributed and put back into circulation within the village, and between clans (Boas pp.79). Social debt materialized in named stores/tokens of value (blankets, coppers, skins, whale tallow and seal oil) undertaken for prestation (i.e. for social exchange) ties persons organized in clans in reciprocal relations of hierarchical obligation.

In keeping with the spirit of a man who also wrote On Alternating Sounds in Language, in this particular description we do not find an account of the irrationality of the potlatch, though other descriptions of the time do remark upon these public contests of status wherein native chiefs competed with each other to destroy quantities of skins, oil, wax and copper valuables (Boas). In the general public sense of the time, bolstered by ethnographic accounts, the potlatch was marked as a puzzling form of exchange that seemed to depend on the destruction rather than the acquisition of

¹ I thank Xenia Cherkaev for pointing me towards thinking the social economies of debt and cotton through blankets and the Potlach.
wealth. This description of the potlatch as a figure of alterity to the rational economic exchange of capitalist societies depended on the mirroring of the presumptive profligacy of the native Indian chief, to the parsimony of rational, settler colonial homo economicus. Drawing attention to epistemic prejudice, Marvin Harris notes that the moment at which ethnographers were describing the potlatch was that of the radical transformation of indigenous native life, social and political institutions under the pressure of settler-colonial trade and political conquest. The Europeans and the Natives were trading for, and in, incommensurable things (Povinelli 2001; Simpson 2016).

Like other ethnographers before and after him, Boas examines a restricted exchange of ranked objects, assuming diverse forms, adjudicating a dimension of personhood as carried/alienated in the name as the bearer of rank (thus holder of ranked goods) and value within a structure of social authority based on hierarchical exchange relations between clans organized into phatries/tribes (See: Boas; Gregory; Malinowski; Munn). In order to enter the exchange network, mirrored in similar exchange rings elsewhere, one cannot enter at the top as the bearer of ranked objects. These can only be acquired via exchange. In order to enter exchange a person begins by acquiring objects of lower value. A young man starts by buying his way in by acquiring a store of some tokens—in this case blankets which in the hierarchy of exchange objects were rather low in value. He slowly begins trading blankets, acquires a social reputation as an exchange partner, and may eventually be gifted a ranked object. Blankets cannot be exchanged for ranked objects (coppers being the highest); but through amassing low-value objects it is possible to skew the terms of the exchange to one’s advantage (Gregory; Harris). In Harris’ description the flooding of the Potlach exchange with blankets acquired for skins and other products from forced trade with European settlers (axes, yams and pigs in Gregory’s case-study of colonial PNG), resulted in the emergence of community dependence and the concentration of power in figures of native political authority (such

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2 In *The Accursed Share* Bataille famously thinks the destruction and excess of the Potlach within his larger excavation of the drive. (Bataille 1988).
as chiefs) of the sort interestingly described by Rosa Luxemburg for a historically different, but
alogous, process in her description of the destruction of small-holder agrarian commodity
production in the Americas, under the onslaught of cheap commodities (Luxemburg 2003).

We can read Harris’s account as describing how the emergence of the blanket as a token of
abstract value mutated a redistributive exchange ring and, instead of mutual obligation predicated on
social authority, now assumed monstrous form where Native chiefs competed with each other to
gain prestige in local exchange rings with goods received from European traders, violently
reordering the gendered economies (yam and pig production are traditionally garden and women’s
work) that sustained subsistence and social exchange relations as chiefs extracted productive labour
from clan households indebted to them (Dulley 2015; Gregory 2015; Harris). This resulted in the
concentration of wealth and an increase in the power of local chiefs, a consequent sharpening of
conflicts over status, resulting in a sort of redistribution gone mad. We may not agree with the
specificities of Harris’ analysis but for now it (and Luxemburg’s) provides a means of thinking the
social consequences of the sudden surplus of one, or a class of, special commodity.

This commodity is special in having contingently assumed the appearance of, taken the
sensuous form of, a token of abstract-value, i.e. it has the ability simply through the principle of
addition (accumulation) to intensify and warp an exchange network by assuming a contingently
nominative and predicative position such that formerly incommensurable values are made
commensurable through the copular effect of the token. It exercises like the thing it has
contingently become—money—a magical effect in making in-commensurabilities fraternize (Marx
1964 p. 169). It changes all those it touches as its acquisition and accumulation becomes linked to
status and honour within the community. It also becomes the token of, stands in for, access to and

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3 I thank Rosalind Morris for pointing out the importance of the cheap commodity in Luxemburg’s analysis.

4 As should be clear the commodity becomes a token of abstract value not trans-historically or transpatially or forever;
but specifically for this exchange moment in this historical period in this place between these persons.
generalized exchange with a wider market/state/national network. Like European colonialism in the early 20th century produced a potlatch of blankets on the North-West Coast, so Monsanto’s Bt-Cotton hybrids produced something like a potlatch of cotton in the early 21st century in Vidarbha.

**The Potlatch of Cotton**

As I have described in the last chapter the introduction of Monsanto’s Bt-Cotton hybrids potentized with disastrous consequence a set of economic tendencies that had been put in play in the agrarian countryside through the colonial and post-colonial period. I showed the intersecting social, techno-legal and political histories through which Bt-Cotton hybrids conquered cotton acreage in Vidarbha. I closed with a description of the paradox of hybrid cash-cropping—the mono-cropping of hybrid seeds has made cotton cultivation more expensive and thus riskier, as it has made it more lucrative and expanded cotton-yields. This has had certain consequences on the economies of social reproduction that sustain material production for the market. The productive units that stand at the center of this socio-technical economy of cotton—that which produces for the cotton economy but also reproduces itself, the communal social relations in which it is nested and bear the shocks and risks attendant on this kind of farming—is the cultivating household and the village community.

I made the point earlier that today the logics of cotton-cash cropping have realigned the rural domestic productive household somewhat, though obviously not exclusively, as corollary of the capitalist market. As a sociological formation the domestic productive household, the description of which as an analytic stabilization is provided by A.V. Chayanov’s famous *Theory of Peasant Economy*, is not adequately described by the term ‘family’—which I take to be a somewhat imprecise and ideologically loaded term used to describe both an actual formation (the nucleated hetero-normative productive household) and an ideology of kinship as being normatively organized
in this way. \(^5\) However, now many households and domestic units could also be described by that term, nuclear unions of the heterosexual couple and their children choosing to set up a separate home from the man’s natal family becoming a more common feature of rural life in the last decade. Regardless, I here choose to describe this formation as the domestic productive household and not ‘family’—though the intimacies, affective registers and modes of its inhabitation are hailed by that term—because it allows us to see the household as not closed in on itself in any way. Rather the cultivating household is constituted as a node within a set of social exchanges and prestations that link domestic life to a wider agrarian community—an expanded economy of social reproduction—enacted through kinship, clan and caste relations.

**Social Exchange and Material Reproduction**

For the average land-owning cultivator household, the daily burden of social exchanges begins early in the morning and continues long past sundown. The grind of gendered domestic labour that keeps the wheels of the agrarian social order going—the many categories and kinds of persons to whom one must give the many kinds of things that the work of men and women produce—is evocatively

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\(^5\) The question Chayanov grappled with is how to characterize the mode of production of the peasant-proprietor small-holder type in a subsistence economy which is also partially monetized, as was the case with peasantry around the world by the early twentieth century. That is, how to characterize peasant production (and relations with an external market) since neither a neoclassical theory of wages may be applied (since the model assumes that all labour is done only within the family unit), following which nor do categories such as ‘factors’ of production stabilized in this model (ground rent etc.,) make sense, nor is the mode explained through Marxian theories of class and surplus-value: see the introduction to Chayanov (1966) by Daniel Thorner for this contextualizing of the main theoretical and empirical issues. Around this question has emerged a large body of writing, reflected particularly in the writings of the Marxist theorist Teodor Shanin of the Manchester School: see particularly Shanin’s introduction in Chayanov (1988), *Late Marx and The Russian Road* (1983) and *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (1972). Marshall Sahlins re-reads A.V. Chayanov’s researches into the structure of the Russian peasant farm as the basis of his formulation of the ‘domestic mode of production’ in *Stone-Age Economics* ([1974] 2017). This discussion also informs the 1970’s debate between James Scott and Samuel Popkin on the nature of the peasant household’s relationship to new avenues of surplus creation and threats to subsistence: see Scott (1977) and Popkin (1979). I do not have the space in this dissertation to situate my interventions theoretically in relationship to this literature: the manuscript is a practical iteration of these theoretical problems, particularly when applied to peasantries in South-Asia, and specifically Vidarbha where I am arguing this model must be revised to account for a new peasantry created for capitalism, in which the peasant household is interpellated into the labour regimes (Banaji 1977), credit networks (Guha 1985) and logics of producing commodities for capitalist market-exchange (Satya 1997) from its inception.
described in this passage by Bhalchandra Nimade in his Marathi novel *Hindu: Ek Samruddha Adagal* (Hindu: The Bountiful Clutter of Living):

The [farmers’] craze for cultivating the land meant work, and more work, night and day, all year, for their wives. Backbreaking work. A start to the day with the sound of grinding flour, laid out by the mother-in-law. The husbands won’t let them go, but downstairs the morning chores pile up – the grinder, churner, whisk, broom, ash, dung for smearing, fireplace, mortar and pestle, bhakri for breakfast, bhakri to be packed, baths, washing, dishes, the cows and buffaloes, firewood, groggily drawing water as if in a trance, milk boiling, curd-setting, children whining, a long line of morning alms people—vasudev, gondhali, nandibailwale, bhadangwale, tirmal, bairagis, nathpanthis, malangs, sanyasis, cripples, karunaru, and in the afternoon the fortunetelling joshis, almanac reading brahmans, holy men—all with a rightful claim at the large kunbi’s house. Then again the evening balutedars, beggars, food for the buffaloes and cows, and cooking again for twenty-five people. However simple, just a vegetable in a pot and a basket of bhakris it might be, it has to be enough to allow everyone, including the wage labourers, to take on nature all day. Getting up to make yet more bhakris when the last one has been picked up from the basket. Sore by the time everything is cleared up. It is as if the women of the household perform thousands of bharatnatyam gestures all day. Fingers, thumbs, neck, shoulders, hands, wrists, thighs, feet, waist—how many movements? In the air, bent to the floor, upright or seated, sweeping, rolling, patting, pouring, mashing, sifting, picking…agrarian civilization has swayed for ten thousand years to the rhythm of this age-old female dance. (Trans. Deshpande 2010: pp 202-203)

To this list of communities/castes/groups can also be added the Fakir, the Kaikadi, the Pardi, the Dhangar, the Mang Garodi and so on. In this passage Nemade paints a picture of the gendered social relations that compose the matrix of everyday rural life, that sustain the productive household and subtend material production. The cultivation of cotton is (or used to be) nested in the prestation economies, of which many are routes of diversion, of these exchanges which circulate goods and social objects in the rural social order. The exhausting work of women inadequately contained by the boundary ‘domestic’ converts things produced by households into objects that may be given so they may circulate in the wider social order (Strathern et all).

These include gifts of grain and milk products to the Vasudevs, wandering Vaishnav mendicants ritually tasked with uddar—re-establishing and correcting ties with dead ancestors; grain and cooked food to Gondhali, a bardic caste who live on alms and sing lays from the Ramayana and
Mahabharata; offerings to wandering beggar and bardic castes from the Telugu country, *tirmak*, raw rice, grain, and cash to the *nandibailwale*, pastoralist wanderers from popular Shaivite cults who subsist on alms from agriculturalists for a *nandi* (bull) which is often a mutant with an extra leg; cash and grain to the *bhandangwale*, sellers of spicy puffed rice and roasted chickpeas snacks; grain and milk products to the Bairagi, wandering Vaishnav ascetics who worship Gouranga and are ritually Brahmin; Gosains, cowherds; Sanyasis: yogis and ascetics of all kinds; cripples – *aphang* - traditionally owed *Dan* prestation; purveyors of human hair who trade women’s fallen strands for utensils. All of these persons who arrive begging, asking, demanding and soliciting at the door, are owed prestations from a cultivator household.

Besides these are the exchanges with those directly involved in material production: the twelve *balutedar*, hereditary village servants owed a share of the agricultural produce; the wage-workers, *ghadimanasa* who must be fed; the care lavished on animals and birds. Besides gifts to kin, there are also prestations to those who essay specific roles at life-cycle events: gifts of cash, cloth, grain/gold to the Joshi, the astrologers with whose consultation important dates are selected; and similar gifts to the Brahmins who prepare *janampatri* (astrological charts) which determine marriage. Marriage rites involve elaborate prestations to members from specific caste groups who essay ritual roles like the barber (*Nhavi*), the drum-beater who comes from the leather-working community, and so on. In the wake of the new economies of cotton this description of agrarian life has indelibly transformed and yet the temporalities and material practices of these what might be called, ab-capitalist and ab-nationalist social forms and life-worlds sustain, still fundamentally order the

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6 In Vidarbha, where the Marathi is grammatically laden with long association with the Hindi-speaking peoples of central India, I heard someone crack a joke that works between both languages. Hair buyers are a common sight in villages. They wander with scales and a stack of utensils offering them in return for women’s hair. Most women keep their hair long and thick. Every day they collect the strands that catch in the comb, which are then exchanged by weight for metal pots called *ganj*. The hair is further processed into wigs etc. The word *ganj* is also a homophone for ‘baldness’ in Hindi. So the joke is that women get ‘*ganj*’ (M: Utensils) for ‘*ganj*’ (H: baldness).
registers of social and domestic experience.\(^7\) It is to these intimate reverberations of the economy of cotton, to the village as market and household as field that this and the next chapter attend.

In doing so they consider three sites—usurious lending, caste and kinship; the re-signification of land from gift to debt; and the inclusion of new social groups into the economy of cotton—that are exemplary of the confusions between gifts and debts that I am tracking throughout this dissertation. While I separate out these as three ‘sites’ for the purposes of analytical and narrative clarity in the chapters, the larger transformation I am detailing occurs across these scales and realms. It is impossible to understand the fracturing of an agrarian milieu under a new mode of production unless one attends to its primary store of value—land—which is both the ground of material production as also the fulcrum of social exchanges. To understand the disarticulation of the link between land and social authority, it is crucial to see the weakening of clan and caste structures and the monetization of kin and caste relations. Since clan and caste formations are themselves predicated on control over land, one cannot understand the inclusion of new caste/class/ethnic groups into the ranks of cotton cultivators unless one understands the changing social valances of land. This process itself occurs because the linking of cotton cultivation to money and the market, and not land and the village as occurred with the adoption of hybrid seeds, meant that subaltern groups without traditional access to land-holdings (such as tribal, nomadic and pastoralist communities) could enter the new economy of cotton by reaping large yields from small plots. And when once settled to cotton cultivation with caste cultivators in the village, relations between cultivating and non-cultivating castes also transformed as money raised through debt achieved for cotton cultivation (and thus life) what land had once done.

\(^7\) By the prefix qualifier ‘ab’ is meant that while these temporalities, social forms and life-worlds exist in the time of capitalist modernity and the national-state and bear their impress, they are not contained by them.
To state it simply, the new mode of cotton production described in the last chapter, which here I am calling ‘the potlatch of cotton’, by making every component of the agricultural process—seed, manure, fertilizer, insecticide, pesticide, labour and loans for money for all of the above—dependent on the market and not on the field and the agrarian cultivating, artisanal, pastoralist and trader communities, replaced the economies of social reproduction which had subtended material production for the market with money raised from debt and earned from cotton (i.e. quite technically as the token through which things which were heretofore could only be received could also be bought). The economies of cotton in Vidarbha are to be understood then as a complex comprising the entirety of the social, ideational, discursive and material practices and supports of a life-world and I describe here some aspects of the restructuring, in three dimensions, of a whole social reality.

Part I

Caste – Kinship - Money - Cotton

The Moneylender’s Power

In the village of Tirjhada lives a man called Atma Ram Moon. Though he looks of indeterminate age, Moon is probably in his late sixties/early seventies. He is tall, gaunt, with deep brown weather-beaten skin, sunken eyes and the long loping gait of one used to traversing distances. Moon is of the neo-Buddhist Baudh Dharmi caste and is a follower of Baba Saheb Ambedkar’s vision for his community.\(^8\) Unlike other neo-Buddhists in the village Moon has never formally taken diksha\(^9\) and

\(^8\) I do not discuss the Ambedkarite movement in Vidarbha as the domain of electoral and popular politics does not feature in this dissertation. I arrived in Vidarbha in the wake of this movement; in the social formations it produced which are described across this work. I arrived also in the wake of a more recent movement under the broad banner of the Shetkari Sangathan – The Farmers Alliance, a militant peasant struggle against state procurement and the just price (here open market price) for agricultural produce that is briefly discussed further on. This dissertation does not analyze the domain of formal politics, electoral, party or popular. I hope to correct this lacunae in future work; but it was too large a topic to tackle within the limits of this phase of fieldwork and dissertation writing.
narrates no moment of origin as the source (or undoing) of his religious and political beliefs. Moon and I had long conversations over the course of our acquaintance. Like many in the village I called him ‘Appaji’, an affectionate diminutive for ‘father’. But on one particular day a man called Ritthe, of the OBC (Kunbi) caste, referred to Moon as ‘Badshah’ (Emperor). The relations between Ritthe and Moon being ambiguous, and my proximity to Appaji a source of some tension in Tirjhada, I didn’t press the matter. As we now sat drinking tea, I teasingly asked, ‘Of what are you the Emperor, of Tirjhada?’

AM: ‘No. I am the Badshah of time (ved).’
AS: ‘Of time – vedibha badshah mhanje? How so?’
AM: ‘Take for instance when I wake up – jar samjha mi kadi utho- Now when do most people wake up in the morning? At five o’clock – paanch vajta uthtil. The women have to cook, the men have to look to the animals, a hundred things need doing - shambhar kaam aste. Not me. I wake up at nine – mi nau vajta utb-to. And sometimes, I wake up at ten – kadi kadi dab vajta bi utb-to. I awaken when I want to - jehba mala pat-te, tehva mi uthto. So people began to say, ‘Look at him waking as he pleases. He must be a Badshah’. And the name stuck.’
AM: ‘And then there was my business (dhanda).’
AS: ‘What business?’
AM: ‘My sabukari (moneylending) business.’
AS: ‘You were a sabukar (moneylender)?’
AM: ‘Yes. How do you think I acquired all my land? I was the biggest sabukar in Tirjhada, Vani, Deoli, (neighbouring villages) all the way till Kadam.’
AS: ‘And Ritthe?’
AM: ‘Ritthe? He used to be my munshi (account-keeper). When my business finished I let him go.’
AS: ‘Why did the business end?’
AM: ‘That is a story for another day (atta assu de, azun kadi sangto).’

So be it. For now, Moon offers a precise delineation of the moneylender’s power: the moneylender controls time, his own and the time of others. In his description, what fellow villagers saw as Moon’s minor sovereignty, hence ‘Badshah’ (Emperor), is that Atma Ram Moon’s time was his own.

His sleep was not linked to the demands of agricultural production or earning a living through wage; rather through the network of debts his fellow villagers owed him, A.R. Moon shadowed their

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9 Ambedkar encouraged his followers to convert to Buddhism as a means of exiting the caste order. These mass conversions were staged in public fairgrounds in ceremonies called ‘diksha’: the receiving of the teachings of the Buddha. The first ceremony occurred in 1956 in Nagpur, Maharashtra wherein Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism along with 600,000 of his followers.
waking and sleeping hours. So people in Tirjhada call Atma Ram Moon, a Baudh Dharmi man who had once pulled a knife on a caste Kunbi cultivator, *Badshab Sabukar* - Emperor Moneylender. How and when did Atma Ram Moon, a Baudh Dharmi man with no land and no received social power in an OBC-Kunbi dominated village, become a moneylender? To understand this—i.e., locate the biography of this specific individual within the larger shifts in the new economy of cotton—we can turn to one of Atma Ram Moon’s favourite *kodh*, one of his signature riddles.

**Sacks, Naka and Coconuts**

I had become friendly with Atma Ram Moon through his son Sagar, who was my age, and I sometimes dined at their house. At one dinner A.R. Moon called me over into the other room and asked me to solve a riddle. This pattern set organized our time together for the next year. Structured as jousts between friendly adversaries, our conversations would often commence with Moon setting problems and giving me some days to respond. Reproduced below is the first riddle Moon asked me.

The riddle is narrated as a journey where Moon is the real narrator and the fictionalized protagonist. ‘When I was young’, begins Moon, ‘I went to Bombay.’ ‘Did you actually?’ ‘Yes actually I did. I went in 1974, and several times after that. So for this *kodh* (riddle) let’s assume this is the first time I have gone, i.e. 1974.’ So, I took a bus from Kadam till Nagpur and then an ST (State Transport Bus) all the way to Bombay. I was in Bombay for ten days. In those ten days I did everything: I went to the cinema, I ate on Chowpatty, I drank like a bastard, and I spent all the

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10 Like most other houses in Tirjhada, it is a two-room house: one in the front opening into one at the back.

11 Whether A.R. Moon went to Bombay in 1974 or some other date is impossible to ascertain nor does it matter. What is interesting is that when he recalled this trip to me in 2015 he located it in a year of extreme national political instability. The next year (1975) Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would dissolve the Parliament, arrogate all legislative power to the executive branch of Government, suspend democratic rights, imprison political opponents, students, activists and intellectuals and unleash a wave of state terror specifically targeting subaltern urban populations with the Emergency declaration.
money I had. And then I had to go home. And since I had gone all that way, obviously I needed to make some money off the trip. So I bought two sacks (pothi) of coconuts (naral). Now in those days, coconuts were cheap in (coastal) Bombay and very expensive here (landlocked Vidarbha). So I buy the sacks and take them with me, or say you do, say you buy the sacks. Now I know, and you know, that at every naka (highway toll-booth) there is a luggage tax.’

AS: ‘Really?’

AR: ‘Yes there is a tax on the weight of the load you are carrying.’

AS: ‘Is this a law?’ (sarkaracha kayda abe - lit. rule of the state).

AR: ‘It must be. Anyway you have to pay something like Rs. 1 on every quintal of load. So now I, or you—tar atta mi, ani tu—have two pothi of coconuts, each with a 100 coconuts. Each sack weighs about 10 quintal. I arrive at the first naka. And the guy says, ‘You have two sacks so that’s Rs. 20.’ So I say, ‘But I don’t have any money’. ‘Where are you going?’ ‘To Yavatmal.’ ‘That’s a hundred naka.’ And if I don’t pay up he won’t let me go further. So the man says, all right instead of paying Rs. 10, you hand over a coconut instead at every naka in lieu of payment. So now we have two sacks, each sack with a hundred coconuts, one coconut per sack at a hundred naka – tar atta samjha ambe samor abet don pothi, tyachat shambhar naral, shambhar nakavar dar pothi ejji ek naral. So tell me now, sacks, coconuts and naka, how will you make a nafa (a diminutive of munafa: profit) from this expedition?’

12 Chowpatty is a famous public beach in Bombay, often featured in Hindi films from the 1970s as the rendezvous for star-crossed lovers, melancholies turning their backs on the metropolis pondering the sea and strangers looking for shelter in a cruel city. The famous Hindi film song, ‘ek akela ek sheher mein – raat aur dupahar mein – aashiyana dhundta hai – aabodana dibunda bai – a stranger alone in a city – searches for shelter – seeks grain and water’, shot on Chowpatty beach expresses this quality of invitation and solitude in the big city.

13 The commercial transport of goods and commodities on the national and state highways across state boundaries in India is governed by an arcane web of tolls, duties and octroi charges levied on kind of road, size of vehicle, weight of load, kind of commodity etc., opening myriad avenues of rent-seeking for officials manning the toll-booths, and several strategies of hoodwinking border police perfected by the long-distance truck driving community on the national Highway network. The truck driver communities of India are also, like everything else, caste and region-specific. See Aman Sethi’s report on skill, driving and ustadhari on the Punjab to Calcutta truck route (Sethi 2008). Economists have long bemoaned the octroi charges as skewing local and state markets for agricultural produce and commodities, driving profits down for the cultivator and prices up for urban and industry consumers. The current BJP regime has been trying to push through a bill in a bid to simplify the movement of goods and rationalize markets across state borders but so far it is stalled in Parliament.
How, in other words, will you still hold on to some part of what is yours?

‘Well’, I said thinking a minute, ‘who says you have to pay from both sacks? You have to pay for both sacks, but not from both sacks. Pay from one – ekatun dhayche, nng panaavsaka alaka phakt ek potbi shilalk asel - Then at the 50th naka, you will have only one sack left (and the price will go down besides), after which you begin paying out your coconuts from the remaining sack, and at the 100th naka mark you will still have at least fifty coconuts to sell. Sure, it isn’t much but its something – mante mi jast nahin ahe, taripan kabetari abet. Do you have a better idea?’ ‘We have the same idea – don janacha ekch bhan’, Moon regarded me with satisfaction. But beyond the cementing of an acquaintance through basic reasoning, this and other riddles were Moon’s mode of imparting some truths about the workings of the rural order and how he had made his way. Take this kodh for instance: Moon explains where money is to be made, who makes it and eventually, how he made it. First, there is no money to be made from growing coconuts. If you wish to make money, you learn the old mercantilist lesson of buying cheap and selling dear. The trader makes money, the farmer makes nothing.14 Second, at every stage, there is some authorized or non-authorized entity trying to skin you for all they can. Third, in this game there is no winning against those above one more generally; you will usually turn over more than you keep. But four, and this is most important, if you use your brains - doka phirayche - you can still turn a profit; you can still make a nafa. And nafa is something Atma Ram Moon knows something about.

Money from Trade, Money from Cotton, and Money from Money
When A.R. Moon says he was a sahukar – a moneylender – he is describing a transition from trader to moneylender in the context of economic changes in village-level cotton-production, the details of which I have described in the previous chapter. In this process persons such as Atma Ram Moon,

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14 Also why no one likes traders. ‘To vyapari manat’, ‘that trader fellow’ being a common slur amongst cultivator castes.
who came from caste-groups that historically did not own land, had through the process of social reform and political struggle given up their earlier occupations considered degrading (such as my host family who used to be barbers) and had entered trading in small commodities and village produce. Persons from such groups took their place alongside older groups who had traditionally undertaken trading and money-lending in Vidarbha, many who had arrived with the colonial economy of cotton a century ago: Marwari from Rajasthan, Patel from Gujarat, Pathan and Afghan Muslims, Khatri traders, Khoja Muslims, Brahmans and Sindi traders amongst others. In the first chapter I described how Gaikwad, a Baudh Dharmi trader, had gone from selling chilies to becoming a moneylender ostensibly with the discovery of his pot of gold. Expanding on that anecdote here, from selling chilies Gaikwad entered the trading of cotton, a vastly more lucrative (though riskier) enterprise.

As I have mentioned, from 1970 till 2002 all sale of cotton in the state of Maharashtra occurred through the AFPMC, the state marketing federation. The Maharashtra State Procurement for Cotton Act (1970) set up a complex structure of state-controlled cotton-marketing federations across the major cotton-growing regions of the state meshed with the agricultural whole-sale marketing system. Agricultural produce in India does not reach the consumer (industry or household) directly, or in the open markets. Cultivators take agricultural produce to controlled whole-sale markets (mandi), where in state-wise arrangements produce is auctioned, traded, sold at fixed prices etc., through a network of licensed intermediaries (i.e. middle-men enabled by state law to extract bribes from cultivators). For cotton, between 1975 and 2002, the state was a monopoly buyer of all cotton grown and produced in the state of Maharashtra. Graders in the employ of the state marketing federations signed off on cotton acquired, through intermediaries, from cultivators. The cotton marketing structure was meshed further with the agricultural marketing infrastructures
which, through a network of interlinked, vertically arranged markets were intended to supply food to urban centers and fiber to industry at reasonable prices.

Thus traders who could raise the money to commence dealing in cotton in the village afforded connections with the most powerful government body for cotton cultivators, buyers and procurers, the graders in the state-wide AFPCM (Agricultural Federation for Procurement of Cotton in Maharashtra: the controlled state marketing board for cotton). The booming economy of cotton made men such as A.R. Moon and Isu Pathan suddenly powerful in the rural economy and village life as with the expansion in yields, cultivators now had more cotton to store, transport, and bring to market. The trader-moneylenders constructed sheds and arranged with acquaintances in the local agro-buying businesses to store and hoard cotton bought in the village from cultivators who could not hold out till prices rose. One of the first things all of these trader-moneylenders invested in were bullock carts to take quintals of cotton to the district mandis, enabling the purchase of cotton at very cheap rates in the village. The carts were also used to smuggle cotton bought in Vidarbha across the border into the neighboring states of Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh to take advantage of price fluctuations in the open markets in those states (scattering on the way petty bribes to police, border patrols, octroi agents at government tolls, etc.). Rural India is under-served in infrastructural supports and even though Maharashtra has greatly improved infrastructures in the past two decades, bad roads, not enough wholesale markets, no storage facilities, deficient public transport continue to drive up post-harvest costs for cultivators and render the production and sale of Indian cotton the most inefficient in the world.

Every single new money-lender, like Atma Ram Moon and Isu Pathan, who entered the economy of cotton in the past two to three decades that I spoke with had at one time or another an arrangement with a local AFPMC grader or a board official, who would, for a fee, upgrade lower grade cotton fetching a higher price for the seller. Through their connections with graders, traders
like Moon and Pathan exercised enormous control over the prices at which cultivators could offload their cotton harvests. This process was explained to me by Isu Pathan, who for 15 years served on the cotton federation in Selu, and by a Marwari family in Wardha, of which Maheshwar Taori (of the Jodhpur Marwari community) served as a cotton grader in Vidarbha for almost 20 years between 1975 and 1990. Good relations with the local trader meant that grade C cotton could be bumped up to grade B, grade B cotton to grade A, the money was going from no one’s pockets, not the seller and not the grader.

One time, he claims, Moon made over a lakh from cotton leavings literally swept from the ground. These residues are so dirty and frayed that today it would be impossible to find a buyer at any price. The tattered staples cannot be spun into thread; such leftover lint is usually used to line mangers for baby animals born out of season in the winter or stuff mattresses and pillows. Moon dispatched one of his boys to ask households if they had any leftover cotton of any quality or condition. Word spread that crazy man Moon (yeda manus Moon) was buying ker/kathya (rubbish) and people arrived with sacks of lint. Moon paid them Rs 50 a quintal, acquiring a hundred and twenty quintals of no-grade cotton. He loaded it onto carts, took it to the board in Kadam, where a grader of his acquaintance signed off on the purchase as grade C cotton. He made Rs 1,20,000 in one day, an enormous sum considering the goods at hand. Moon quite relishes his reputation as an eccentric. It is part of his charisma that he could see money where others saw only rubbish.

From Field To Market
The expansion in cotton-yields whose marketing, transport, and sale opened lucrative new avenues in the rural economy also depended, as I have shown, on an input-driven, heavy chemical use model

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15 Rs 50 may not seem like much today, but not only did it go much further in the late 90s, considering the daily wage rate today is Rs 100 for 8 hours of labour, half a day’s wage for stuff that would be thrown anyway is not a small sum.

16 Of course Moon is almost certainly inflating his earnings.
of cultivation. This predictably erected an intensified economy of inputs around hybrid seeds as many of the manures and fertilizers that had formerly come from the fields now also had to be acquired from the market. The Green Revolution policy subsidized certain classes of pesticide and insecticide. In villages across Vidarbha young men with high-school and/or Bachelors degrees became salesmen and dealers of the new classes of pesticide, insecticides, weedicides, and fertilizers that were to be used on the new seeds. They also became dealers of the hundreds of Bt-Cotton hybrid seeds that flooded the market.

The elder son of my own host family of Bhagat for instance, also Baudh Dharmi, is a salesman for the Hyderabad-based firm AgroGrow which specializes in pesticides for sucking pests, which are attracted to the large vegetal matter of hybrid Bt-Cotton crops. The daughter-in-law of Manu Bhau, a Jodhpuri sweet shop owner in Wardha, had done her B.Sc. and M.Sc. in Botany from Amravati University so she could get a job with a local seed development firm. In local village markets the dealers of pesticides, fertilizers, and seeds also became de facto moneylenders as they lent inputs on credit (at a rate of 2.5% to 5% interest) to cultivators without the money to buy them. Hoping to reap profits this year so that the cycle could become self-sustaining from the next season, cultivators in postcolonial Vidarbha found themselves, as had cultivators a century ago in colonial Berar, entangled in credit and debt lines before the first seed had been planted.

It is not as though the older trader and moneylenders exited the scene; it is that the market expanded and suddenly had room for more, and diverse, players. In Kadam and Ralegaon for example, two neighboring blocks between which all my three field villages are sited, the trading, agro-chemicals, cotton-buying, and money-lending scene is divided between Marwari and Gujarati traders like Bothra, Kothari, Maheshwari and new entrants like Gaikwad, Bhagat, Das Bhai and Munna. The difference in their lending strategy seems to be that the older Marwari moneylenders tend not to lend to smaller or landless cultivators.
New Creditors and New Debtors

In household surveys on domestic assets, I attempted to gather a sense of forms of credit accessed by cultivators differentially situated in the cotton economy, i.e. by caste, by size of land-holding, crops cultivated etc. During one session I was interviewing members of the Chahare clan, from the Gawari (cowherd) community, who subsequently became close associates. This particular family owned about 4 acres of rain-fed land on which they cropped cotton and/or soybean. When I asked them to breakdown the capital invested in last year’s crops by source, I was struck by the absence of sahukari – moneylender – debt in the list. So I asked, ‘Why, don’t you have debts to the sahukar – kay sahukarche nabin abet ka tumchekade?’ To which the woman, Anita Chahare, loudly scoffed, ‘Us – amhala - How will we have sahukari debts? amebakade kassa asteel-ji sahukarche - Will they lend to people like us? – to deteel ka aamesharekaha ka-ji bo?’ It turned out that they did have outstanding debts, many to wealthier fellow villagers who had begun dealing in money on the side to poorer acquaintances in Tirjhada. Such persons, like Gawrikar, who owned irrigated fields and had cash to spare after their debts and costs had been paid off, lent comparatively small sums to clans like the Chahare at marginally lower rates of interest in a newly altered market in which cash was suddenly vital. The Marwari moneylenders in Kadam lend and trade with land-owning clans of diverse castes: Kunbi, Rajput, Brahmin, adivasi and ST/SC clans, with whom they have long relations. They are also the major players in the local agro-business and wholesale trading sectors.

New moneylenders, such as Moon, entered the economy of cotton by innovating new credit strategies for a new class of debtor-cultivator: the small or landless cultivator, ploughing a small owned or rented rain-fed plot between 3 to 6 acres; who had no real collateral to speak of, and yet hoped to reap large yields from the new hybrid seeds. In the over-heating economies of cotton such as obtained in the waning 20th and early 21st centuries in Vidarbha, it was suddenly possible to reap
expanded yields from otherwise uneconomic plots of land. However in order to reap these yields one needed to invest in costly inputs which could only be obtained for cash from the market. Money, cash, entered the sinews of the village economy in a new way—not for luxury or subsistence consumption, but as constant capital in the productive process. Regardless of social standing or land holding, now everyone required money to cultivate cotton, and a new kind of moneylender emerged to meet this need.

**The Price of Money**
At the height of cotton fever, which lasted in popular memory from about 1997 till about 2007/2008, money suddenly became a precious commodity in the village economy. The local price of money began steeply rising at this time, reflected in interest rates on loans which sometimes touched 10% a day. The sources of this money for cotton-cultivation were varied: some in terms of groups/persons I have already described; others (such as important institutional sources like banks) I will come to in a moment. Economists have demonstrated in such situations, interest rates between credit sources synced to create a money market in Vidarbha in which anyone and everyone who had any cash to spare began making money off money by advancing loans to those who required it. Sangeeta Kale, whose own husband, according to her and the file opened on his death, had committed suicide as a result of indebtedness, said when I asked her about whether some person we both knew used to lend money, ‘Yes of course he did. Everyone did it, so did I.’ The Kale are from the Sutar (carpenter) community and do not own any land of their own. Every year they rent 6 to 8 acres from larger cultivators (the Aglave clan for instance) on which they cultivate cotton and soybean, along with their carpentry business and shop. Sangeeta said, ‘the first few years after we started growing cotton – ek don varshi parati chan nigdalees, mhanun ambi pan paishe doosrale dile bate– there were some years of good harvests and we gave (lent) some of the money to others. It was
the best way to make money at that time – *chan vasuli asat boti tevha.*

A variegated structure of interest arose, a differentiated cost of money, depending on proximity between the creditor and the debtor. Thus one raised money at different rates of interest based on whether the lender was a professional moneylender or not, the caste of the lender/borrower, whether the creditor was a kinsman, and if so which side of the family. While some of these rates were formalized, others were not. Cultivators and wage-earners who were lending spare cash to their neighbours, relatives, caste-fellows, and kin lent at rates lower than the market, taking into consideration other social relations between the two parties.

Briefly, a money-market emerged comprising of formal, informal, institutional and non-institutional players at various levels, all plugging into cotton cultivation: agricultural loans from banks, small entrepreneurship seed grants from micro-credit companies and development agencies, district and village-level savings groups meshed with the public and private banking system, post-office loans and savings schemes. Then money-lenders of various castes operating at different levels—agriculturalist lenders in the village lending to other villagers, artisanal caste-groups like the Dhangar who diverted money made from animal husbandry to loans to caste cultivators, loans from kin-members, arrangements whereby someone with land took a loan from a bank and then lent further on interest, those with one member in waged work (eg.: a schoolteacher son or daughter) or a small business (carpentry workshop)—diverted savings to earning interest from money.

**The Institutional Money Market**

I will briefly turn to the institutional money market, since it is debt to banks and the unavailability of formal credit that is the issue in public discussions of farming debt and cultivator suicides.\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^\text{17}\) Banking and agricultural finance, the complex state-managed and private institutional structure through which co-operative, public and state banks dispense money to cultivators for cotton cultivation, is too vast a topic to treat separately here. This would include the myriad financial technologies of crop loan; electrification loans; loans for animal
The rural cooperative banking system through which the vast majority of farmers access loans for cultivation, a topic of fractitious public, governmental, and scholarly debate, has come under severe stress in the preceding two decades of intensive cultivation and failed harvests. In the era of global climate change, droughts are now a regular crises: when I arrived in Vidarbha cultivators were in near desperate straits since two successive years of drought had strained household resources to breaking point. Thankfully 2015 had good rain and people managed to recover. However this year (2017) the monsoon has been scanty and with harvest season upon Vidarbha, the suicide rates have begun to climb. Cooperative banks in Vidarbha are currently saddled with enormous unpaid debts as their cash-strapped clients find themselves unable to recoup costs much less pay back loans in the face of the unpredictable monsoon, the lifeline of agrarian sub-continental life.

In the preceding two decades of heated scholarly and public debate on the suicide of farmers in the Indian sphere, it is bank debt that is centrally at issue in discussions of the event of cultivator suicide. The deceased’s bank details comprise the large mass of documents in a suicide case-file, and unless a file reflects appreciable monetary debts to banks it is usually not eligible for compensation. At the same time, providing documentary proof of amounts owed to private sources is difficult if not impossible. Since it is unprofitable farming, the lack of credit is figured as the cause of suicide in the commonsense narrative: precipitated by the unavailability of cheap credit from (supposedly) safe institutional sources like banks pushes cultivators into the arms of unscrupulous moneylenders. It is thus important to note that contrary to the expectations of market-fundamentalist and centrist economists, the (limited) availability of cheaper credit through

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husbandry; loans for well and boundary construction; loans for farm mechanization, schemes to enable purchase of land by marginal farmers, short-term loans for primary crops, etc. offered at different rates of interest from public and private banks.

18 Specific citation is difficult since the vast majority of writing on cultivator suicides in Vidarbha takes this to be its central focus. Some of this writing has been referred to in the preceding chapters and introduction.
in institutional sources only served to intensify both the economic risks of cash-crop cotton farming and further erode the ability of clan groups to extend care and assistance to individual households in the (by now sadly regular) event of failed harvests.

**In Through The Out Door**
The structure of the banking system as it meshed with the local village economy preceding and intensifying through the Bt-Cotton wave was explained to me by G.C. Karmore, a relatively wealthy OBC landowner of my acquaintance in Tirjhada. He worked for 25 years (between the late 1980s and early 2000s) as a loan recovery officer with the Adivasi Cooperative Bank in Ralegaon. In contrast to the modest dwellings of most other villagers, the family owns one of the more palatial houses in Tirjhada, a jeep, two television sets with cable, a refrigerator, and two motorcycles. They now own almost 40 acres of well and tube-well irrigated land, on which they cultivate cotton, soybean, and vegetables, but are not hereditary landowners. Karmore’s father received some land, like other OBC-Kunbi cultivators in Tirjhada following the land distributions in 1962, and G.C. Karmore bought the rest with money saved from his job when land was still cheap and cotton cultivation suddenly profitable. G.C. Karmore currently occupies a house with his wife, two sons, their wives and children in the OBC quarter. His sons oversee the family fields and dabble in village and block-level politics. They have connections with officials in the local block administration and beyond, are often the point people for visiting political dignitaries, government workers, NGO consultants, and foreign academics, which is how this family was one of the first I got to know in Tirjhada. The Karmores are felt to display their economic stability and comparative access to official and metropolitan avenues of power to other villagers in an unseemly way. For this and other reasons, they are not well liked, though on public and ceremonial occasions and in village discussions they are accorded a position of respect given their social and economic clout. While
young, G.C. Karmore had the reputation of a lay about, and in middle-age he apparently took ferociously to drink, when I met him he had managed to provide a comfortable standard of living for his family. I initially had several interactions with this family, and then for reasons to do with the community I lived with etc., relations cooled. Most of my information draws from our earlier, more relaxed, interactions.

Karmore was reluctant to discuss his job because he understands the social force of monetary debt for cotton in an intimate way. His day job as a recovery officer, with the limited staff of these institutions, often combined with the role of the officer responsible for advancing a loan. Karmore thus found himself both the munificent benefactor who signed off on loans to cultivators with sparse assets, and the villain sent to a cultivator’s house with a seizure note. He had taken early retirement when I met him, and when I asked why given the pay was good he said, ‘I tired of it – kantadlo mi - I tired of being abused – shivai eikun eikun - when you go to their house on a pre-loan inspection they pull out drinks and sweetmeats – jevha tumi jata inspectionsaathi, te jevhu-piyu-khau diyu tumale - and when you have to return after the money a few years later, they won’t even ask after a glass of water – ani paishemage parat aale, mhanje paanihi vicharnaar nabin tumale.’ The recovery and loan officers staffing the cooperative banks were making bad loans to and seizing movable assets from their consociates. Like A.R. Moon and company leveraged the social relations obtaining between villagers to charge astronomical rates of interest, local bank officers like Karmore controlled access to small to medium sums of money at low rates of interest to socially indebted monetarily vulnerable acquaintances. As we will see, the temporality of repayment on a bank loan meshed with circuits of social obligation such that, even when the source was a bank it was difficult to escape debt.

Hotel California
To put it simply and schematically: the institutional credit structure accessed by most cultivators in
Maharashtra, like elsewhere in the country, consists of loans from a Primary Agricultural Society (PAC) to which funds are disbursed from the District Cooperative Banks, who are further fueled by the State level co-operative banks (Kalkoti, Kalkoti and Patel 2012; Shah). The State cooperative banks in turn get money from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and from capital raised by the government of Maharashtra from central, state, and commercial banks. Maharashtra has the largest rural cooperative banking structures in India with over twenty thousand Primary Agricultural Credit Societies tasked with disbursing timely loans to cultivators in time for the two major kharif (monsoon) and rabi (winter) sowing seasons.

However, the rural cooperative banking structure eroded to a very large extent in Vidarbha, like elsewhere in India, after structural adjustment austerity measures radically cut back state support for agriculture and institutional rural credit sources sharply contracted post liberalization. This year, due to failed rains, the Maharashtra government has announced one of its largest ever debt-relief packages for cultivators and the state exchequer expects 34,000 crore rupees disbursed in loans for the fiscal year. However the District Central Cooperatives banks, which disburse funds to PACs, are currently strapped with debts amounting to almost 9,000 crore rupees to the state. The government of Maharashtra is currently in negotiations with the Reserve Bank of India to extend the State’s credit limit and with private banks to extend loans to the state. Meanwhile desperate farmers turn to moneylenders, kin, and other sources as the DCCBs which fund the PACs do not possess the running liquidity to extend timely loans, as funds will only resume if their creditors (private and nationalized banks) stagger repayments, and thus the PACs which receive their outlay post from the broke DCCBs cannot advance timely loans to cultivators for sowing and post-harvesting costs.19

The terms for short-term loans available from public and co-operative banks are seemingly generous, since short-term loans for cultivation of primary crops of small amounts of up to 3 Lakh

19 There has been a spate of reporting on this in the major English and Marathi language dailies in India. Some of this literature is referenced in chapter 2 of this dissertation.
rupees at 7% interest on an 18-month repayment cycle may be acquired against a land title, with no other securities. However, once the loan persists for longer than the stipulated 18-month period, the base-rate of interest on the unpaid amount immediately rises to 13%. If the monsoon is scanty, or for any reason the harvests fail one year unless immediately followed by a year of bumper harvests and high cotton prices, it is soon impossible to extricate oneself from bad loans to the farmers cooperative and become a multiple defaulter, since an unpaid source from one institutional source disqualifies a cultivator from accessing other sources. This information is recorded and stamped on the land title against which the loan is made. Since loan amounts from one source are typically small to medium (ranging from a few thousand to a few lakh rupees) cultivators might take loans from more than one PAC in one season. While the loan is made against the saathara (village form 7/12), the land title, only a specific class of mobile assets can be seized in lieu of repayment. Thus while one can only get a bank loan if one has a land-title, the cooperative bank (unlike a commercial bank) cannot seize land as a penalty for default. Loans are meant to be recovered from ‘hypothecation of crops’, and while bank officials are reluctant to risk the wrath and bad publicity in arriving at a farmers door and try to give cultivators as wide a berth as possible, however once a cultivator finds herself with unpaid debts from one year, since she is immediately barred from state-managed sources she cannot raise the money to invest in inputs this year. And by necessity she turns to riskier and more expensive sources in the private credit markets to repay the loans by investing in the only asset she still has, land.

Besides the cooperative banks, commercial banks also extend credit lines to agriculturalists but for most cultivators, except very well-off rural gentry with appreciable landholdings, these are out of reach since they require a no dues certification from the agricultural officer and neighbouring financial institutions including the PAC, a land title, and for loans above Rs. 1 Lakh, an investigation
by a legal expert on the bank’s panel. Commercial banks also only lend against legal debt-free land-titles, but unlike state-managed cooperative banks they are enabled to seize land in lieu of repayment, along with a wider class of high-value mobile assets (farm machinery, tractors etc.), which must also be declared as securities against the principal. Should a cultivator still manage to get a loan, which may be had at 0% interest rate on loans up to 1 lakh, for loans above a lakh and or/once the unpaid amount crosses a lakh, it jumps to 15% to 25% per annum. Given the costs of cultivation, the risks and profit margins of cotton cultivation, I have detailed in the preceding chapter, 1 lakh rupees is a large enough amount to rapidly snowball with interest and penalties into an impossible sum to repay. Thus even a reasonably well-off cultivator may find himself entrapped in crippling debts to a commercial bank and at immediate risk of losing his land if, for the many reasons detailed in the previous chapter, the crops fail or the prices of cotton fall. In which event either the cultivator will, like poorer compatriots, turn to non-institutional sources of credit and bear the costs, or borrow from clan, kin, and caste-men, or all else failing eschew the land title.

**Land, Clan, and Loans**

Since loans in both the commercial and cooperative sector are issued against debt-free land titles, those who possess them now also have another resource that could be leveraged. Thus a common arrangement is between those with clean land titles against which loans could be had from the cooperative banks, and those without land needing access to avenues for funds, whereby one party took the loan from the bank and lent it further to the other party at an appreciable rate of interest (between 10% to 20%), but also bearing the risk of a default mark on the *saatbara*. It has also meant that since title-holders with different *khata kramank* (account numbers) can take out loans on the same title to which they may jointly as a clan, and separately as individuals, have a claim suddenly within clans the fortunes and debts of individual cultivating households became an issue since either

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20 The rates of interest and terms for agricultural loans in the cooperative and private commercial sector may be viewed on the banks’ websites.
others extended money to pay off the debts of a struggling household (which if they are farming debts can be substantial), or the ability of other clan-members to raise low-interest money for their own fields stood at risk. I discuss the pressure placed on clan and kin relations in more detail in the next chapter, as well as below. The inability of clans to assist individual households with their debts placed kin and clan members in new relations of dependence and authority, as the economy of cotton individuated the risks and debts of cultivation onto individual households.

In a sense, under pressure of the input costs of cultivation and the opportunity costs of money, the clan as a formation has eroded in Vidarbha. Rural kinship has been shatteringly realigned by kin and clan members lending money to each other at usurious rates. That is, kinship relation and clan affiliation no longer signify necessary barriers to usurious lending as persons related to each other through variegated social bonds forwarded spare cash earned in wage or leverage assets such as land for a loan to lend further on interest to those who required it. Throughout Tirjhada, villagers from all castes have begun to lend to each other and divert earnings reaped from cotton and/or earnings from other sources to the local money market, institutional sources of credit assuming their place alongside other avenues to raise cash-debt for cotton cultivation.

*Usurious Kin*

A new kind of debt-relation arose between villagers who also had ongoing ties of a social and intimate nature arrayed along many other axis of differentiation (kinship, caste, language, religious beliefs, etc.). In a sense, the market monetized these relations in so far as they were already the channels through which other kinds of social obligations and resource sharing occurred. The new market in money had opposite consequences on family structure and community-life, the most powerful being the normalization of usurious lending between formerly proscribed groups of persons. In an economy where everyone’s fortunes were now thought to be determined by how much one could pour into a suddenly hungry field, the ties of kinship could not defray the
opportunity costs of money. On the one hand, kin and clan members began to lend to each-other at rates pegged to the market; and on the other, formerly dominant and socially distant caste groups found themselves in new relations of hierarchy and transaction, as subaltern groups entered trading and money-lending in force. Caste and clan boundaries no longer constituted barriers to usurious lending.

While this claim derives from ethnography, the primary data is too vast and varied to analyze in-depth here; it appears in several forms throughout this dissertation. But to give just a few examples of the many ways in which obligation and proximity became avenues for cash-debt in village society at this time: the clan of Narayan Rao Dhangar, who have squatted their herds on the field of Kunbi cultivators in Tirjhada for three generations, acquired land and began trading in money at this time. Thus now his herds squat on the fields of the farmers, of which community some were also his debtors. Atma Ram Moon, we have already met, made out loans of varied amounts (from Rs. 2000 to Rs. 50,000) to different villagers. This caused enough trouble in the village, that eventually Chintamani Shinde’s (of a Patil-Kunbi family) intervention ended Moon’s dhanda. Gawande, a cultivator who had made big profits in the early years of hybrid cultivation because he had a well, had lent to the Chahare clan for twenty years. He had refused to lend to them after two years of drought, knowing they had outstanding debts from the previous cycle. Since no one lent to them, they were forced to sow soybean instead of cotton; this crop also failed. Relations between the two families had soured and Ajj Chahare now claimed that Gawande refused to meet her eyes in the street for shame of causing their precarity. The Bhagats, my hosts, were a family of barbers who had settled in Tirjhada in the 1970s. They owned no land, but one son was a pesticide salesman and the other drove an autorikshaw. They had also taken 6 acres thekevar – rent – from an OBC cultivator on which they had sown cotton. The financing of the autorikshaw had been undertaken through association with a schoolteacher’s family who had taken the loan for them and
charged an interest of 5%. In the Shinde clan, a socially prominent family in Tirjhada, relations between brothers over cash-debts from banks, intra-kin lending and failed harvests were tested finally resulting in the death of Vinod Shinde, whose death I specifically attend to in the next chapter. In order to supply these variegated credit lines and avenues to acquire cash-debt between kin and castes, moneylenders innovated new strategies that enabled and further intensified these channels, aligning them with rates in the local money market. This period saw the introduction of several new rates of interest in Tirjhada, pegged to different repayment cycles attuned to capacity of the borrower.

**Sawai - Deedhi – Varpatti - Percent**

In the money market of Tirjhada in the decade of the cotton boom, differentiated rates of interest entered social exchanges with particular force as the costs of cultivation sharply increased. Thus a host of players now were dabbling in moneylending on a variety of new rates. I do not have quantitative data sets from which may be pressed generalizable claims so this is to be taken not as a ‘theory’ of local money markets but a description deriving from a mass of anecdotal evidence for what occurred in this one site. Take for instance the years 2005 to 2007: at this time, besides the rates available in the formal banking sector, there were three major named rates of lending in the non-institutional money market in Tirjhada and Kadam that I could gather evidence of. There may have been many more, including a host of smaller rates (2.5%, 5%).

The named rates were: *sawai* – a quarter rate – of 25% on the principal. Here, depending on other factors obtaining in the transaction, the rate was set along different payback ranges: 25% a month/25% per 6 months and/or 25% per year. The next rate was an *ardha*: 50%; *percent*: a 100% on the principle; and *deedhi* – one and half times the principal. From what I can gather, these rates usually obtained between caste groups and agriculturalist lenders; or between acquaintances through
some or the other connection (caste/religion/friendship, etc). These, plus a separate tranche of rates (which began from 1% to 10% a day), obtained on money from ‘official’ moneylenders, which tended to be both lower (for long-standing clients with collateral) and very much higher (for the large new class of borrower with no social standing, land or assets).

The most notorious of the moneylender rates was an interest pegged to the day called ‘var-patti’ – daily rate. The varpatti responded to the new class of clientele that needed money for cultivation, but did not have any real securities that could be offered against the loan. The rate is simplicity itself: whatever be the principle the borrower pays between 1% to 10% per day, i.e. a sum of Rs. 1 to Rs. 10 on every Rs. 100. On the varpatti even a small sum soon spirals into an astronomical amount. From what I could gather the varpatti is only a market rate; kin, clan, and neighbours do not lend to each other on the varpatti or its variants. When I asked Praveena Gangamvar, who is the daughter-in-law of the oldest money-lender-trader in Tirjhada, about whether they had ever lent on the varpatti she categorically refused saying, ‘No never! Only those sahukar-types lend on this – nabin, kadibi nabin – varpatti phakt the sabukarsarkhe karte’, by which she meant the (notionally distant) sahukar of Kadam, and the new Johnny-come-latelys like Munna.

There could be many reasons for why, some which have to do with the infrastructure and manpower required to run a successful operation of this scale, and some which have to do with the temporalities of social obligation and monetary debt. Lending to one’s kin on the varpatti not only places them in a precarious situation for which one is responsible, it also means that the issue of repayment potentially shadows every encounter. In the case of the Gangamvar, Praveena’s categorical disavowal is interesting because not only are they the oldest money-lending clan of the village, they are also the oldest shopkeepers in Tirjhada. In the main chowk (village-square) every morning and evening an animated crowd gathers outside Praveena’s kinara dukan (daily-needs shop). A stream of people comes through with fruit/grains/produce and cooked food, their house-tea stall a hub of
village gossip, talk and buying the requirements (soap, tea, sugar, milk, snacks) of daily life. So while the Gangamvars ran a profitable money-lending and trading business whereby they borrowed the capital at rates between 1.5% to 2% from their own caste and clan networks and lent it further to Tirjhada residents at the going market-rates, and grumbled about how the wealthier families never paid back, Praveena nonetheless distinguishes their dhanda from this one. As shopkeepers dependent on village custom and patronage, they never lent on the varpatti.

There is no way to accurately trace the lineage of this rate, or its entry into Tirjhada much less Vidarbha. A.R. Moon claims he learnt the mechanics from Muslim moneylenders in Kadam and introduced it in Tirjhada for the first time, but he was certainly not the only one lending money in this period. Moon began his sabukari dbanda, the trade of moneylending, by hiring three drummers and a band. ‘It was like a festival – sanachadivas sarkhas - They went around the neighbouring villages, to Vani, Ralegaon, Kinwat, Jadka etc, banging the drum calling, “Come! Come! Money! Money! Atma Ram Moon will lend money – ya, sagde ya Moon paishe denaar.’ From the next day people began lining up outside his door.

I asked Moon and others like Sallu Bhai and Munna who lent on the varpatti: what if borrowers didn’t return the money? What can you do? Their answer was usually, ‘Nothing. There is nothing you can do. Do you have a license? - pawti abe ka aamchekade - Can you go to the police? - mug policekade kassa jayche - They’ll throw you into jail rather – mug vipreet tule jailteel phekun deteel.’

Initially I assumed they were simply hiding the more disreputable aspects of their trade and this was part of it. But how many people can you beat up, especially in a rural milieu where news travels fast and every one knows every one? Routinized thuggery, while useful as deterrent, is not a stable

21 The ins and outs of how moneylenders, within the broad parameters, evolve their own personal ‘style’ is, like gambling rings (which I sadly do not have the space to write about here), a topic both convoluted and secret. How moneylenders keep track off and decide interest rates, installments in which the principal may be paid (kisht), the time cycles on different rates to different classes of lenders is, unsurprisingly, a highly specialized kind of knowledge that is neither shared, nor understood, easily by others. I am still figuring this world out after repeated field-visits and explanations.
business strategy. The creditors kept extending credit because this lending strategy responded to the shift I am marking in this chapter: once some other source of value (here the product of the land: cotton, soybeans, cowpeas) could be adduced as acceptable collateral instead of land, the varpati strategy began to make profitable sense. Of course traditional moneylenders have always extended credit against a variety of securities not just land—gold, utensils and so on. Amir Ali Ajani, whose father was an Agha Khani Zamindar and sabukar in the district of Wardha, remembers the long line of peasants before their shop holding loan slips issued against objects of value (women’s gold jewelry (dagine), brass and copper utensils (bhande)) held in their home. However acquiring credit from such a person is not an easy task.

In something like a historical inversion of what Guha describes of Berar in the colonial period, when the new commoditizations of land under the revenue settlements gave moneylenders a high-value security against cash loans made to peasants resulted in a concomitant decline of the practice of crop-lien, Moon took the question of social standing and its connection with title to land out of the equation. He instead focused on the volume of transactions. By lending small amounts widely to a majority strata of small borrowers, Moon hedged his risks: even if there were those who didn’t repay, they were in the minority of borrowers and their bad debts were an acceptable loss to absorb. The majority of borrowers repaid (something) because they needed the cash for cultivation and moneylenders like Moon were its source. Borrowing was made more alluring by Moon’s repayment policy: for small amounts he never asked borrowers to repay the principal, as long as they kept up interest payments. Recently varpati has fallen out of favour and overall informal interest rates seem to have declined. On asking why I was told with the entry of micro-credit companies, savings banks, post-office schemes etc., (which make small sums of capital available at significantly

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22 See Sumit Guha 1985, Commodity and Credit in Upcountry Maharashtra, wherein he describes this logic in reverse for the colonial period. When a partial colonial land-market emerged, the practice of crop-lien of cotton stopped because in this case now land could be mortgaged as security against loans.
cheaper rates of interest, and the costs of default less dire) the local price of money has fallen.

I have examined interest rates on money to demonstrate what I mean by the proximate reverberations of the economies of cotton, here in the generalization of usurious lending between formerly proscribed groups of persons. The valorization of money, the monetization of kin and caste relations, and the new strategies of lending that emerged in this time enable us to see an adjacent and related shift in the social value and economies of land, the most significant store of value in this (or any) agricultural milieu. It is not that the economic value of agricultural land declined—on the contrary it rose as is to be expected with increased productivity. Rather with the sudden centrality of money in everyday life that occurred in the potlatch of cotton, land-ownership as the hegemonic basis, as an extremely powerful index of social and political authority in village society weakened with a consequent re-aligning of caste, the shifting of responsibility of cultivation (and thus risk) from clan to the household, and shifts in the social basis of authority. In the next chapter, I attend to the relation between land ownership, cash-crop cultivation and the re-signification of the marks of social authority. I will briefly examine some facets of the transforming social values of land, which are connected to its prices and modes of circulation and alienation in an economic land-market, but are not reducible to them.
CHAPTER FOUR: REPUBLIC OF COTTON

Taking up where the last chapter concluded, in this chapter I examine the transforming valances of a public ritual that dramatizes the centrality of land as a normative axis of social authority. Further, I claim that this authority of the landed rural household/clan performed as the right to give – dani (Sk: ‘giver’)–was itself predicated on land being received as a gift, as Dan. The chapter extends the argument made in the previous one where I showed how when money became a high priced commodity in the village economy and a necessary requirement of cotton production, relations of social obligation became the conduits of monetary debt thereby also reshaping relations of reciprocity between kin, clan and caste members. The economy of cotton restructured what could be loosely called gift relations between persons, i.e. it made gift-debts into commodity-debts as social exchange relations (caste, kinship) organized on principles other than accumulation became the conduits for monetary loans and the charging of interest. We could say the economy of cotton forged a fractured alignment between the temporalities of social reciprocity with those of money debts.

In this section I extend this analysis of gift-debt to land to argue that the expanding economy of cotton re-signified land from something that was received as dan (i.e. as gift), which enabled an arena of social exchanges on which cotton (and subsistence) cultivation depended, into that which value derives from what it can yield (cotton). This may then be converted into money,

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1 A note on the sources for this section and, as applies, elsewhere in the dissertation: as I have mentioned Vidarbha, though overwritten, is extremely understudied and there exist almost no secondary materials in English or Marathi for this region. Thus throughout this dissertation, given that it is impossible to situate the ethnography and understand what is occurring today in these regions without first historicizing current social formations, I have had to perforce extrapolate a social history and write an ethnography at once. Thus for the colonial period I cite all secondary and primary sources; the description of postcolonial Vidarbha I assembled over a period through fragments derived entirely from ethnographic fieldwork and my reading across a mass of different kinds of information: crop records, land-titles, suicide-case files, bank documents, news-reports in the Marathi dailies, interviews with cultivators, officials, state functionaries, NGO workers, political activists and information compiled from official published and unpublished documents (which are cited when referenced). When other researchers and fieldworkers go to Vidarbha, which I hope they will, they will be able to add to and correct the necessarily partial account I have been able to gather and write here.
through which may be acquired a class of things (commodities, social goods and resources, ritual authority, class mobility, a route out of the village and also land) the possession of which formerly constellated primarily around the extent of land-holding, itself received through dan. This change is itself presaged, since we are in a Mobius-strip situation here, from the transferal of subsistence (predominantly) and cotton cultivation (entirely) from the community of social reproduction to the capitalist market.

I make these arguments through ethnographic examination of idioms in which cultivators in Vidarbha narrate the alienation, receipt, and redistribution of land and the transformation of a ritual and prestation network that is/was constellated around land. I show that the expansion of yields that accompanied large-scale adoption of Bt-Cotton hybrid seeds shifted, or finally fractured, control over land as the axis of power in the rural social order. From one vantage, land could be viewed as the ur-political gift in South Asia, at least for its early modern and modern history. If status and authority had formerly flowed from the ownership and extent of land-holding (i.e. inverting C.A. Gergory’s schema we could say land had a cardinal value), then in the new economy of cotton at issue is no longer simply how much land one owns, but how productive a single unit of land is deemed to be (i.e. land now also has an ordinal value). Thus by the transitive property, how capable the one who cultivates the land is, regardless of given marks of social personhood (caste, sex, religious identity, family status etc.) some which may be earned (money and class mobility through wage-labour or salary or trade; a new kind of village authority linked to the market through cash-crop profit, also enabling the buying of land), others which may only be received. This may seem a commonsense argument. Indeed, it is a common claim by economists that what bedevils Indian agriculture is the unproductive size of landholding and inefficient cultivation techniques. Ergo, as techniques improve and land markets are “set free” in some presumably natural order of progression it is desirable that land be viewed precisely as a high-value asset that should be leveraged by
cultivators for monetary ‘credit-lines’ to ‘improve production’ (see previous chapter). However, this resignification of land from Dan to productive asset in the rural socio-economic order is a shift of tectonic proportions when viewed from the position of the persons, groups, and communities who cultivate and own land.

The rupture of the historically tight articulation between socio-political power and received landed authority re-aligned relations between caste and occupational groups in the agrarian landscape. I am not suggesting that Bt-Cotton hybrid seeds alone that achieved this overnight, or that land was the only axis of community and social life, or that this realignment is to be located within cultivation and the rhythms of agrarian life and production alone. Land was the preeminent axis of those arenas of social and community life that centered around cultivation as a primary occupation. Nomadic, pastoralist, trading, artisanal and other non-cultivating communities had (and have) complex prestation relations amongst each other and with caste cultivators arrayed along different axes of social, ritual, and economic power. To turn to the contemporary moment, this shift is of a piece with the large-scale transitions in Indian economic, social, and political life post-liberalization in the early 1990s which radically altered the meaning and significations of ‘rural’ and ‘urban.’ As with the decimation of agricultural and forest livelihoods, India witnesses one of the largest historical migrations of rural populations to urban centers and peripheries for work and young people imagine a life organized around wage-labour and the city rather than cultivation and the village. Indeed this entire dissertation is an attempt to texture the lived experiential reality, and in so doing submit account of how the lives and deaths of one group of people in a remote set of villages in the heart of India came to be the signifiers and portends of a fortitude through the passages of late-capitalism.

For the specific sites under discussion here, the relation between social authority, land ownership, and productivity had already eroded (or had always been constructed as partial) through
the colonial and post-colonial economy of cotton. Regardless, a decisive shearing occurred in the wake of Bt-Cotton hybrids because of the scale of transformation—the wholesale replacement of one mode of production with another which (briefly) enabled the harvesting of large yields from small plots and the entry of money as a necessary requirement for cotton-cultivation. In replacing land with cotton as the predicative social value, the potlatch of cotton re-aligned a host of clan, caste, and community relations and institutions that had formerly been constellated around control over land, since now control over quanta of land was no longer the primary arbiter of access to cotton which gave access to money which gave access to cotton which gave access to money.

Part I

Land, Caste and Cotton

Social Authority, Prestation and Land
When I say social relations constellated around land I mean a specific organization of social, political, and ritual authority predicated on the control of land that arranges trade, prestation, and labour relations between groups (artisanal and cultivator castes; service and cultivator/artisanal castes; castes and ‘tribal’ groups and so on) in the rural socio-productive order. In Vidarbha, like in many parts of the Indian subcontinent, the rural social order presents (or presented till very recently) a picture of land-holding dominant cultivator castes (Kunbi and Teli), and a network of occupational groups-castes (Nhavi, Sutar, Lohar, Shimpi etc.) who essay various roles in productive and community life. In return for these services they are owed annual gifts of grain, cloth, and food from the land-owning cultivator household.

Earlier in the chapter we have encountered Nemade’s description of some of these groups and the ritual and other kinds of roles they perform/ed. We see that caste as an organizing logic of
production is inscribed in the cultivation process itself. So it is commonly said in Vidarbha that it takes five castes to make a plough (nangar); the sutar (carpenter) to carve the frame; the lobar (blacksmith) to smelt and work the harrow (vakbar) and fashion the nails; the chambhar (leather worker) to fashion the strips and stays; the weaver (bunker) to fashion the reins; the Kunbi (cultivator) to plough (jothne). Additionally in village life prestation is owed to the barber (Nhavi), the jeweler (sonar), the astrologer (joshi), the bard, and so on, plus the twelve balutedari castes mentioned by Molesworth and attested to by Satya as has been previously discussed.

This organization of village-level production, as I have described in chapter 2, is called alutedari (holder of a small share) or balutedari (holder of a share) in Western Maharashtra, and Dani (giver) in Vidarbha. Variants are to be found in some form in many regions of the country, famously appearing as the ‘Jajmani system’ in Dumont’s (and others) analysis of caste prestation in North India. There is a vigorous and ongoing debate in Indian economic history/agrarian sociology about whether caste should itself be termed a mode of production and what precisely is the relationship between caste and class in the Indian case. However, I would argue that at least for Berar-Vidarbha since the emergence of a dominant land-owning caste itself was a consequence of the extension of colonial-capitalist relations into the countryside during the colonial economy of cotton, Dani prestation was not so much a mode of production, which for cotton was enmeshed with the financial technologies and labour regimes of a capitalist market from the mid-19th century, as it is/was a socio-material arrangement between occupational groups/castes that reflected, inscribed, and ritualized the normative value of control over land as the axis of social authority in this milieu.

**Caste As a Mode of Production?**

In the last chapter the point has been made that Vidarbha was a densely monetized region long before the arrival of the EEIC and the colonial state. Not only was money a common medium of
village-level transactions, but also Maharashtra as a region has historically had a close link between rural life and urban centers, a social familiarity with markets, trading and agricultural and artisanal production for market exchange (Banaji 1977; Perlin 1983; Youngblood 2002). The colonial land settlements, construction of roads and railways, destruction of older towns and trading centers, and funneling of cotton to monopoly metropolitan markets, forced sedentarization of nomadic groups peasantized and de-monitized this region, and cash-rents to the colonial state locked indebted cultivating communities to cotton production for the mills of Manchester and Lancashire. Thus even though caste identity and occupation do have a connection in Vidarbha (as they do in the rest of India), and thus agricultural labour and production did/does involve persons of different castes essaying specific roles loosely organized into patrons and receivers in *Dani* prestation, compensation for services has always occurred in both cash and kind and landless peasants and or/sharecroppers tilling other’s fields—wage-labour—has existed alongside caste-based occupations.

This mobility of caste and occupation is attested to by the district gazetteers for these regions compiled between 1898 and 1911 in which administrative officials noted that *dani/alntedari/balntedari* did not organize occupation and/or production for subsistence/exchange and if it ever had, this structure had already crumbled by the late nineteenth century (See *Administrative Gazetteers of the Berar Districts* 1894-1911). This did not mean that there were not many ceremonies, social customs, forms of exchange, and ritual prestation both lateral and vertical that dramatized the agrarian social order and cultivation as being composed of the participation, and requiring the communal labour, of persons from different castes and groups. There were (and are) several such social customs and material exchanges, both vertical and lateral between castes/communities in specific occupational and ritual relations to each other. Here from the Yavatmal gazetteer (1908) on ritual relations between Kunbi and Mahar: ‘In some parts of Berar the Holi fire of the Mahars is first kindled, and that of the Kunbis must be lighted from the Mahars’
There being no distinction between the realm of society and something called ‘economy’ here from the Chanda gazetteer (1909) on the relation between cultivators and the carpenter in Sajoni, the cultivator’s observance of teej (i.e. the first day of the month of Chaitra, the new year by the Hindu lunar calendar), ‘Sajoni is the cultivators observance of Tij. The carpenter is called in and ceremonially welcomed, kunku and rice being applied to his forehead. He prepares a wakbar which is taken to the field next day by gaily caparisoned bullocks.’ There were other social customs and observances which explicitly ritualized the relation between cultivators and occupational castes, and between landowners and their tenants such as here from Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces: ‘At seed-time and harvest all the village menials go to the cultivator's field and present him with a specimen of their wares or make obeisance to him, receiving in return a small present of grain.’

Thus we see that, while certainly caste structures social relations and exchanges of goods and labour in the rural social order, its performance is concerned not so much with organizing production per say along caste-based occupations but with the inscription of the caste-group that controls land as the fulcrum of social exchanges (Raheja 1988). From what I observed and many persons attested this had more or less been the case from what they remembered for the last two/three generations, and the gazettes say this was true by the late nineteenth century, gifts of grain and cloth accompany the payment of money in exchange for labour and services in Vidarbha. Of course by this I do not mean the large-scale monetization of everyday life and proletarianization of wage-labour as occurred with the new economy of cotton through the 1980s to 2000s, culminating in the debacle of Bt-Cotton; it is a question of scale. Thus when I say that Dani not so much

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2 For an account of caste as social practice in relation to land see Monica Goodwin Raheja’s stunning ethnography of caste prestation in North India. Besides offering a model technique for thinking about caste not as theory but as social practice, The Poison in The Gift also locates caste prestation, like I am doing here, in actual relations between groups and not a theory of caste predicated on varna or jati position/hierarchy. So she shows in her ethnography how Gujjar landowners, who are lower-caste, assume the role of patron since they are the primary cultivating caste in her field sites and in her case-study the social significance of castes-caste control over land is socially and ritually inscribed through the right to transfer pollution to other service-tendering dalit, and lower-castes through cloth and food prestations. Goodwin-Raheja (Chicago: 1988).
organized production as ritualized land-ownership, I mean that while village-level production was
certainly organized around land-holding castes and occupational, service, or artisanal groups, this
structure has always been very loose in Vidarbha, with subaltern, lower and tribal castes and
communities entering and exiting cultivation, and commonly engaging in cotton cultivation
alongside other occupations.

*Caste in India, Caste in Maharashtra, Caste in Vidarbha*

There are many reasons for this which I can only gesture to here: the historical expansion of upper-
caste (Maratha) and Brahmin landed political dominance in regions west of Vidarbha in Maharashtra
occurs through the military victories and reign of Shivaji, and the expansion of Peshwa Brahmin rule
after Shivaji. This never occurred in Vidarbha in quite this way (it being under the unsettled control
of the warring polities of the Bhonsle Rajas, the Marathas, the Nizams of Hyderabad state and the
EEIC). While there are certainly communities of Brahmins in Vidarbha (particularly deshasth
Brahmins), and the gazetteers reflect that after the Kunbi Patels, Brahmin Patel’s held the headship
of many villages, as a caste they do not have determining social power in these regions of central
India since Brahmin caste groups were not associated with proximity to political power unlike
western Maharashtra. Thus the lived everyday experience of caste in Vidarbha—composed as it is of
a majority lower-caste, OBC, Dalit, tribal, adivasi, pastoralist, artisanal and Muslim population—is
something other than that secreted by the ideology and early modern and modern social, political
and state institutions of upper-caste savarna hegemony found in Western Maharashtra and other
parts of India (such as Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu) (See Rao 2009).

The experiential and lived reality of caste in Vidarbha does not map onto a ‘theory’ of caste
as the boundary-making practices thought to be ontological features of caste difference do not
derive from a theological or discursive or theoretical position in either the ‘varna’ hierarchy or even
'jati' norms, but are decided for specific situations between specific sets of persons as a matter of social praxis. This claim is demonstrated by the extreme local and cultural specificities even of norms thought to comprise the ‘essence’ of caste in sociological accounts such as ‘purity-pollution.’ That the relation between social identity, occupation, political authority and ritual and social ‘purity’/‘pollution’ are differently organized in Vidarbha, we can turn to the Yavatmal gazetteer of 1908. In a section describing the claims of the Patel, the village headman usually from an upper or middle-caste, the gazette describes customary shares to the skins of dead animals: ‘Another duty performed by the Mahar is the removal of the carcasses of dead animals. The flesh is eaten and the skin retained as wage for the work. The Patel and his relatives, however, sometimes claim to have the skins of their own animals returned; and in some places where half the agriculturists of the village claim kinship with the Patel, the Mahars feel and resent the loss. Another custom, which occasionally obtains, gives one-quarter of the skin to the Mahar, one-quarter to the Chambhar, and a half to the Patel.’ The flesh of the animal and the skin of the animal are ritually and semiotically coded as opposites of each other. Here, the Mahar take the flesh of the dead animal and claim a share of the skin, the Chambhar have claim to a fourth of the skin. However, contrary to the supposedly essential workings of purity-pollution, not only does the Patel and his extended clan not shun contact with necrose he also establishes in social custom the claim to half the skin of a dead animal. One can find numerous such examples both in the archive and ethnography where norms considered almost ontological features of caste are settled as a matter of co-habitation between groups and communities not as theological, ritual or scriptural injunctions but through social praxis.

As there are few Brahmins, so there are no indigenous Rajput, Thakur, or Kshatriya castes—the ‘ninety-two’ Maratha-Kunbi clans who consolidated under Shivaji claim Kshatriya lineage, but this is again still a contested category of social and political identification in Vidarbha as compared to Western Maharashtra (See Youngblood, Deshpande). Likewise, there are no indigenous trader
castes, except one minority Komti community/ caste (thought to have migrated from the Telugu country), though certainly there are several migratory communities of all these (Marwari, Bania, Khatri, Pindari etc) in Vidarbha. The land-holding dominant castes of the rural social order, Kunbi and Teli, are ritually *shudra*, i.e. lower-caste in the caste order, now designated OBC castes deserving of expanded reservations post the Mandal commission recommendations in 1990.

Third, and very significantly, Vidarbha is the birth country and center of political struggle of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the visionary leader, social reformer and politician of the Dalit Mahar community. Under his leadership Mahar communities who had begun entering the colonial army as a route out of the village in the late nineteenth century, organized in the national movement under the banner of the Indian Labour Party, converted en masse to Buddhism, acquired and encouraged modern education in convent and missionary schools, and today are a decisive social and political presence in the region. In Tirjhada, for instance, while today Baudh Dharmi comprise almost a third of the landowners in the village only one suicide (and this attributed to a prolonged illness) has occurred in the community, with strong intra-community networks and clan and community institutions which step in to assist families in times of need.

Fourth: Vidarbha was the epicenter (from 1985 to 1995) of one of the most militant peasant movements of postcolonial India under the broad banner of the *Shetkari Sangathan* – The Farmer’s Alliance – lead by the charismatic bureaucrat turned farmers leader Sharad Joshi. Today there is no trace of it left in its former strongholds. The collapse of the movement is co-terminus with the adoption of hybrid cotton cultivation. Of interest is not only the broad cross-caste and cross-class nature of the alliance, which brought together small and landless farmers-labourers, middle peasantry, rural gentry, artisans and traders, but the fact that it did not organize itself solely around the symbolism of an agrarian peasant cosmology though of course these vocabularies deeply influence its political organizational, pedagogic, and aesthetic forms. Rather the *Shetkari Sangathan*
articulated a common identity as producers/cultivators and rural denizens demanding an unmediated relation with the market and the ending of state procurement of agricultural produce. So in this case the articulation of a demand for the just price was made explicitly against a paternalistic national state which in the guise of protection was accused of artificially depressing the price of agricultural produce through monopoly procurement and funnelling cheap rural surpluses to an urban bourgeoisie (Youngblood 2002; 2017).

Thus for a host of reasons located in its early modern, postcolonial, and recent history, even though the Kunbi and Teli do comprise the majority of cultivating households and land-title holders, and Dani clans are consequently usually Kunbi, the articulation between caste, occupation and cultivation in Vidarbha is not rigid. Rather it is highly mobile with persons from subaltern castes practicing all manner of occupations, including owning and cultivating land, and this seems to have been true at least since the upheavals of the late nineteenth century. It is in this sense that I mean caste in Vidarbha being not quite a mode of production, but rather a redistributive and circulatory mechanism in which services of various kinds by specific groups are tendered towards cultivation (and social reproduction) to certain households/clans, this exchange centered on the material enactment through prestation (Dani) and the performative display through public ritual (Pola), of control over land as the arbiter of social and political power in the village community and the wider rural social order. Because Dani prestation was primarily (though not exclusively) centered on the ritualizing of land and not (primarily) the organization of production, when land as a principle of social power was undercut by the expansion of cotton production and artisanal, nomadic, pastoralist, and other groups became cotton cultivators, this exchange system and the contingent relations of dominance, subordination, prestation, and exchange it reflected collapsed within the space of ten years.
**Dani: Givers**

By the time I arrived in Tirjhada in 2014 Dani, such as had existed, was already a thing of the recent past and the young generation barely remembered it. However most middle-aged people, by which I loosely mean 35 and up, remembered it as organizing social relations to some restricted sense. Dani is better analyzed as organized around the principle of land based social authority rather than a system of production because, while the large majority of cultivating households and landowners in Tirjhada are OBC-Kunbi and also enter into exchanges with artisanal castes like all landholding cultivators, of these only five clans have Dani, or patron, status. Thus simply being a Kunbi landowning household does not bestow Dani status. On enquiring it turned out that the Tirjhada Dani were also the hereditary khatedars of the village.

Till the mid-1960s a majority of the lands of Tirzhada was held by only five prominent Kunbi clans—Shinde, Ruikar, Aglave and Khadse. The overwhelming majority of Kunbi cultivators, and cultivators from other castes, were tenants and sharecroppers on these clan lands. The largest and wealthiest of the land-holding Kunbi clans in Tirjahada village was that of Ruikar, distinguished in their social primacy by the honorific ‘Izhardar’. Izhardar, lit. ‘holder of a Izhara’, is a Mughal title which bestowed on Ruikar, by popular account, ‘the sanad of 400 villages’, (in actuality a much smaller) number, anyway a substantial number of villages. Likewise Patil, the other Dani clan, is an honorific marking the headship and revenue-collection responsibilities to a circle of villages. All such rentier rights in land were dismantled by legislative actions of the postcolonial state abolishing Zamindari and begar (forced labour). The land ceiling and redistribution legislations of 1962 (known as the kudhkayda) gave tenants and sharecroppers titles (the Kunbi-OBC cultivators in Tirjhada received titles to land at this time), and specific legislations further redistributed (to some extent) lands to tribal/adivi/ST and other dalit, and backward caste communities who also entered cotton-cultivation in this period (See GOI 1957; Nanekar 1966).
These five clans are also the Dani in Tirjhada, hereditary patrons to whom other artisanal households tendered services in return for gifts of grain, cash, and cloth. So the Shinde clan is the Dani of Sangeeta Kale’s family, who are of the sutar – carpenter – caste. For at least three generations her husband’s people fashioned the ploughs, cots, stools, cupboards of the Shinde clan in return for 5 munn of jawari (millets), 2 munn of rice (tandoor) and 2 munn of wheat (ghumi) and later also money at Pola, the annual bull parade and festival. There no longer is a Khati (blacksmith) family in Tirjhada; the last member having died some years ago. But the Shinde were also the Dani of the Khati of Tirjhada. A Dani relation did not mean that the Kale only worked for Shinde or that Shinde only compensated labour with grain; the Kale ran a small woodworking and carpentry shop where they fashioned, for cash, everything from chairs, cots, almirahs, and beds to beautifully carved and painted bulls ordered on custom for display on Pola by wealthy rural families. The Aglave are the Dani of the only Pandit who lives in a neighbouring village and he dutifully arrives to conduct prayers and propitiations for births, marriages, and cleansing rites after a death for a long agreed upon share of rice, wheat and cloth to be received at Pola.

**Political Authority and Landed Authority**

It is through the social exchanges surrounding a landed Dani household that the clan displays its claim to prestige in the rural social order. In their position as dani, these clans hold certain kinds of public ritual authority and undertake social and community obligations on behalf of the cultivating community. It is these five clans that take the primary responsibility for organizing the annual dhindi (procession) and bhandara (communal offering of food and feeding) of Gosain Ba, a village warrior-ascetic deity that has become very popular in the surrounding regions.³ Besides the exchanges which

³ The popular worship of the figure of horse-riding, cattle-rustling, warrior-ascetics is to be found across west-central India. See Bhrigupati Singh (2016) on the cult of Thakur Baba in Shahbad, Rajasthan. This briefly finds mention later in this chapter.
other landowning households also undertake, Dani also enjoy ritual precedence in community
festivals, decision-making and so on. They are also expected to provide help to their tenants at
specific life-cycle events, so it is to the landowner’s wife that the *dai* (midwife) is sent to ask for a old
*lugdya* (cotton sari) for the tenant to wear when the mother gives birth.

During the annual Pola parade lead by the village chief, the order of precedence is a matter
of debate and contest between landed clans. This ‘customary’ right became a legal property right by
the early twentieth-century when, when with the conversion of land into private property, land title
too became a legal property right. As indigenous revenue and land tenure systems as well as
institutions of political and social authority were inscribed in mutilated form in the emerging legal
and civil codes of the colonial state, the customary right of the village Patil and landowners to lead
the Pola parades became tied to a new system of ordering land and its possession and alienation (see
*Berar District Gazetteers*; Russell 1916). The right to a specified position in the village Pola could be
enforced as a legal right tied to the land-title. The emerging district court systems and administrative
judicial officers in the late nineteenth-century admitted complaints demanding the right to the
specific position that came with the transfer or sale of a land deed, and district officers bemoaned
the time spent on sorting out disputes of precedence between agitated parties (See *Berar District
Gazetteers* 1898-1911).

This inscription of the relation between the conferral of titles/cultivation rights/revenue
rights to land as the axis of rural politico-social authority is further attested in this interesting
description of a Pola parade from the Yavatmal gazetteer of 1908. Noting the bulls and officials
present at the occasion in their capacity as representatives of the rural political order the Gazeteer
states: ‘Under this stand the Patel’s bullocks, which should be a pair without spot or blemish, all
white or all red, according to the custom of the village. To the left of the pole a long line is formed
of the other bullocks, those of the Patelki family first, then a pair chosen to represent the
Deshmukh, a pair to represent the Sarkar, the Patwari’s pair and finally those of the other villagers.’ We can note here the bull-men pairs chosen to represent specific titled offices connected to land as political authority: the Patelki family, i.e. the clan of the village chief and revenue-collection officer; the Deshmukh with similar functions; the Patwari who is the village accountant and revenue record-keeper; and very importantly, a pair of bulls chosen to represent the Sarkar, the British colonial state, as the sovereign political authority which is deemed so because titles to land are issued by the Sarkar.

This description also tells us, by implication, which land tenure this village was under—the Ryotwari system—since here it is the Sarkar’s bulls that head the parade and ryots paid revenue directly to the colonial state. Compare with this description from the Wardha gazetteer (1906): ‘In the evening drums are beaten and all the cattle taken outside the village to the shrine of Hanuman or Maroti. A rope is made of mango-leaves and stretched between two posts, and all the cattle are collected in a line. The Malguzar’s cattle are then worshipped and to the horns of the oldest one pieces of wood are bound and torches tied to them; he is then made to break the rope and stampede back to the village followed by all the other bullocks. They are caught and taken to the Malguzar’s compound and he distributes a pice each to the villagers.’ In this description, instead of the Sarkar it is the Malguzar’s bulls that lead and ford the toran since the Malguzar is the holder of a pre-colonial patrimony converted into a revenue-entitlement to a designated number of villages under the Malguzari tenure system by the colonial state.

The Dani of Tirjhada lost a majority of their lands (though the clans still have substantial holdings of 50 acres and up) as a result of the land ceiling legislations in the first decades after Independence, which fixed the upper-limit of landholdings in Maharashtra. After the land ceiling legislations of 1962 which both dispossessed the hereditary khatedar of some of their lands but left plenty as compared to the plots distributed to their sharecroppers and tenants (who each received between 4 and 6 acres per cultivating household) and the Green Revolution technologies that
expanded the yield potential of cotton-fields, the forms of landed rural power that had been consolidated through the privatization of land in the colonial economies of cotton enabled access to new avenues of wealth-creation from cash-crop agriculture.

Interestingly, from what I can make out by comparing the colonial accounts with remembered accounts of older residents and then comparing with the parades I myself witnessed in Wardha and Yavatmal in 2014/15, for this period of (short-lived) postcolonial prosperity, when there was money to be made from cotton between the 1970s and the mid-1990s, the claims to social power that had been advanced on the basis of land were peculiarly intensified as large land-holding was now not just a claim to social authority in the abstract but material prosperity through the intensive cultivation of cotton. By the time I arrived in 2014 this moment had passed with the (devastating) democratization of cotton cash-cropping and the Pola parades are now a much more sedate affair compared to the intense rivalries to precedence that had marked the festival just a few decades ago when the bombast of warring clans was ( provisionally) matched by economic clout. Today when the relation between land, cultivation, and social authority has itself been radically upended, the Dani of Tirjhada, while better off than their poorer compatriots, are as uncertain of what they may be in a position to give as everyone else.

The Sovereign Gift of Land

I have said the position of the Dani as giver itself flows from the receipt of land as gift. Let me offer a small ethnographic anecdote to explain what is meant by this speculation: I was sitting besides Atma Ram Moon’s fields and asked, ‘So how did you buy your land (vavar kassa ghelka)?’ To which he replied:

ARM: I received it (mala bhaintla).
AS: How do you mean ‘received’ (midala)? You mean it was given to you? By whom? Your father (vadeelkade midala)?
ARM: My father? Hell no (nai ba)! He didn’t have any land (tyankekade kaisch zamin nabitya). All my land is my own (i.e. acquired by him). Yes that’s exactly what I mean. I got the first 4 acres from Chintamani Shinde, and then the next 7 acres from Moreshwar, and it went like that. Later when money came I bought land (nantar jevha paisbe aale tevba mi svatah vikat ghetlo). But in the beginning that’s how it was.

AS: Did you pay them for it?
ARM: Yes of course I did later. But he gave it to me.

I encountered this specific self-thematization—as a recipient rather than a buyer of land—present, albeit in different ways depending on the parties to the exchange, in many conversations with other cultivators from different castes. I heard a version of this from the clan patriarch of a Dhangar group of my acquaintance. The Dhangar are a pastoralist community of sheepherders who travel with their flocks on seasonal migratory routes across west-central India, but again entered the colonial economy of cotton alongside caste cultivators in the late nineteenth century. During the cotton-sowing season in 2015, a Dhangar clan was camped on a hill a few kilometers away from Tirzjhada, my field village. Recently the Dhangar have turned to cotton cultivation, and this clan (comprising five brothers and their wives, children, and grandchildren) owned about 40 acres of land lying between Tirzjhada and the next village of Dhotra. When I asked how they had got their land, Narayan Rao Dhangar (the clan patriarch) said the fields were given to his father by a wealthy Kunbi landowner in Dhotra village. This landowner, a man called Arun Kakade, is a local big man for whom Narayan Rao Dhangar’s father performed varied husbandry services. Narayan Rao Dhangar does not describe this first exchange in land between his father and Kakade in the idiom of a sale—his father received the land, for which money was exchanged later. That is, whether money was exchanged which it almost certainly was, the receipt of the land, i.e. what enabled this particular group specifically to have come about/bought their land, was narrated outside marketized logics of sale and purchase. Rather, it is only because Shinde first gave the land that Moon was able to buy it.

Why is the acquisition of land narrated in this way? More specifically, why is the idiom of the gift so commonly invoked even today when all transactions and exchanges in land are subtended by
commodity-exchanges on the market, and have been for the past half-century? Because there is a historical model at hand for the gifting of land—that of the pre-colonial land grant and the postcolonial land redistributions to landless tenants and sharecroppers. Land it would appear, while certainly bought and sold, has never been a commodity proper in Vidarbha, nor indeed does there exist a free market in agricultural land.\(^4\) The primary mechanism of the movement of land through Vidarbha’s (and South-Asia’s) early modern and modern history was that of the sovereign land-grant.

This model of the sovereign land-gift has an intimate, and ritually present, social history in Tirjhada. When people describe the moment when they became legal title-holders of the lands they worked, in popular memory the Izhardar Ruikar is described as having called all his tenants and given his lands away before his clan sold the rest and left the village. Interestingly when I enquired if tenants had paid to receive rights in land, no one was clear on this question. So I asked Sagar who demurred saying, ‘No it wasn’t like that - tassa nabi,’ and to further resolve what he viewed as my inability to understand clarified, ‘He gave his lands away - dan dila’, invoking here the ur-figure of the gift in south-Asia. The dan in land here is a specific marking of what Parry terms the ‘downward’ vertical gift—it is a political relation whereby pre-colonial sovereign authority (Mughal, Maratha, etc.) vested rights to revenue collection in powerful local clans and chieftains.

The sovereign gift in land is not an economic relation between individual buyers and sellers; nor is land a commodity. Rather dan marks the political relation by which land is bestowed on a title-holder/his clan as the mark of sovereign favour. The dan of land is thus a political and social relation between clans and sovereign authority. That Zamindari titles were legally abolished by the post-

\(^4\) The regulations that govern the legal alienation and sale of agricultural land in India is a topic too vast to be treated within the constraints of this dissertation. Agricultural land cannot be bought and sold in an unrestricted fashion, nor can land designated for agriculture be turned to other uses without permission from the administrative branch. An agriculturalist can alienate her land only to another agriculturalist, and owners belonging to SC/ST communities who have received land under state schemes cannot alienate their land at all legally without permission from the District Collector. There certainly exists a market in agricultural land in rural Vidarbha; yet it is a partial and restricted one.
Independence state as part of its modernizing drive to abolish feudatory land relations and increase agrarian productivity by giving tenants title and security of tenure, does not mean that land immediately became a commodity proper with unrestricted rights of alienation and circulation in a commodity-exchange. Nor did the buying and selling of land in the market lead to a wholesale transformation of the ideology of land-ownership in village society.

Land may have come to the tiller (or at least one class-caste of tiller) via postcolonial legislative action, but in popular memory it is the Izhardar Ruikar who gave away his lands to the tenants and share-croppers of Tirjhada village. This is not because present-day farmers labour under confusions regarding the domains of legitimate political authority. They do not confuse the postcolonial democratic state with the feudal ties obtaining between Izhardars and their tenants, misattributing the actions of the former to the benevolence of the latter. They are well aware of the land ceiling legislations, particularly since the vast majority of them received their lands as a consequence. The land is marked as having been given away by Ruikar because it is through Dan that land is received. The Ruikar clan has not lived in Tirjhada since the mid-1970s and no longer even own their ancestral homestead in the village. Regardless, at the annual pola festival, it is Ruikar’s bulls that lead the parade. I attended the 2014 and 2015 parades—since the Ruikar clan is no longer in situ, an impressive animal belonging to one of the other historically landed Kunbi clans ritually stood in for the absent bull of the absent Izhardar.

**Pola: The Parade of Bulls**
The titular and real social authority enjoyed by land-owning clans, displayed in fixed order of precedence behind the figure of village political authority, the Patil, is most prominently displayed at the four major communal public festivals: Holi, Dussehra, Tulsilagna, and Pola (*Berar Gazetteers*). Of these, I will discuss only Pola because as an extended, multi-layered, and, in many ways, still political
public ritual, it most centrally expresses the relation I am drawing here between land-ownership and social authority.⁵ The other rituals have been culturalized to a very large extent, an issue that is taken up for discussion in the last chapter. This is also true of Pola at one scale or one dimension of its ritual performance, but less so. Unlike the other festivals, which mark major events in Hindu cosmology and the religious calendar, Pola is an agrarian rite. Tied to the seasons of cultivation, Pola continues to be a major event in rural and peri-urban Vidarbha. Pola is found in a wide region of south/central-India; but nowhere else in the country.⁶ The broad contours shared are many variations not only between states and regions, but also within regions and even villages. My account is to be taken as describing versions that I both witnessed myself and have gathered from other sources as obtaining in Maharashtra, primarily in the Vidarbha, Khandesh, and Marathwada regions, with Vidarbha’s Pola being regionally famous. My data derives primarily from the versions I saw in the Wardha and Yavatmal districts.

The festival occurs over three to five days and is extremely complex, dramatizing relations and exchanges obtaining at many different levels and sites of the agricultural order—the man and bull; the cultivator and service animal; the cultivator and the different caste and occupational groups involved in cultivation; the hierarchical relations of labour obtaining between landowners and their workers, and the relations of social and political authority obtaining between titled landed authority and the village community. Rituals marking each set occur on designated days, beginning with a staging of wildness and domestication between man and bull, and culminating with the public parade lead by the Patil’s bail/jodi (his pair of bulls). To give a flavor of what Pola looks like and

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⁵ Given the transformations I am tracing in this dissertation two of the other three festivals, i.e. Holi and Tulsiagnna have become private rituals, by which I mean are now performed publicly under the aegis of some or the other religious or community institution/residents association/village street or in individual homes. Dassehra, which is still staged publicly on a large scale, has lost its political function.

⁶ Versions of the Pola occur in the east-central state of Chhattisgarh, the southern state of Karnataka, and in Andhra Pradesh. In Tamil Nadu, the same ritual appears as Jallikattu, recently the subject of controversy sparked off by a legal prohibition under pressure from animal rights groups.
demonstrate what it meant by a shift in social understandings of land as the normative axis of authority, I will briefly describe some of the main rites on each day and the kinds of intimate/socio-political relations they enact. This will demonstrate both the social exchanges and prestation networks, a ritual enactment of which comprises the rites, considered central to agricultural production and their transformation in the wake of the new economies of cotton.

In those instances when Pola occurs over five days and is being conducted by a landed house with persons on their pay, on the evening of the first day the bulls are set free to graze for a night in the pasture-lands. The next morning the cultivator goes to the bulls and invites them with the words whispered in the bull’s ear, ‘atta avatan ghya – udaya jehwayla ya – now accept this invitation – tomorrow come for a meal.’ The bulls are then ritually bathed and this evening they are kept in the shed at home. On this day the marks of servitude in the form of the wooden plough, the iron harrow, and iron nails are taken off the animals. These will not be put back on the bull until the festival concludes, when they will be dressed in tinseled and embroidered cloth and adorned with strings of shell and metal bells. The next day the bull’s shoulders, across which the heavy wooden nangar is placed, are rubbed with a mixture of heated ghee/oil and halad (turmeric) in a ceremony called khand-malane (rubbing the shoulders). The bulls are propitiated by both the landowner and the service men who are tasked with the daily care of the animals and the fields. That evening the bull is again formally invited with words (amantran, avatan) for dinner, and this evening they are served festival foods by the women of the house. This evening when the ghadimansa, the field labourers, bring the bulls to the landowners house for dinner, they propitiate the bulls outside the home and sing zhadti propitiations to the bull and abuses at their paymasters.

The next day the bulls are bathed, painted, and dressed in elaborate costumes and again formally invited to participate in the village parade lead by the bulls of the village chief. The festival concludes with Pola, a bull parade through the public square, lead by an old bull belonging to the
village chief (Patil, Deshmukh, Deshpande, etc) with a wooden frame of flaming torches (called *makhar*) tied to its horns. The animal is made to ford and break a string of mango leaves (*toran*) strung between two poles on the outskirts of the village, at which the gathered company yells, ‘*pola phutla* – pola has burst’.

On this basic theme there are many variations: in some the bulls are arrayed in a circle and then let loose, the line of the crowd breaking with the bulls; in others instead of a *makhar*, icons of a favoured village deity are tied on the horns; in still others, two bulls are ritually married; in one version featured on local television in a town located on the borders of Vidarbha and Andhra Pradesh I saw a eunuch dressed as a bull ritually included in the Pola parade, and in some regions/villages a bull called the ‘*bashinga bail*’ (the bull with the flag: ‘*bashinga*’) is turned loose to run through the village, chased by young men who try and catch it for a prize. Colonial gazettes note that an extension of this gesture used to find corollary in the belief that the old bull would die within three years of being made to signify the pharmakon. In some versions I was told the Patil’s wife places a soaked wheel of turmeric bound in cheese-cloth on the shoulder of the *makhar* bail, this pouch is then taken off the bull once it has forded the *toran* and stored carefully to be used as a cure for specific illnesses. The processional aspects of the festival conclude with a parade of bulls lead by their owners in descending order of rank through the village, accompanied by their field labourers (*ghadimanasa*) who hurl ritual abuses at their patrons and the bulls.

During this parade, the order of precedence of which is hotly contested amongst powerful clans, in which most people are very drunk alcohol being one of the customary gifts by patrons to their labourers, ritual abusive limericks called *zhadti* are flung as challenge and riposte between warring parties. From what people in Tirjhada recalled and accounts I heard, in their heyday the Pola parades were turbulent affairs with prominent clans and their service men fighting pitched battles over the right to lead. The game of provocation and offense quickly descends into sharp fights as
men hurl cheeky limericks insulting each other’s progenitors like this one:

\[
\begin{align*}
Aabhad gadgade, shing phadphade \\
Shingaat pade khade \\
Tubi maay kaadhe...bo telaattle vade \\
Tuva baap khaye, bo...pede \\
Ek naman gavra Parbati \\
Har bola Har Har Mahadev!
\end{align*}
\]

The clouds rumble, the flags flutter
On your horns may fall blows
Your mother fries...O balls of dough
Your old man O.... sucks on milk cakes so
A white calf for Parbati
Say Har Mahadev Har Har Mahadev!

Another class of zhadti comprise four to six line invocations to Mahesh (Shiva), the lord of the bull (nandi). Briefly, the zhadti rehearse the travel of the gana, the people, to the high mountain where Shiva and Parvati reside (varbya rana; dongar), from where they bring earth and place it in the hand of the guru, here teacher and Shiva himself, the ascetic warrior. The earth is fashioned into a bull and the cultivator is given lordship over the bulls in his field by Mahesh, the lord of the bull. The zhadti end with a variation on the theme of cattle-raiding, a deep Indo-European mythic and epic structure to be found in the Greek, Celtic, Iranian, Irish, Indian, and German mythic corpuses. In western India deified cattle-rustling heroes (Pabuji, Gogaji, Dev Narayan) from pastoral Jat, Gujjar, and lower status Rajput castes are propitiated in folk ballads, lays, and bardic musical traditions for their healing power over snakes and snake-bites (Singh 2015). Bhrigupati Singh, drawing on Doniger and Dumezil, has analyzed the cattle-rustling myth within the longer temporalities of the transformation of the mytho-moral structures of the subcontinent from the cult of blood sacrifice associated with the Rig Vedic gods, to the cult of milk (agape) materialized in Krishna Gopala, the cowherd. Interestingly while in the Shahbad iteration the pastoralist hero Tejaji receives a boon from Shiva and rescues cattle, in Vidarbha it is ‘the people’ (gana) as a cultivating community who go to Mahesh,
receive the bull, and rustle a white calf for Parvati.

\[
\begin{align*}
Gana \textit{re} \textit{gana} \\
Gan \textit{gele} \textit{varchya} \textit{rana} \\
\textit{Varchya} \textit{ranatun} \textit{aanli} \textit{maati} \\
\textit{Te deli} \textit{guruchya} \textit{baati} \\
\textit{Gurune} \textit{ghadavla} \textit{mabanandi} \\
\textit{To nela} \textit{ho} \textit{Polayamandi} \\
\textit{Ek naman} \textit{gavra Parvati} \\
\textit{Har bolo Har Har Mahadev!}
\end{align*}
\]

The people O the people
The people climbed the mountain steeple
Brought earth from the high mountain land
And gave it in the guru’s hand
The guru fashioned a bull
They took it to the full circle, and
A white calf for Parvati
Say Har Mahadev, Har Har Mahadev!

Others paint vivid word images like this one:

\[
\begin{align*}
\textit{Kadlya} \textit{vavarat} \textit{kundhyacha} \textit{khati} \\
\textit{Bail} \textit{bandhle} \textit{daatodaati} \\
\textit{Shyam} \textit{Rao} \textit{mbante} \textit{budali} \textit{sheti} \\
\textit{Ganaji} \textit{mbante} \textit{lavo} \textit{chatile} \textit{maati} \\
\textit{Ek} \textit{naman} \textit{gavra Parbati} \\
\textit{Har bol} \textit{Har Har} \textit{Mahadev!}
\end{align*}
\]

Iron hoes planted in the black land
Nose to tail the bull stand
Shyam Rao says there drown my fields
The people say here rub your chest with sand
A white calf for Parbati
Say Har Mahadev, Har Har Mahadev!

In some regions the week also includes public jousts in which young men compete to bring a bull set loose in the \textit{maidan} (open ground) under control, the winning youths awarded a small price by the village organizing committee. In the evening the \textit{ghadimanasa} take the landowners’ bulls from door to door, where the women of the household welcome them with gifts of grain, cash, and sweetmeats. These offerings are also made to the bulls. It is in the processional aspects of the ritual, the public
parade and performance, that the social and political axes of authority are most prominently displayed in the kinds of ritual actions undertaken by the Patil, the figure of landed political authority, for and on behalf of the cultivating community.

Man-Bull: Nature in Culture
Recently the performance of the Tamil Nadu version of this festival, known as Jallikattu, was proscribed by a Supreme Court injunction in response to a petition advanced by animal rights groups who have castigated the bull-man contests as causing harm to the animals. In the events young men vie with each other to bring a bucking bull under control and there is much rolling and tumbling about of both bull and man as a result. Despite the presence of state-appointed medical doctors and veterinarians as a legal requirement for the staging of a Jallikattu contest, the mostly urban animal rights activists demanded the fights be banned as this put the animal under threat of injury and emotional distress. The incident spiraled into a national fracas between angered rural and political constituencies in Tamil Nadu who argued the Courts had no business intruding in traditional and customary practices and an urban middle-class national public decrying the contests as against the norms of civilized society in which it would seem men and animals equally comprise a future rational public. The heated battle that followed, which culminated in the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu insisting he would organize a Jallikattu on the lawns of his official residence in Chennai if New Delhi did not withdraw the order, rehearsed the long history of conflicts over what constitutes ‘tradition’ and ‘custom’, the proper relations between humans and animals, the proper arenas in which these relations should be located (pets in home versus work animals in fields, transport animals in towns, scavenger animals in cities). Like other questions of custom and practice in a modern socio-political order continue to be a contested arena of contemporary Indian life, which range from questions as tragically horrifying as the 1987 immolation of Roop Kunwarba
Kanwar as sati to the violent overtones beef-eating has assumed as a signifier of the Muslim other in recent India, the debates around the appropriateness of Jallikattu as the reflection of a pre-colonial order mimicked, through inversion, the modern histories of these practices, their implication in the discourses and institutions of the colonial and modern state, and the right of the modern Indian state to intervene in ‘traditional’ practices in the name of a national public.

My interest was sparked by the interesting discussions of the practice underway in the Indian media sphere, in which several articles cited the Neolithic lineages of the festival, many reports claiming the bull-man tussles enact the taming and domestication of cattle (Premakumar 2016). In establishing the hoary credentials of a custom that seemed to provide a living link to an ancient agrarian past, several pieces noted that something akin to Jallikattu is attested to in an IVC seal (3300 to 1300 BCE) depicting a man holding onto the hump of a bull. Mentions appear in Tamil Sangam literature composed between the 2nd BCE and the second century of the common-era and also feature prominently in descriptions by colonial officers (Venkat 2017).

I was curious about the Jallikattu controversy since I had seen several versions of the rituals during Pola where the man-bull contests take a different form, though in Vidarbha too they are often staged in some regions as part of the festivities. To dispense with an obvious point, whatever might be the antiquity of the practice in its present form in Tamil Nadu I am not competent to judge. But since cattle have been domesticated in the Indian subcontinent for over 5000 years, it obviously cannot be a first contact moment between man and bull that Jallikattu rehearses. Indeed this point is made by implication in two excellent analyses in which the authors note that the banning of Jallikattu will further endanger indigenous breeds of cattle under pressure from imported Jersey milch breeds, the native bloodlines of which are preserved through careful breeding for their
proven performance in the annual contests (Anugula 2017; Karthik and Vasagam 2017). A festival economy in which specific breeds of bull are prized and inter-generationally bred for their capacity to act as if they were wild is staging, in my view, a much more interesting set of relations of domination and subordination, invitation and conquest between the ploughman and the service animal. It is to the contemporary rites and invocations we should turn to understand the lived experiential textures of how articulations between the man-bull, cultivator-service animal, pharmakon-village community are lived and experienced in the agricultural order today.

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Pola 2015, Tirjhada, Yavatmal

In Tirjhada village where the participants share, albeit a radically altered, social milieu the Pola as I have described presents an aspect both recognizable and fundamentally altered from the gazetteer descriptions, and even from what it used to be like in the recent memories of older residents. While the Izhardar Ruikar’s de jure bull with its flaming horns still notionally lead the parade, the gathered
procession did not present as a village, as a cultivating community bound in ties of vertical
tie reciprocity behind their Patil and local gentry. Rather the procession moved in intermittent and
broken file, accompanied by musicians beating drums, through all the neighborhoods of Tirjhada
lead by the bulls of the Dani clans and leading households who still have the largest claim to village
lands wealth and resources, followed by a rag-tag trail of cultivators, field labourers, and bulls loosely
grouped into varied configurations which could be community identity or acquaintance. Villagers
whose fields were close by or who lived on the same street walked chatting alongside groups of
people tied together by kinship, clan, or caste affiliation. The rains had been scanty and few were
expecting a good harvest. The Karmore brothers had taken to accosting me with ghoulish grins on
the path, ‘Just wait – your research will be a success – the suicides will begin soon – atta samjha
tumcha research zhala – atmabatiya nakki suru bonaar.’ They could be seen with their father and
handsome bail jodi right up front. Sagar and I were standing with our friends Badu and Maruti
Chahare waiting for the burning bull to appear. There was a great deal of noise and jostling and the
lowing of animals but the assembled gathering did not seem quite joyous. There seemed rather a
fibrillating tension standing in for what everyone wished were actually present. Crowds of drunk
young men crowded around the animals, some yelled zbaditi, a raised voice beginning an invocation
to Mahadev, telling of the hardness of the earth and the hardness of the Patil’s heart.

Kaldya vavarat dhanachi sheti
Dhanala lagli rogaanchi lagan
Ram Rao mbane budli sheti
Viju Patil mbane lav maatile chbbati
Ek naman gavra Parabti
Har bola, Har Har Mahadev!

In the black field the ripe wheat stands
The ripe wheat rots to sickness
Ram Rao says there drowns the field,
Viju Patil says here rub your rib to the sand
A white calf for Parabti
Say Har Bholo Har Har Mahadev…!
Someone replied,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Chakebada bailgada} \\
\text{Bail gela pavangada} \\
\text{Pavangadahun aanli maati} \\
\text{The dile guruchya haati} \\
\text{Gurune banavli chakti} \\
\text{De mahya bailacha jhada} \\
\text{Mng ja bo, aaplya ghaara} \\
\text{Ek naman garra Parbati} \\
\text{Har bola Har Har Mahadev!}
\end{align*}
\]

Spoke to wheel the bullock carts stand  
The bull went to the mountain of the wind  
Brought earth from the high windy land  
And gave it in the guru’s hand  
The guru fashioned a wheel  
Come, now turn over my bull’s seal  
And go, go to your own land  
A white calf for Parbati  
Say Har Mahadev, Har Har Mahadev!

But most attempts petered out after a few lines, not many seemed eager to enter the spirit of challenge and riposte. ‘It’s a bad year,’ Sagar noted quietly. ‘No one has the money or heart to get into it really.’ Nonetheless a thrill ran through the assembled party when the makhar bail arrived, a huge white animal with flaming torches tied to its horns. I misjudged just how large a bull is up close, and how fast an angered animal can run, when while video recording at what I thought was a safe distance I was suddenly confronted in the viewfinder by the nostrils of a bull running full tilt at me. I fell over onto tiny Maruti Chahare who leapt into the street and caught the bull, easily a foot taller at the longshanks, by the tail to general applause. Things picked up after this and, by the time we turned towards home in the darkening evening, we could hear the bells of bull-men arriving at village doors to be welcomed by women and girls with offerings of food, money, grain and rice. From what I heard from my window the revelries continued late into the night, scattered parties of men grouped around fires, eating drinking and playing cards.
There was no policing of the order of the parade as far as I could determine or what occurred after or before it. Walking back in the evening from the Gavari basti where I had gone with the Chahares after the parade was tiresome because of the drunks at every corner, but I was still allowed to make my way back alone part of the way by Ajji who sourly noted that if this were twenty years ago she would have accompanied me the whole way with her dogs besides. ‘You have no idea what it was like – tule mahit nabin kassa aste the – the kinds of things they would say, the filth – kay kay mbante te – kaay kassa shivai det bote te.’ ‘But to whom?’ I asked. ‘To each other! To each other’s men – the rich landlords and their ghadi and servants (naukar) would get into huge fights – you couldn’t walk on the streets – ekamekavar shivai! – the motbe be Patilsarkhe, ani tyanche ghadi be naukar, the bhandan tanta karat boto – gavat tule vyavasthit vagayla nhave.’ What is interesting about Ajji’s description is that while limericks and the like are a salty genre and rural speech is laden with the grace of proverb, pun, joke, and abuse, it is not the abusive speech that so upset Ajji and which she wished to protect me from, but the unbridled masculine violence that had come with it. Approaching the turn of the century the big men fought and women, girls, and non-elites in Tirjhada took cover from the pointless annual feuds between the hired hands of the soon to be obsolete Dani.

**Dani: Uncertain Givers**
The parades I saw in 2014 and 15 were long past the era of the great fights. The parade was headed by the bulls of households of important village clans, but the jostling shouting ghadimansa hurling abuses at the landowners did not array themselves into ranks behind their individual patrons as had been described to me by Ajji Chahare and other women friends, most of whom refused despite much pleading to recite zhadti for ‘my research’; a request that my male acquaintances had already categorically declined. I eventually obtained them by scribbling down snatches of what I could from what I heard, and then reciting them later for correction to the faux-scandalized laughter of young
friends; finding descriptions in the Marathi blogosphere and as featured in local newspapers. In the
descriptions in the Gazetteers, there is extraordinary attention paid not only to the order of
precedence in the village parade but also to the the marking of sovereign political authority in the
Sarkar’s bull leading the parade alongside the bull of the Patil. The colonial festival gatherings exhibit
in the descriptions none of the frenzied rivalries that old timers remembered fondly and women
recalled with dread besetting Tirjhada in the parades of the 1980s and 1990s.

In all the colonial descriptions we have read the Pola comes off as a rambunctious, but not
for that violently combustible event, and for archives as obsessed with signs of criminality in the
native populace it is unlikely, when so much else is mentioned, that fights between village clans as a
regular feature of Pola parades would have escaped notice. In the colonial description of the Pola,
only the Malguzar’s bulls are left free to roam and the tenants receive a gift when they are returned.
Since the right to revenue rests only with the Malguzar there is here no other figure of landed
authority represented by a bull-man pairing. In contrast in those regions, as we
have seen, where
Ryotwari tenure obtained the parade was lead by the bulls of the Patil, the village and administrative
officer responsible for revenue, the accountant, the village chief, and the bulls of the ryots—the
newly landed khatedar who became the Dani—as holders and signifiers of a radically new kind of
power in South Asia: title to land as transferable alienable property. We can see then why Dani and
land-based inscriptions of social authority persisted, even if as I have said perhaps only as
inscriptions if not much else, for such a long period into the postcolonial era and finally ruptured
only with the large-scale adoption of high-yielding seeds.

The access to comparatively large landholdings as a property right that had consolidated
through the privatization of land in the colonial era enabled this caste-class for a brief period from
the 1970s to the mid-1990s to be well-poised to reap the benefits of state investments in agriculture
and advances in postcolonial science as I have described in the last chapter. Since at this point only
cultivators with appreciable land-holdings could invest in the new techniques, seeds and fertilizers, as I have said, village-level cotton production presented a variegated picture. Landed clans who could afford the input costs and had wells adopted the new techniques, reaped large profits, and acquired with the money earned the things money could buy in a newly liberalizing country—access to education for children outside the village and blue-collar work, a new economy of consumption; a rural class mobility in which some sons might leave to make a life as a salaried professional, with the security of a prosperous landed clan and immediate family in the village. For the rest of the village, the emerging state-protected economy of cotton also provided these avenues of class and other kinds of social mobility, but there was no comparison between the yields reaped from variety cotton on small rain-fed plots and the enormous yields of chemical driven hybrid farming. The large mass of cultivators with small rain-fed plots sowed millets for subsistence and planted low-yielding but hardy cotton varieties as a supplementary cash-crop. Bt-Cotton hybrids entirely upended this calculus. Regardless of plot size, it was now possible to reap expanded yields if you sunk enough money into inputs—for which you needed money. And consequently, prestation economies organized on the exchange of stores of value (grain, cloth, metal, words) that could not be exchanged for money for the market no longer made sense. By 2005 Dani prestation collapsed in name as well as practice. When I arrived in Tirjhada in 2014 none of the artisanal clans had claimed their customary watan for almost a decade.

When I asked why Sangeeta Kale said: ‘It was us who stopped – aambi pan mbanale bota assu dlya - there was no need for it – atta byachi garaj nahi – and anyway it was by then more of a hassle – mbanje vipret adevani vatat boto - why listen to words for some grain – mbanje dhaansaathi shabdas ambala nhave – parati suru keli thekevar - we had started cultivating cotton on leased land - dbhaa bota - we had our carpentry shop – aambi mbanalo nakko diyu dhaan - we said we don’t need the grain.’ And on asking the patron clans they spoke of the ‘swarth-bhaav’ of the artisans, their selfishness, quite literally
a desire turned towards the self, that did not need to listen to their words anymore as the price of grain and cloth. The Dani and the artisans parted ways. We could say the orientation of exchange between persons changed. In the new economy of cotton, now that such a thing had indeed emerged, since the entirety of material production was now oriented towards the market, persons too turned from each other as individuals towards the market.

The Secrets of The Productive Order
And here too there is a poetics. When I asked my friends, ‘what is Pola for?’ I was not offered a sociological or historical explanation as the reason for why everyone waited so expectantly for the festivities to begin. Instead I received a delicate answer: ‘It’s after the season of sowing and tilling – Pola is for the exhaustion of the bull – the bull should get some days of rest, and so Pola – atta perni ani jothni jhali, bail lay thakun gela – tyanna ek divasacha aaram midlava, mhanun be Pola.’ And to inhabit for a moment the intimacy of this pairing between the two animals linked by wood and iron breaking the earth to raise plants, we can turn to ethnography and the colonial gazetteers, which show that the cultivating community must provide a corresponding figure of the makhar-bail, the old exhausted bull-pharmakon, which it is said will die within three years of fording the Pola toran (mango string).

Here from the Yavatmal gazetteer (1908):

‘The day after Pola is called Barga. In the early morning the people take the toran or rope of leaves of the Pola out to the boundary of the village, where Siw, the boundary god, resides. The boys also take the sticks which they have been using for one month previous to the Pola festival and throw them with the toran outside the boundary of the village. They bring back branches of nim trees and wild tulsi or basil, which they call the hair of Marbod. Marbod is a deity represented by the shrub called by this name (Asparagus racemosus). With these they sweep the roofs of the houses inside, and in the evening a man nearly naked goes round the village with an earthen pot in which the people place cowries, rice husks, chillies, mahua flower, garlic, flies, mosquitoes, and any other insects which they can catch. The man then goes and breaks the pot outside the village and comes back without speaking to anyone. By this ceremony they think that noxious insects and the diseases caused by them will be kept out of their houses.’
Marbod is also referred to as Marbat in some regions. As the silent naked man who exchanges no words with anyone runs through the village bearing the pot of illness, cowries, leavings and vermin, women sweep out their houses chanting: ‘jhada-pida gheun ja aye Marbod – rog-rai gheun jay aye Marbat – masha, chilt, das, jadu-tone gheun jay aye Marbod – fevers, pain, coughs carry away O Marbod – bugs, fleas, mosquitoes, sorcery and black-magic carry away O Marbod!’ As the bull returns to live out its apportioned time, the man returns from his temporary signification of negativity to resume his place in the cultivating community. The gazetteer does not mention caste or community identity here but in other accounts this duty was sometimes ritually undertaken on behalf of the village by members of certain Dalit castes, or a cultivator household could hire a person to undertake this role (Berar District Gazetteers, 1898-1911).

We can return again then to the man-bull techne to consider whose exhaustion is being ritually and somatically alleviated through the exchange of touch and the giving of kind words. The attention paid to aching shoulders, the rubbing of sore muscles with heated ghee and turmeric paste. The long and careful bathing, the shedding of the marks of labour and the dressing in soft cloth. The cutting loose from the burdens of the field and running free in the raan for a day to be entangled back with an inducement to not refuse hospitality this day despite the extraction of bodily labour the whole year. The solicitations through invitation and the serving by women of special foods. The one day of festivity and decoration, drinking and feasting, hurling abuses at the landowner and the paymaster, expelling some of the old to make space for the new as the bashinga bail, the flag bearing bull, the makbar bail, the pharmakon bull, breaks through the mango leaf toran chased by the young and a new year of sowing and reaping, harvesting and picking begins.
Who Must Give What To Whom?
Thus to return finally and complete where I began: I have said that Dani, with the public village status of ‘giver’ as well as ‘one who gives’, a position of village social power and claim to political authority based on land, can in a sense be thought of as flowing from the dan, the downward sovereign gift of land. The Dani is giver based on land because he was once a recipient of the dan of land, because it is through dan that land—the fulcrum of material and social exchanges in the agrarian order—is received. So it is important to note again that the large majority of current landowning OBC-Kunbi cultivators in Tirjhada who received title to their fields in the 1960s; this bestowal of land-rights to ex-tenants and sharecroppers by the postcolonial Indian state did not bestow Dani status. Though almost three decades later they still narrated their own land as dan from the ex-Izhardar, acquiring Ruikar’s land did not bestow Dani status on them nor did the receipt of land-titles in this form from the Indian state to the fields of their former landlords change the order of precedence in the Pola parade. What did occur, rather, is that the parades themselves were democratized and no longer articulated to the principle of landed social power in quite the same way, as the composition of the cultivating community changed and OBC-Kunbi, Baudh Dharmi, Adivasi, ST and other groups who had received, bought and settled small parcels of land through the redistributions and land ceilings in the postcolonial era also took to the cultivation of cotton.

This is revealed in the changing nature of the parades themselves. The 2014 and 2015 Pola parades I attended in the town of Wardha and in the village of Tirjhada, were very different events. The Tirjhada Pola I have already described. The Wardha Pola was staged in a large public fairground on the outskirts of the town. Various city dignitaries such as the local MLA, city councilors, a local judge and headmaster, the President of the Wardha chapter of a women’s association, representatives of political parties and civic institutions etc., were present to felicitate the farmers and crown the winning bulls who had arrived from the surrounding villages, along with a large
crowd of city-dwellers and spectators from nearby hamlets. Interestingly, this was held at the fairground Wardha rather than as a parade of bulls through the town—which would have created confusion and discord given there was no means by which precedence could be decided the participants having no relation to each other. The festivities consisted of the bulls arrayed in a wide circle behind which the crowds gathered, the river of carts, bulls, and people breaking this way and that around the bulls running amok, trailed by young men attempting to control the frenzied animals. The Wardha Pola was attended over two days by over a 100,000 people from the city and neighbouring villages and small towns, vendors selling snacks had set up kiosks on the edges, others wove through the crowds with wicker baskets filled with postcards, icons, flowers, children’s toys, trinkets for women, baby clothes, amulets, and sundry other wares. Attend by families of young and old, children enjoying the exhilaration of swings and rides, the scene presented the aspect of a riotous fair with lots of decorated animals, which in fact it was. I enjoyed the Wardha Pola enormously as it was my first spectacular encounter with a ritual I would spend the next two years attempting to understand.

This movement of the Pola from the village to the fairgrounds of a city entailed the shedding of prior inscriptions of village life and political authority, which make no sense in a transformed world. In the Wardha parades, and in others like it across hundreds of villages and towns in Vidarbha, newspapers reported and spectators heard a new class of zhadi, new couplets of abuse and grievance hurled at intransigent foes beyond the account of present relations.

Zamanat laaj sodli re
Jathi tathi lootmar
Mhya bollo kahyika
Mhya gharavar ghotmaar
Ek naman kawda Parvati pate
Har Har Mahadev!

8 I asked the local policemen deputed by the city to keep order in the mayhem to give me a rough head-count by their estimation of the size expected at these events.
The times have lost their shame
Everywhere is plunder
What are you looking at me for?
My own house torn asunder
One white crow for Parvati
Har Har Mahadev!

*Vaati re vaati khobryachi vaati
Mahadev rade don paishasaathi
Parvatiche lugdyale cbhappan gaathi
Deva kava dhava garichempashi
Ek naman gavra Parbati
Har Bol Har Har Mahadev!*

A measure a measure, a measure of dry coconut
Mahadev’s tears not worth a tuppenceworth
Fifty-six knots on Parvati’s robe
Pray when has a god run to a pauper’s stove
A white calf for Parbati
Say Har Mahadev, Har Har Mahadev!9

The invocations to Mahadev recognize the limits to what the Guru can fashion today. In the loud
strident renditions of the soft hurr-ing sounds ploughman whisper to their bulls, and instead of the
abuses hurled at the village Patil, a new class of *zhaditi* articulated the debts and repayments, the fears
and obligations of the gathered participants who had no relation to each other in this fairground,
except in their shared fate of cultivating cotton in the economy of debt.

Across the preceding chapter I traced the contours of a certain articulation of social and
community life, as they meshed with the circuits of production and reproduction in the new
economies of cotton. I showed that the nesting of money-debts within social and familial

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9 The Marathi newspapers and blogosphere were a rich resource for comparison when I began gathering *zhaditi*. The *zhaditi*
translated here, some I heard versions of in Wardha and Tirjhada, some were recited for me on request by older
residents and then I compared them with versions I found. These, alongwith many others, can also be read here
[https://mr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E0%A4%9D%E0%A4%A1%E0%A4%A4%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AF%E0%A4%BE](https://mr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E0%A4%9D%E0%A4%A1%E0%A4%A4%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AF%E0%A4%BE).
temporalities and the disarticulation of land as the fulcrum of social authority both occurred as a result of, and then once having occurred, contributed to intensifying the economic and social logics by which economies of social reproduction re-aligned to accommodate the accumulation of cotton. So as a concluding set of explorations I will attempt to illuminate the complex of cotton from its peripheries to ask: if these are the social forms through which surpluses are generated, circulated, and exchanged in this social milieu today, by what means are they diverted? What are the realms of social banditry and thieving—the myriad rents, channels, and breaches which the logics of history themselves carve out—through which social goods and objects slip down byways and alleyways in the violence of a new order? Today, where the money is always elsewhere like the elusive jam Alice never got to eat, in what ways does the stolen share come back to trap the thief in the new economy of cotton?

**Part II**

*The Stolen Share*

_Chor! – Thief!_

In my conversations with acquaintances, village watchmen, and onlookers to the altercations that arose in the incidents of theft I was witness to, rural people did not seem to like thieves at all. ‘Chor!’ – Thief! – is a pretty serious accusation in terms of its effect, the shout often followed by a public drubbing of the alleged thief. When I asked around, there seemed to be no analogous Robin Hood-type mythology valorizing the small thief, the petty criminal as an illegal but ethical diverter of surpluses extracted from the poor by the rich, repatriated back to the laboring poor by the thief. As I have sought to show across the preceding chapter, pre-colonial relations between sovereign authority/political power and the peasantry were not organized around control over land, but over the labour of cultivators through taxation (Satya 1997). Even while big landlordism did emerge in some form in Berar with the Malguzari land settlements under colonial rule (see Palrecha et all...
2034), the agrarian social structure was not organized around, and did not produce, manorial relations on the style of the ‘classic’ feudal model of landlords and serfs to be seen in Europe. The complex of overlapping usufruct rights mentioned in the colonial archive and reflected in the ethnographic data show the mediated access rural and forest communities have historically had to the commons—to forests, pasture and grazing lands, ponds and rivers. These forms of community access to the commons were re-organized and restricted through the colonial forestry drives to bring forests and commons under state control for timber and forest produce. These conflicts have continued into postcolonial India and forest communities around the country continue to clash with state and capital over control and decision-making to ‘jal, jangal, zamin’ – ‘water, forest, land’ – to common property resources. But even so, there never occurred anything on the scale of the enclosure movements in the South Asian countryside. Agrarian communities still rely on the commons for fuel, fodder, grazing, fishing, and foraging. The poacher, the tramp, and the thief as subaltern figures trespassing in the name of the commons on the lord’s domain are rarely to be found as celebrated figures in rural India.

I do not mean to suggest theft or the figure of the thief is absent in the Indian countryside. On the contrary, theft and thieves are old inhabitants of the rural social order and appear in myriad forms—as dacoits, robbers, thugs, ‘criminal tribes’, thieving castes, reformed ascetics. These are figures and social types given by indigenous social and exchange relations, mythologies and colonial knowledge/power encountering the peoples of the Indian sub-continent.10 Vidarbha has a

10 The history of tribal and nomadic communities in the twentieth century is entangled within a larger imaginary of Indian modernity. On the one hand, in the late-nineteenth early twentieth-century tribal communities, through colonial anthropological and discursive practices which marked them as racially and civilizational other, came to be the mark of a ‘primitivism’ and criminality against which the Indian national-modern articulated itself (Dirks 2001; Ghosh 2008; Skaria 2001; Sundar 2008). On the other, as the bearers of this primitivism, they were designated as the targets of the post-colonial state’s ‘civilizing’ pedagogical interventions to transform former ‘tribals’ into new citizen-subjects. ‘Tribal’ identity, itself the product of colonial ethnography, became the grounds for the articulation of an ethno-cultural difference to be preserved and protected, while the language of post colonial national development (through welfare, planning and the extension of tribal development programmes) emerged as the means through which the state assumed a paternalistic role in bringing tribal communities into the national mainstream. Because the legitimacy of the postcolonial Indian
particularly storied history and lore in this regard, the colonial\textsuperscript{11} trope of ‘thuggee’, is given by the harsh landscapes of Berar. Robbers, bandits and dacoit gangs continue to be felt as a present threat in rural small town life. In my own stay of two years in Wardha and Yavatmal, there were at least 6 violent robberies and several murders that I recall, far higher than anything I witnessed as a child and adult in metropolitan cities and small town India. In an unsettled frontier landscape like Vidarbha, there are plunderers everywhere and village society is well used to transacting with them. I am speaking then of a particular kind of thief: the petty criminal, who while living in society does not abide by its mores, the person with no relations and no people. This sort of low-class thief and his petty thieving elicit neither sympathy nor terror in village society.

\textbf{The Thief Without People}

One night I arrived in Tirjhada to find myself amidst an altercation in the village square. At the center of a crowd of shouting people stood the regal figure of Narayan Rao Dhangar. Wearing a white cotton dhoti, kurta and a massive red turban on his head, Narayan Rao stood calmly talking to a crowd of gesticulating people wildly pointing towards a dark hut. ‘It’s him! He did it! Take him away! Do what you want with the \textit{harami} – bastard – kill him! – \textit{maara tyaile}!’

democratic state is tied to its developmental efforts and the uplift of ‘backward sections of society’ (Chatterjee 1993), when it came to groups such as the \textit{adivasis} the postcolonial state confronted a dilemma were they to be assimilated within the modernizing agenda of the nationalist welfare state, or were ‘native customs’ to be protected from external intrusion? The colonial and post-colonial state thus adopted mechanisms of fitful integration through constitutional protection (officially enshrined in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution) and welfare and affirmative action programmes (reservation of government jobs) and exclusionary (designating tribal areas out of bounds for non-tribals) strategies through which a paternalistic state hoped to gradually include \textit{adivasi} communities into national life, while simultaneously protecting their ‘cultural distinctiveness’. The post-Independence experience of the past 60 years has rendered tribal communities particularly vulnerable to the demand for resources of the national state, as reserved forests have had to give way to commercial forestry, mines and dams. Tribal communities today comprise 40\% of those displaced by government projects (Guha 2008).

\textsuperscript{11} Thug, the English noun, comes from the Hindi verb ‘\textit{thagna}’ to rob/steal. See also Bates 2005 on colonial ethnology and the denotification of ‘criminal’ tribes.
A man called Ramya had caught and slaughtered one of the Dhangar’s sheep as the herds were returning to their camp in the evening, and sold the meat to people in the village at Rs. 200 a kilo, half the going rate of Rs. 400/kg. Many people from the Baudh Dharmi quarters had bought the meat and Narayan Rao Dhangar’s prize seed ram was now stewing on cooking fires. Having eaten a large quantity of the ram himself, the thief meanwhile had passed out in a drunken stupor, oblivious to the commotion. The Dhangar had arrived to demand blood money, which they realized was hopeless given the thief was a jobless pauper. Narayan Rao dispatched two of his sons. When they entered his hut and attempted to catch Ramya by the feet, he suddenly awoke and began wriggling his way out through the reed walls. The Dhangar dragged him out by the legs, hoisted him onto their motorcycles, and took him to their hill top camp, where presumably rough justice was dispensed before they handed him over to the police the next morning.

That night the village was abuzz. The OBC villagers began a rumour that not just the thief, but all those who had bought and eaten the stolen meat should also be turned into the police. The Baudh Dharmi, the majority of purchasers, claimed they had no idea the meat was stolen, a notion rubbished by the others who noted that if goat meat was available for half the price, it certainly couldn’t be kosher goods. The small crowd outside Praveena Gangamvar’s tea stall began recounting village lore about the thief who was a well-known pilferer in these parts. He apparently had once had a son, a daughter, and a wife but they had left him in disgust and moved to Vani. Last year he had walked off with two sacks of soybean from someone’s courtyard and spent two months in jail. As people talked of what a terrible low-life, good-for-nothing he was the tales became more and more outlandish. Not only was he a man with no people, a drunk, and a thief, he lived in an almost subhuman way— ‘He’s a demon! – rakhs-sekar ha ahe to! – He eats snakes – sarpas khato to!’ someone exclaimed. ‘I don’t believe it’, I said. ‘No he does, I’m telling you. He even walks like a snake – sarpas ahe to – sarp-sarkha karat nai ka? – Writhing along the ground just now did you see him?’ Such a
person is contemptible because no community holds him to account and he lives by pilfering the labour of those in society. So while people in Tirjhada tolerated Ramya laying about and doing the odd job for a few rupees, when the Dhangar came for him the village didn’t much care if they beat, killed, or dispensed of Ramya in some other way. Ramya being a thief was of a piece, in village talk, with his character as a sub-par sort of human, living by himself in a pathetic state without clan, family, or productive labour. When the Dhangar took him away, Ramya’s relations with others in the village being contractual or extractive, he had no people to protest. The village did not resist because no one felt as if a member of the village was under attack. The individual petty thief is disowned for he has no social relations of his own and others do not seek to establish any with him because, by his actions, he has shunned reciprocity.

**Thieving Peoples**

These are not the only thieves, however, and this is not the only kind of theft in Vidarbha. Vidarbha is home to large communities of peoples with whom settled caste-cultivators have had long, what Bhrigupati Singh in his work on this question has termed, ‘agonistic’ exchange relations. With these peoples, the wandering peoples – **ghumantu jati** – caste-cultivator communities have complex ties. They are felt to carry something of the **raan** with its qualities of wildness with them but whether, if, when, for whom, and for what purposes this quality of wildness denotes ‘savagery’ is not exactly clear. Let me briefly return again to a point made earlier about the non-givenness of ‘caste’ and offer a minor ethnographic corrective to the ‘tribe-caste’ debate in Indian sociology. How ‘tribal’ and

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12 See Bhrigupati Singh (2016) who, on the basis of fieldwork on caste-relations in Rajasthan, has re-conceptualized the question of caste mobility in M.N. Srinivas’s influential framework of ‘sanskritization’ as one deriving not from ‘caste’ or ‘tribe’ identities, but as a problem of ‘neighborliness’, i.e. the social (caste slurs and accusations) and ritual (the cult of Tejaji) practices through which proximate groups negotiate co-habitation through the travel of gods and deities into popular Hinduism.

13 Crispin Bates and Susan Bayly have discussed the colonial obsession with race in the attempts of colonial officials to grapple with both ‘castes’ and ‘tribe’. In an interesting essay on colonial ethnography Bayly argues that 19th century racial
‘caste’ peoples/communities construct and engage each other, both in the emergence of these categories through colonial Knowledge/Power, and the redistributive mechanisms and naming practices of the postcolonial state is too complex and vast a topic to be dealt with here. However, I will make one point since it specifically pertains to this discussion: while Kaushik Ghosh has productively theorized the figuration of the ‘primitive’ adivasi ‘tribal’ as the mirror of the ‘national modern’, the ethnographic data shows a much more unstable and complicated arena of interaction and exchange between tribes, castes and the discourses of modernity. First, it is by now axiomatic that these terms do not designate any actual sociological formations, and scholars have shown the distinction between tribes and castes to be a product of colonial—and postcolonial—ethnological typification. However this is not to say that there are not groups who are nominated as, and self-nominate also as, ‘caste’ people and non-caste, adivasi, ST, or ‘tribal’ peoples.

14 The last several decades have witnessed a thoroughgoing critique of the category of the ‘tribal’. Several scholars have pointed to the essential hollowness of the term, its fictitious character as revealed by the lack of any central defining features or characteristics that are shared uniformly by groups designated as such. The ‘tribal’ is thus not a primary, or primordial, ethnographic fact the use of which reveals anything about the groups or communities under discussion. Rather, the term ‘tribal’ says much more about the practices of colonial knowledge gathering and production about the ‘other’, who needed to be known so she could be governed.

In an early iteration of the problem, Andre Beteille noted that the grounds of differentiation between communities termed ‘peasants’ and those called ‘tribes’ were unclear, and that this lack of clarity extended to the alleged differences between ‘tribes’ and ‘castes’. Responding to the prevailing schema amongst social anthropologists of dividing India into ‘urban’ society, ‘peasant society’ and ‘tribal society’, Beteille noted that the category of ‘tribe’ seemed peculiarly unhelpful when attempting to describe groups and communities traditionally designated as such. Beteille, writing from within sociology, does not give up on the typology of the tribe entirely (Ibid.). He does however note that while it is possible to enumerate the differences between ‘tribes’, as a sociological category, there exists no adequate way to define ‘tribal society’ as such (61). None of the characteristics that anthropologists have traditionally used to define ‘tribe’—isolated, small in scale, the mode of subsistence being primarily hunting-gathering as opposed to settled agriculture, homogenous non-stratified social organization, animist versus ‘Hindu’ religious beliefs, and so on—seem to hold water in the Indian context and empirical data suggest that in most instances ‘tribal’ communities seemed to share traits, beliefs
Within this, there may be amongst peoples in certain regions a mythology of the ‘tribal’ as savage other, and even perhaps as ‘primitive’ other (though again against what abstractly available discourse of ‘civilisation’ this would be stabilized as social practice amongst groups is also not clear). Even so, exactly which social groups these discourses nominate and what exactly this means in terms of actual relations is a historically specific empirical, not a discursive or theoretical, question. Thus conclusions that hold true for an epistemic and hermeneutic figuration of the ‘national modern’ and the ‘adivasi’ in Jharkand, do not for Chhattisgarh, much less for Vidarbha, or Kerala or Bihar or North-East India any of the regions of the sub-continent with large ‘tribal’ populations.

and practices with non-tribal communities within a region, rather than with other communities termed ‘tribes’ of another region (63). Groups traditionally considered ‘tribes’ such as the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas and Gonds had in fact practiced settled agriculture for generations and displayed all the characteristics displayed by ‘peasant’ communities (Beteille, 42), including integration into the market economy (70). Beteille notes that while an argument could be made about an alleged ‘fall from grace’ i.e. tribal society no longer existed in its ‘pure’ form and was ‘transitioning’ under the pressures of modernity, he also notes that ‘transition’ as a sociological notion is not very helpful when the groups under consideration seem to have been ‘transitioning’ for about three centuries (71).

While Beteille’s argument devolves on the question of ‘content’, i.e. it appears on closer inspection that no actually existing ‘tribals’ seem to display the requisite features of ideal-type ‘tribals’, in a slightly different, though allied vein, scholars such as Ajay Skaria and Crispin Bates have drawn attention to practices of colonial ethnography and anthropometry through which the category of ‘tribal’ was discursively produced and stabilized. Returning to the ongoing discussion on the colonial attempt to differentiate between ‘tribes’ and ‘castes’, Skaria argues that the difference for British colonials turned on the question of gradations, of what he calls, ‘wildness’, located within a politics of gender and time (Skaria, 727). Skaria begins by noting, as have others, that colonial constructions of ‘native’ society were located within a concept of time wherein different societies were ranked in relation to the time of Europe (Ibid), with Europe representing world historical time at its most advanced, and non-Western societies ranked on a descending order of scale according to what position they occupied on the civilizational ladder. To be advanced on the civilizational scale was marked according to various criteria—race, levels of technological advancement, climate, modes of subsistence, and significantly, a quality of stasis versus dynamism (728). Thus while Chinese, Arab or Indian society, though possibly advanced by other criteria, displayed a timelessness and an inability to transform when compared to a dynamic Europe (Ibid). This orientalist discourse that was invested in discovering the ‘essence’ of non-Western societies was accompanied by what Skaria calls ‘anachronistic’ thought which combined this notion of ascending time with a timelessness which located certain groups outside of time, as survivors or signs of a past outside modernity. Within this colonial schema the difference between tribes and castes hinged then on the ‘tribals’ of the hills as being the original or primordial’s inhabitants of India, displaced and overtaken by more advanced ‘invaders’ who had settled in the plains. Drawing on the Aryan invasion theory as settled fact, the castes composed Hindu society, contrasted with non-Hindu wild ‘tribes’ (729). By the 1860s this distinction between tribes and castes has stabilized (Ibid) around two axis, biological— a purported racial difference between ‘tribes’ and ‘castes’—and social—the reliance of ‘tribes’ on hunting rather than settled agriculture (i.e. a mode of subsistence argument) (730), the absence of literacy, written script and codified law amongst the ‘tribes’ when compared to their ‘civilized’ caste brethren (731).
**Adivasi – Tribal - ST**

In the incident above Ramya was an adivasi Gond, of which community there are several households in Tirjhada, many settled on the *marb*, the new row of 70 Indira Aawaas Yojana houses that had been built and assigned to families and new entrants to Tirjhada in 1995. I mention Ramya’s adivasi identity because as I said thieves are an old part of the social order and Vidarbha, and Maharashtra more generally, has several communities, many designated as ‘criminally de-notified tribes’, ‘adivasi’, ‘tribal’, or ‘ST’, whose hereditary or caste occupation is understood to encompass thieving. These would include communities such as the Mangarodi and Pardi in Vidarbha, Ramoshi in Western Maharashtra, and dalit Muslim communities. Persons from such groups have begging rights at weddings and religious feasts, and also raid fields and animals. For all the abuses and calumny heaped on him, however, in none of the conversations was Ramya’s tribal identity at issue.

Which leads me to suggest that the social figuration and lived relationality of the ‘adivasi’, cannot be mapped onto a theory of caste and tribe relations. For instance, Gond communities whose chiefs once controlled large parts of central-India’s forest belt and also entered the Mughal and Maratha armies as mercenary fighters; Gonds are certainly understood to be adivasi in Vidarbha. However the connotations of this term when applied to Gond are not the same as when applied to a member of the Pardi community, who are also ‘adivasi’ and ‘ST’. Gond communities entered the economy of cotton at the same moment as settled ‘caste’ cultivators like the Kunbi and Teli, and the 1911 Gazettes for all 6 districts note that Gonds held Patelgiris – village headships - in many villages in the Vidarbha region. Social understandings of what and who exactly is an ‘adivasī’, an ‘ST’, a ‘tribal’, a ‘jungli’, a ‘jhadhpatti bolnaara’ – ‘speaker of the wild tongues’, a ‘ghumantu log’ – ‘wandering people’, and what that designation is meant to convey, what it is a short-hand for, in this specific

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15 There is a rich tradition of anthropological work on Chhattisgarh beginning with Verrier Elwin (1935; 1927). See also Babb (1975) on popular Hinduism in central India, Gregory (1983) on trade relations in Bastar and Sundar (2002) whose monograph is the only full-length study of colonial conquest, postcolonial dispossession and tribal sovereignty in south Bastar.
dialogic situation, these are all designations and nominations employed by groups as nominations for themselves and for others for different purposes at different times, the specificities of which must be worked out and empirically described for each situation. In these extremely local histories of community relations and exchange it is difficult to sustain generalizations about ‘caste in India’ (again except at a certain level/scale of social and political life in which it acts as an abstraction), or the ‘tribal in India’, or provisionally stabilize for purposes of academic critique ‘the primitive’ against the ‘national modern’ as abstractly available categories.

Thus in Vidarbha, the communities called ‘ādivasi’ and/or ‘ST’ by themselves, the state and others comprise diverse sets of communities with different relations to each other as well as with caste cultivators. For example Kolam, Gond, Kond, and Banjara are all ‘tribal’, ‘ādivasi’ and ‘ST’ communities, but they entered the economy of cotton in the late nineteenth century and now share rituals, clan organization, religious life, trade relations and social practices with caste cultivators. Dhangar—also ādivasi, ‘tribal’, and ‘ST’ in some states—are nomadic pastoralists with whom caste cultivators have squatting relations going back several generations. Dhangar herdsman squat their sheep and goat *khandi* (a measure of 100 head) in cultivators’ fields: the fields get fertilized and the herd pasture. The Dhangar also began entering the economy of cotton as cultivators from the late 19th century onwards; and held the Patelgiris of several villages.16 Dhangar communities in Vidarbha also have old exchange relations with Korku ‘tribal’ communities in northern Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh by which a Korku family apprentices for a sum of money a son as a traveling helping hand with the Dhangar herds. They also have exchange relations with Pasmanda Muslim butcher communities to whom they sell and acquire sheep and goatherds. Pasmanda Muslims, Dhangar and Korku are ‘ādivasi’, dalit Muslim and ‘ST’, but what this means in their relations with

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16 The Yavatmal District Gazetteer (1908) notes for instance the emergence of a new ‘caste’ of Dhangar-Kunbi, who were pastoralist clans who settled to the cultivation of cotton in the late nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth had also acquired Patelships of villages. This has been discussed in chapter 2.
each other and ‘caste’ communities is a matter of empirical understanding and description, not theoretical assertion. Pardi, Mang Garodi, Fakirs, these are the forest peoples, and with them caste-cultivators have relations of a slightly different order.

People of the Forest and Jewelers in The City
For several years in the mid to late 1980s Allahuddin Ali Ajani (urf Amir Bhai), owner-proprietor of the Oasis Biryani restaurant on Itwara Chowk Wardha, performed, by his own recounting, the function of negotiating terms of trade in gold between Marwari and Gujarati sonars (jewelers) and Mang Garodi thieves. The Mang Garodi is a group of hereditary bird-catchers, described in The Peoples of India series as a wandering ‘tribe’ who practice, amongst other trades, thieving as a hereditary occupation. Like other groups tainted by colonial Knowledge/Power, Mang Garodi were a criminally notified and then de-notified tribe. The Mang Garodi currently reside in a basti (neighbourhood) in Pul Phail across the Wardha railway line and are a locally somewhat powerful community with two municipal councillors, and local political leaders. But it was not always so: till the mid-1980s the Mang Garodi were a ghumantu jati – wandering tribe. Today persons from the Mang Garodi community ply a variety of trades such as construction, shop-keeping etc. But they have not, so the rumors go, given up their old trade and the women and young children still ride the inter-state trains, selling flowers for women’s hair, flicking gold chains off the necks of travelers. In Amir’s descriptions gold is a substance traded amongst men, but worn, protected, and earned by women from women.

The gold stolen by the Mang Garodi women was/is periodically disposed off to the sonar, the jewelers who deal in precious metals, for cash. The conversion of gold into cash was facilitated via the offices of Amir who ensured both parties were cheating each other within an acceptable range (5% at the time; interestingly also the rate of interest on cash loans). He earned a small
commission from the Mang Garodi and the sonar for his services. Why did the Mang Garodi need Amir in their dealings with the sonar? First, because some midway party was required to provisionally bridge the vast social and cultural chasm between them: ‘They don’t even speak the same language!’ in Amir’s words. The Mang Garodi speak jhaadpatti chi bhasha amongst themselves (literally the language of trees and leaves; the language of the forest) and varhadi with others; and the sonar speak Marwari, Gujarati, and Hindi (amongst themselves) and chaste Marathi when dealing with others. This difference in language is marked as a distinction in social status certainly, but within this hierarchy is also the question of accommodation: Mang Garodi are not Hindu. Being people from the forest, and thieves at that, they are to be treated with caution. The Mang Garodi trusted Amir because he was a Muslim; the jewelers accepted his intercession for the same religious marker, but for different reasons. Amir is a Khoja Agha Khani Muslim, not a lower-caste sunni (whom the sonars would shun) or upper-caste Hindu (whom the Mang Garodi distrust).

Amir’s fraternizing with lower-castes does not mean that relations between the Mang Garodi and him are harmonious: Amir bitterly dislikes the Mang Garodi for their recent carrying of Taziya and enthusiastic participation in the Moharram jaloos, public processions that Amir, as a ashraf Shia Muslim, considers blasphemous and insulting to the memory of the Karbala martyrs. I do not seek to suggest that this interaction is simply governed by persons’ social locations in a crude functionalist sense. Persons’ social locations are the grounds on which certain kinds of personal and intimate relations may be established. In this delimited instance Amir could function as a neutral outsider-insider, living in the neighborhood and known to all, but whose own allegiances—social and religious—did not enter the monetary negotiations as factors to be accounted for. Through this neutral person, two social groups who occupy incommensurable and separate, but connected, realms in this social order—wandering thieving peoples of the forest and moneylenders and jewelers in the heart of the city—entered provisional exchanges.
**Re-Christenings**
Likewise with the Pardi: the Pardi are a caste/tribe of hereditary hunter pastoralists who are also understood to steal as a traditional occupation. Several Pardi households occupied a *basti* on the outskirts of Tirjhada, and cultivated cotton while remaining active in their traditional trades (*dhanda*). This *basti* was established sometime in the early to mid-1990s. Relations between the Pardi and the ‘caste’ Kunbi cultivators had historically been tense, with the Kunbi accusing the Pardi of theft. Even now in Tirjhada this is common and several Pardi had cases filed against them by caste cultivators alleging petty crimes. The Pardi say they are people of the *raan* – ‘ambi raanche log aho – we are people of the forest’.17 Even though the Pardi now lived in huts, owned land, and cultivated cotton, every member still practiced hunting as a primary occupation. Pardi migration myths and ritual life continually reinscribe the movement to and the space of the *raan*. This group of Pardi settled in Tirjhada because one of the elders cured a Kunbi cultivator’s sick cow, and he offered a piece of land to cultivate in return. This story by Pandit Pardi was offered as a token of a shift in relations between formerly hostile groups.

Why the Pardi were grudgingly allowed to settle in Tirjhada when they had (and still have) a reputation as thieves? It seems from conversations that village acceptance/tolerance turned on their settling to cotton-cultivation. There is often a narrative of progress and uplift adduced here of the exit from wildness and the forest into settled agriculture and civilization by both the ‘tribal’ and the ‘caste’ communities in Tirjhada but it is a complex one. The Pardi still hunt pigs, trap birds and, if village gossip is believed, steal as primary occupations. A Pardi family I was close to, the clan of Pandit Pardi, could be seen every market day in Kadam with a brace of partridges and/or quail,

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17 In Pardi migration myths, they are a tribe of Rajputs exiled to wander from their historical lands in Rajasthan, and speak a version of Marwari. In turn the Pardi were given the *bel* leaf and skill with animals as the tokens of Mahesh (Shiva) who also lives in the *raan*.
sometimes a rabbit, or the prized flesh of a wild boar. But the Pardi now live in huts on the outskirts of Tirjhada, not in the raan (forest, wildness). They no longer line up to receive the leftover food at wedding feasts and every household cultivates cotton. Once these Pardi became cotton-cultivators, the village ceased accusing them of stealing from the fields, though they are occasionally still accused of stealing animals and birds.

When I asked Sagar, ‘Don’t the Pardi steal anymore?’ ‘Of course they do,’ he answered. Regardless, jagal: the staying awake all night to guard the fields, is over. These nights the only cot in the fields is the perch of a very old grandfather, who has probably spent a majority of his waking and sleeping life in the cotton. So, it would not be correct to say that the demise of jagal—the nightly vigil of standing guard over that most precious—necessarily reflects a decline in the value of the things it is guarding, and thus acceptance of those who steal it. This is may be true of millets — jvari. Millet cakes (bhakri) comprised a staple food till two decades ago. The subsistence cultivation of millets has all but been abandoned since subsistence is now obtained, in the form of wheat and rice, from the ration shop not the field. Only the relatively wealthy now perhaps sow millets (jvari) on a corner of the field to satisfy an elder family member who still refuses to eat wheat as a staple grain (pohda) insisting on bhakri (millet cakes); or as cheap fodder for milch and plough animals. In the case of cotton (parati)—mono-cropped or interspersed with toori (cowpeas) for cash—I have sought to show that quite the opposite has occurred. Cotton has become the only value in the preceding two decades.

It is theft that is still an artisanal trade in this milieu and thus dependent on the capacities of the thief. In other realms where production continues to be artisanal, animal husbandry for instance, theft incites immediate and violent reprisal. With communities who herd animals such as the sheep-herding Dhangar, the Pardi continue to have tense relations. The women of a Dhangar clan I got to know, who had set up their winter camp on the hill opposite Tirjhada, told me, ‘These Kunbi are
fine – *Ambi medna basaîche* – we squat our sheep [in their fields] - They eat meat but they wouldn’t steel our sheep. Its the Pardi who are thieves – *chor abet to bhanchota* – these sister fuckers steal any chance they get – we thrashed them hard and they’ve stopped– *lay thokle tyala, atta karat nabin.* And just to put any lingering myths of the ‘adivasi’ as somehow closer to animals to rest; she added, ‘the money is one thing – *mug paishe assu dhyâ* - can you imagine how we feel? – *kassa vat-te ambala?* – all day the mothers are out grazing and the kids stay here with us – in the evening when they come back if she doesn’t return, how do you think it feels? – *divashbar ti charavte – sandhyakali ti parat aali nabin, tar kassa vatel lekru-la?’ In the case of cotton, it is rather that thieving has not caught up with mechanization. How many quintals of cotton can be borne away in sacks in the night? In giving up their nomadic ways, garb and occupations and settling to agriculture, from thieves and hunters the Pardi became (also) cotton-farmers.

*The Four-Five*

On one of my last stays in Tirjhada I went to Ralegaon, the neighbouring village of Pandit Pardi’s maternal clan, to visit his sister Manda Bai. This large Pardi clan, now settled across 5 villages within a 50 km radius, had migrated as hunters, trappers and pastoralists into the forests of Yavatmal sometime in the late 1980s, slowly established relations with settled caste cultivators, and had finally squatted a row of huts on the outskirts of the villages of Ralegaon, Kinwat, Jadka, and Tirjhada. They had acquired land through various means—squatting, buying from caste-cultivators, state land grants to adivasi households—and begun cultivating cotton in the mid-1990s. I had met Manda Bai and Chanda Bai, Pandit Pardi’s elder sisters when they had come visiting with their brother. We had hit it off and I renewed this encounter several times after that initial meeting. I was interested in these conversations for what they revealed about the incomplete and ongoing process of agrarian sedentarisation in Vidarbha, how new groups of cultivators such as tribal nomadic communities
experienced the economy of cotton, their inhabitation of the temporalities of nomadic hunting practices ongoing with the new temporality of settled cultivation. In wide-ranging conversations over many months we discussed current association with caste communities with whom they formerly had agonistic ties; run-ins with the state, the forest department and the police over wood-stealing and hunting; ritual and community life; alcohol and feasting.

Mahesh Pardi, Pandit Pardi’s nephew was sitting outside his house whittling sticks and twisting twine. He was making an elaborate partridge trap composed of linked stick hexagons, from which hang small nooses. The trap is laid across a forest path and the trappers beat the surrounding bushes scaring the birds towards the trap. As the little birds run through the trap their feet and necks get entangled on the twine nooses, which tighten around the ankles and the hexagonal sticks limit range of motion. The Pardi sell braces of live birds in Tirjhada and at the weekly Kadam village bazaar. Mahesh Pardi was heading out to the raan in the evening to see what he could catch. He is a relatively well-off cotton cultivator. His clan owns over 35 acres of land in Ralegaon so they are not small farmers. Nonetheless, ‘Nature didn’t cooperate - nisargani saath nabin dile- the rains haven’t come – pauws alas nabin – so might as well try and earn something, so I’m making this trap – kaisatari poat bharaiče mhanun be karat abo.’

Manda Bai was away working in the fields. When I enquired when Pandit Pardi, his maternal uncle, had last visited his nephew grumbled about the money Pandit Pardi still owed him. ‘He hasn’t come to see her [Manda Bai] because he [Pandit Pardi] owes me Rs. 5000 for the past two years.’ Pandit Pardi had borrowed money for input costs from his close kinsman. If he had gone to Bothra, the Marwari moneylender in Ralegaon with whom this Pardi clan has long ties, Bothra would have

18 It was a source of curious, and occasionally horrified, delight to my male and female friends in Tirjhada that I had no food taboos to speak of and enthusiastically partook of odd meats. Friends from different castes would specially acquire interesting meats and organs for an evening of eating. Quails, partridge, wild pig, beef, coagulated goat’s blood, river eels and catfish, small river shrimp and prawn, trotters, udders and stewed goat heads, drunk with home-brewed mahua were served at some of my most memorable meals in Vidarbha.
given Pandit the money at not less than 10%. Mahesh Pardi, his nephew from his elder sister, extended the loan at 5%. ‘So why hasn’t he come?’ I asked. ‘Well he’s ashamed that’s why – laaj vat-tyaile.’ Two years of bad harvests had placed a strain on Pandit Pardi’s relations with his sister. His nephew was particularly worried because he had his own debts to pay off to Bothra. ‘What happens if you don’t pay?’ I pulled out my stock question. ‘Don’t pay meaning? – Nabin dile tar mhanje? - How won’t I pay? – Kassa nabin dhyaiche? - We have to sit and walk with four-five [i.e. with others, with a community] don’t we? – Charchanghanshi uthayche basayche ahe ke nabin?’ In entering the economy of cotton the Pardi too were disciplined, indebted into the same temporality of debts and repayments as everyone else. For whatever myriad reasons after some decades of hostility, in the early 1990s the others in the village acceded to the arrival of these first-generation cotton-cultivators.

**Sex, Drugs, and Capitalism**

This does not mean that these realms and figures—the movements of cotton markets and the relations between kin; caste-taboos and the interest rates on loans; hybrid plants and thieves; exhausted bulls and legal property rights—in being co-temporaneous are also co-temporal. In sharing the same time, they are not necerraily arrayed along the same time; or rather there are many temporal orders operative in a given social field.¹⁹ Nor is it to say one determines the other in the first or the last instance. Rather, a materialist analysis insists that in this moment of the structuring of the relations of force (Foucault 1966) at various levels of the social field, it is possible to identify certain logics in relation to others in how they inflect the inhabitation of, the living-through, which is a living with, experience (Das 2006). When attempted in this expanded sense one need not enter debates such as whether if cotton farmers in Iowa were confronting the ‘same conditions’—as if

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¹⁹ Note this formulation shares nothing with Johannes Fabian’s critique of anthropology’s alleged ‘allochronism’, as made in *Time and the Other* (Fabian 1983).
there could be an event of pure social repetition—as cultivators in Vidarbha, they too would be committing suicide. Whether, in other words, the realm of what positivist sociologists in a crude Marxian vein call ‘culture’ has any bearing on the truth of ‘material conditions’. Stating the conversation in these terms is an unimaginative imprisoning of the problem, one which Marx himself was at pains to disturb in his long tussle with bourgeois economics. A materialist analysis, in so far as it considers political economy and not economics, in so far as it attends to the behaviours, motivations and intentions of persons not individuals, takes as axiomatic that the realm of economic relations—the material conditions—are saturated in, find their meaning in, and indeed, are social relations since the world is inhabited by persons who are made so in social relations. It is in the reifications of capitalism—the alienations it enacts at all levels of the socio-productive order—that the realm of economics appears unmoored from social relations, that objects produced and exchanged within ritual, cosmological, and material orders not organized around the exchange logics of the capitalist market enter the fetish of the commodity, and productive work becomes alienated wage-labour. Rather than further mystifying the fetishes of capitalism by reifying them as true objects in our analysis, social anthropology, like structural Marxism, asserts instead that culture is material production. A further exploration of this realm of social and intimate relations, their narrativization and performance in moral and ethical orders and actions, forms the substance of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE ETHICAL ECONOMY OF THE PEASANT

In danger, the holothurian cuts itself in two.
It abandons one self to a hungrv world
And with the other self it flees.
—Autotomy

‘This morning I had a desire to drink alcohol. There was no alcohol in the house. So I drank ausbadh (medicine; poison)’.¹

These words appear in a dying declaration made by Ganesh Rao Keshav Rao Adhavu before a medical officer in the District Hospital, Wardha. He came home drunk at 7:45 A.M. and wished to drink more. There was no alcohol in the house so, Adhavu’s deposition states, he drank endosulfan an organochlorine insecticide widely used in India’s cotton-fields. Adhavu’s words were recorded as part of an evidentiary process toward the adjudication of the eligibility of a ‘farmer’s suicide’ for monetary compensation. The case-file of his death is housed, with thousands of others, in an archive in the District Collector’s office. The archive was established as part of a central compensation scheme instituted in 2002 to extend monetary support to suicide survivor families in six districts in Vidarbha. G.R. Adhavu committed suicide in 2005.

One must exercise caution about the conditions of truth of such words, particularly when apparently made on a deathbed before a state official for the purposes of monetary compensation. Yet this statement appears repeatedly in the case-file. That admitting to having consumed poison while intoxicated technically disqualifies the eligibility of the death for monetary compensation, and that this version of events is repeated by his wife, daughter-in-law and son in their depositions to the police, indicates some of the force with which Adhavu’s words seem to have stayed with those who

heard them. While G.R. Adhavu’s words are perhaps singular in the equivalence they establish between two fluids—alcohol and pesticide—I have encountered their iterations in many conversations in rural Vidarbha. On asking why someone killed himself, I would be told, ‘He drank pesticide because he was drunk - to daru ghet bota, mag endrin pajla; ‘He was an alcoholic, so he drank pesticide - to bewada bota, mag aushad ghetla.’ Almost never was debt (karz: debt, karz-bazari: market-debt) adduced as the reason for suicide though debt (karz) is the definitional criteria for state compensation not to mention the leit motif of scholarly, public and civil society discourses on farmers’ suicides. The fungible substances in this scene of death—alcohol and pesticide—partake of co-constituting discourses of prohibition and propulsion. Rural India is awash in state-subsidized insecticides as farmers spray cotton fields for ever-shrinking yields; a long-running state discourse on the prohibition of alcohol criminalizes the production of country-made moonshine, while simultaneously encouraging industrial alcohol production as a lucrative excise industry. These histories meet in the words of Ganesh Rao Keshav Rao Adhavu.

This chapter examines what appeared as an ethnographic puzzle, a bewildering set of conversations in the field. While working through files in the archive, corroborated by conversations during fieldwork, I realized that in almost every instance the chosen modality of suicide is death by the ingestion of pesticide, often consumed mixed with alcohol. The first is not a novel discovery—the farmer who commits suicide by drinking pesticide is the archetypal figure of the agrarian crises in national public discourse. However, the occupational hazard of fieldwork in a region like Vidarbha is a propensity to pursue ghoulish questions. The obvious and gruesome fact is that there are easier ways to die (such as death by hanging) and at least some few (particularly

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2 This is a point noted by several commentators, media reports, academic accounts including in formal depositions to the state and central governments: see IGERI Committee Report 2014.
women) do choose them. Death by ingestion of pesticide is neither quick nor painless—it is long, it is prolonged, it is agonizing and unbearably painful. Pesticide, in the bare words of an interlocutor, ‘Eats the machine of your insides - aatchi machine khann zaato.’ What then has occurred in the rural landscape in the preceding two decades, such that the substance on which the promise of abundant futures rests is now the fetishistic instrument of death?

The second query relates to conversations around the etiology of particular suicide deaths. Whereas media, scholarly, and civil society discourses overwhelmingly narrate the deaths of farmers as a debt-induced historical inevitability as has been described in the introduction, farmers themselves almost always describe suicide as an individual failing, usually on account of alcohol addiction (vyasan) or domestic strife (gharguti). When talking to villagers in Tirjhada about the circumstances regarding suicide deaths in the village, many of my informants demonstrated an extreme reluctance to claim that this death, this one that they personally knew was a true representative of the general case of rural suicide.

Ministers and politicians appear in the regional and national press occasionally making the outrageous suggestion that farmers commit suicide in order to get monetary compensation, producing controversy and indignation in the media. Thus, I was taken aback to encounter similar sentiments in my field sites. Villagers asserted it was indeed a self-death but insisted indebtedness was not the cause, going so far as to say it was not even a suicide—a typical statement of this sort being, ‘Yes it is true he died, and by his own hand. But it was not a suicide - bo maran pawla be khare ahe, ani svatab kela. Pan aatmahatya nabuty.

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3 Data from the case-files shows 4 times as many men kill themselves as compared to women. In my field village only 1 suicide out of over 20 was by a woman. From the files I saw and conversations, woman tend to kill themselves by hanging or drowning.

4 Across the hundreds of post-mortem reports I read, the time elapsed between consumption of insecticide and death stretched anywhere between 4 hours to three days.

5 Such as the scandal caused by the statements of theMinister of Agriculture Haryana who caused national commotion when he suggested farmers who committed suicide were ‘criminals’ and ‘cowards’. 25 April 2015 Indian Express.
An obvious interpretation of this bewildering statement is to contextualize the word ‘atmabatya’ itself within the circulation of governmental discourse in peasant communities. The portentous Sanskrit derivative for suicide, ‘atmabatya’ (atma: self; hatya: killing), is never used by villagers to describe suicide deaths. Deaths are described simply as ‘to mela’ (he died), or ‘to gela’ (he went; passed). This is taken up for discussion later in the chapter. The word circulates in bureaucratic, media, and high literary genres and is now inextricably imbricated, in local understanding, with monetary compensation and state recognition. ‘Atmabatya’ is that suicide death which has received state recognition in the form of compensation since it is this word that is used on the suicide compensation form (‘patra-atmabatya’: eligible suicide; ‘napatra-atmabatya’: ineligible suicide), and then in the media and governmental sphere. Monetary compensation (of Rs. One lakh, approximately $1,500) is distributed to surviving kin after a suicide death has undergone a process of juridical adjudication to determine whether the suicide was specifically caused by agrarian distress—legally defined as static and running debts (stakbit karz: static debt, chalu-karz: running debt)—as distinguished from other ‘social’ or ‘personal’ factors (gharguti, bhandan-tanta, vyasan).

However, since causality is established through the judicial procedure itself, every suicide death occurring in six districts in Vidarbha enters a process of governmental collation and adjudication. Thus when speaking about suicides that, according to those describing the circumstances of the death, do not meet the state-defined criteria of eligibility, people simply claimed that this death was not that. It was something else—‘who knows, there was some other reason - ka mahit, vegda karan bod’. And yet the relationship between cause, intention, and motivation is more complex than that: as I will show below, since every suicide death augurs state recognition through juridical adjudication regardless of eventual compensation, making every death an ‘atmabatya’, paradoxically no actual suicide as far as farmers are concerned, from their descriptions, seems to be an ‘atmabatya’.
The Ethical Economy of the Peasant

What follows below is a chapter that undertakes an excavation of a new ethical economy of the peasant, a structure of feeling I term ‘empathy without sympathy’. The chapter examines why despite an overwhelming discourse—from the state, media, civil society and farmers organizations—that narrates monetary debt as the reason for farmers’ suicides, farmers themselves explain suicide deaths as arising from individual failings (alcohol addiction and personal strife) rather than a collectively borne tragedy. I locate the reason for this non-passage as arising from a restructuring of social relations, particularly caste and gender relations, with the individuation of risk as a structural precondition of peasant household production, and the attempt on the part of the living who must continue to produce within this very mode of production, to recover a space for ethical sovereign action in their readings of the motivations of the dead. I further locate the phenomenological textures of this ethical economy in practices of the consumption of alcohol and pesticide. These two fluids are intimately associated with male forms of leisure and labour, and it is through the use of these fluids that questions of masculine power, relations between men and women, and responsibility for domestic life and productive capacities are dramatized in public form.

Part I of this chapter delineates the structure of ‘empathy without sympathy’ through an excavation of alcohol’s relation to performative constructions of masculinity. Part II extends the analysis to the ingestion of pesticide, constructions of femininity and women’s labour and links the analysis of domestic life to recent transformations in agricultural production.

The chapter argues that the structure of ‘empathy without sympathy’ expresses, firstly an ontological confusion wherein monetary debt is experienced as the Maussian true gift—i.e. as both the remedy and the poison. In life, monetary debt is that without which cultivation (and thus peasant life) is impossible, and thus for the living ‘debt’ is a necessity as constant capital. And yet when someone commits suicide ‘debt’ appears, in state and civil society discourses, as the poison; as that
which pushes persons to commit suicide. For peasants however, since monetary debt is a necessity, it cannot have an independent etiology as the cause of death of its own—rather it is the capacities of the individual person that become a focal point of intense debate and discussion.

The individuation of risk on an individual cultivating household, and the necessity of debt for cultivation, in contemporary agricultural production has been described across the previous chapters. As I have described the transformation of productive relations and the demise of caste-prestation and landed authority, has meant that traditionally dominant land-holding castes and middle-caste men, have lost social power that derived from their identity as patron castes and questions of status, honour and reciprocity between castes have become sites of contestation in village society. This disruption of traditional relations of vertical political authority and, what we could term, democratization of ‘honour’ wherein the social power of traditionally powerful ‘big men’ is contested by lower-caste/class cultivators, finds expression in slurs and challenges to the masculine capacities of landed men. This discussion is begun in Part I, and completed in Part II. Part I primarily attends to the culture of alcohol and its relation to social constructions of individual virtue and character.

Practices around the consumption of alcohol are a potent site of the social adjudication of individual character and masculine capacity. Part I of this chapter, in attending to how masculinity is constructed through the consumption of alcohol, makes two points: first, that in being a fluid through which masculinity is staged, alcohol is also a fluid through which the efficacy of male speech, and the linguistic construction of subjectivity, is enacted. In so being, it is both the mark of efficacious speech through which social power and individual charisma is asserted, as well as the failure of speech wherein it distorts a man’s capacity to say things that others, particularly women, can hear and respond to. Second, this failure itself marks an important shift in contemporary re-significations of gender roles and their relation to agricultural labour, to argue that alcohol is seen as
a fluid, which while a mark of authority when consumed by a powerful man, when drunk by a ‘weak’ man is marked as that through which power flows from men to women. Part I stops with an analysis of the first fluid, i.e. with an excavation of masculinity and alcohol, virtue and honour; Part II briefly engages femininity in the context of the expansion of the domain of women’s labour, transactions between the space of domesticity and the site of this labour i.e. the field, and completes the analysis begun in Part I by locating these fractures within technological transformations in cotton cultivation and the agricultural labour process.

Politically Active and Socially Barren
So to return where I left off, something more than linguistic slippage is also at stake in farmers’ disavowal of ‘atmabatya’: if media discourses, not to mention farmers whose voices appear in these reports, overwhelmingly narrate suicide deaths as a debt-induced tragedy, why then are villagers themselves, when describing the deaths of known persons, loathe to concur with this etiology? These statements express a philosophical quandary with not just the impossibility of determining the exact cause of a death post facto but also the limits of speculation on the intentions and motivations of an other who is now gone. The unease in these statements reflects an attempt to grapple with how, whether, and in what form, the particular circumstances of an individual self-death manifest the historical contingencies wherein it occurs.

It is not as though local people disbelieve that monetary debt causes the suicides of persons in Vidarbha. Farmers committing suicide is the only reason that this otherwise nondescript region impinges on the national consciousness. The papers are daily filled with news of suicide deaths, questions are raised on the matter every monsoon session of Parliament; NGOs and farmers’ organisations hold weekly meetings and record recent suicides; villagers are called on by representatives of political parties to address crowds on the farmers suicide; celebrity campaigns
presenting widows with cheques gathered through public donation attract large crowds. Villagers
attend such gatherings, interview in the media, participate in famers’ rallies, and speak at political
events wherein they describe the all too real risks of cotton cultivation and the death trap of debt
that entangles cotton growers. They simultaneously, however, in private conversation, and
community discussions, disavow the deaths of persons they know as having been caused by these
factors.

In one sense it would be accurate, and easy, to argue that the ‘farmers suicide’ is a discursive
object proper: in Foucauldian sense, a category produced through juridical codification and statistical
collation by the state now acts in the social field. The ‘farmer’s suicide’, as a juridico-discursive
object, is constructed through iteration: the daily tabulation of numbers of deaths in the state
archive, and the mediatized circulation of these numbers in the public domain. Since the category is
necessarily produced through the abstraction of particular circumstance (Derrida 1995; Kripke
1991)—the name ‘farmer’s suicide’—it is then not altogether surprising why, when describing a
specific death, people may assert that this death is not captured by that name.

The trouble of course is that there are indeed thousands of people (over 8,000 deaths a year
in 6 districts alone) who kill themselves in this cotton-growing region.6 The juridical category
‘farmers’ suicide’ attempts to name relations between actual material circumstances (monetary debt
attendant on cotton cultivation) and events (mass suicides by cotton cultivators). It is then not just a
discursive category. Thus we could say that while the ‘farmer’s suicide’, as category, is politically
active (and this too in one very specific way, namely in establishing a relationship with the state) it is
by the same token, I will argue, socially barren. In the introduction of this dissertation I have
undertaken an extended analysis of the former, i.e. the depoliticizing effects of this politically active
but socially empty category, to show why despite mounting ‘evidence’ of an agrarian crises,

symptomized in the massification of rural self-deaths it has strangely not produced a strident peasant politics.

This is especially curious since Vidarbha was convulsed, till as recently as the late nineteen nineties, by one of the most militant and broad-based, peasant movements of post-Independence India. Lead by the charismatic bureaucrat turned farmer activist Sharad Joshi, a broad cross-caste alliance of landless labourers, rural artisans, middle-peasants, small landholders, and landed rural gentry organized themselves under the banner of the Shetkari Sangathan (The Farmer's Alliance), demanding just prices for agricultural produce. The militancy of this farmers movement, which has been extensively analyzed by social scientists, reflected in mass actions wherein farmers clashed with police, stopped traffic along national highways, prevented agricultural commodities from reaching urban centers, and eventually culminated in a radical declaration of independence from the ‘black British’ (referring to a neocolonial urban elite: the ‘new black rulers’ of India). This declaration of secession from India and village independence resulted in the expulsion of state officials across a vast region in central Vidarbha, which was henceforth declared to be the sovereign territory of Bharat (as opposed to India) under the benevolent rule of Bali Raja (King Bali). While the Shetkari Sangathan still notionally exists as an organization, today there is almost no trace left of its erstwhile enormous support base in Vidarbha. The demise of this radical peasant movement coincides with the suicide epidemic beginning in the late nineteen nineties. In this chapter I examine why, and how, the category of farmers suicide is socially barren and the effects of this evacuation on peasant society.

But first, I should explain what I mean by the assertion that the farmers suicide is a ‘socially empty’, and nonetheless politically consequential, category. I mean two specific things: first, that while villagers describe at length, and represent in various forums, the economic factors that push

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7 For a wonderful dissertation on the Shetkari Sangathan see Youngblood (2003; 2016); also see Omvedt 1992, Godbole 2004, as well as all the writings of Sharad Joshi, in English and Marathi, collected in Joshi 1992.
persons to commit suicide, they simultaneously disavow the material instantiation of these same factors when discussing the deaths of persons they know. Second, this disavowal emerges from an ontological confusion wherein persons cannot locate the normative equalization of dead persons enacted through law by the name ‘farmer’s suicide’ within social relations of hierarchy and authority through which inter-subjective recognition is transacted in this society.

**Political Equality and Social Hierarchy**
The ‘farmer’s suicide’ is a legal category extirpated from social history. It produces a juridical equivalence between dead persons in the specific delimited context of the circumstance of their death—in deeming a death a ‘farmer’s suicide,’ the state retroactively fixes not only what the death is, and thus how living others must relate to it, it gives to the living an image of their own (dead) future. In death, a person becomes a ‘farmer’s suicide’, a social (now legal) type, equal in circumstance with all others thus named. This equalization of deaths in the law produces a causal connection between motivation, intention, a dead person, his occupation, his social location, financial circumstance, and the future (and possibilities) of agricultural production.

In a village, while you may encounter a variety of characters, you will be hard pressed to meet a ‘peasant’. Daily life is not lived in the company of other ‘citizens’, ‘farmers,’ or ‘peasants’ but in historically constituted social relations, premised on hierarchy and authority, kinship, caste, and other intimacies. ‘Peasants’ are to be found only in tracts produced by anthropologists, historians and, in the event of suicide by a person thus retroactively named in Vidarbha, the voluminous files in the state archive. In Tirjhada, my field village, while no one can describe a ‘farmer’s suicide’, they most certainly know several farmers who have committed suicide. And in my conversations villagers seemed not to hold the departed in high regard, as was revealed by common appellations for the

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8 I have effected introductions with ‘peasants’ with alacrity in the title.
persons who had died—those who kill themselves (a majority, but not exclusively, OBC-Kunbi men) were often described by fellow villagers who are not their own kin as drunk (bewada), worthless (bekar), arrogant (agavu), lazy (sust), of bad character (badmash), angry (krodhi), stubborn (batti), fornicator (randikhor), licentious (abar). I will come to the import of these accusations later, but for now: these unflattering descriptions, adduced by villagers to non-kin acquaintances, are reflective of a social pragmatics centered not on the disembedded normative equality of citizens in the law that is the ‘famer’s suicide’. Rather, this is a social pragmatics centered on honour, dignity, shame, and status transacted inter-subjectively between inherently unequal persons in a social world structured through custom and hierarchy—in Vidarbha, relations of caste; kinship and clan affiliation. In this world status and authority, not legal or political equality, are active political concepts. By which I mean that dignity and the apprehension of tragedy always begins from, and is enmeshed in, inter-subjective socially adjudicated relations. Rather than a moral economy, therefore, I will attempt to describe an ethical economy in the precise Aristotelian sense of the term—that is, a virtue ethics through which persons engage in social and personal practices that construct honour, shame, ‘face,’ and power. When Atma Ram Moon candidly enquired after the husband of the village angamwadi worker who had committed suicide, ‘Jhatte beat his wife, swore at his son, and drank away the money she brought home. If one day such a man kills himself because his wife (tyachi baiko) tired of his whoring (tyachi randikhor), insults him (shivai dili) on the square (chowk) with the neighbours (shejari) listening, and in a fit of pique (rusla) he drinks endrin (endosulfan), what is to lament about this man’s death? He was not a good man.’ I did not have an answer.

Atma Ram Moon asked me to evaluate Jhatte’s suicide not through reference to a structure

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9 Kunbi are the traditionally dominant land-owning castes of Vidarbha. The vast majority of suicide deaths have occurred within this social group. Transformations in social relations between caste-groups and the recent demise of caste as a mode of production receives has been discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation.
of law external to the material realm of social and intimate relations between actual persons, but to speak instead from a location lying within those relations. It is not as though by denouncing Jhatte’s character Moon adjudicates whether he deserved to die. It is precisely because Moon does not possess the sovereign authority of the state that he asks how others (and specific others at that) should relate to the fact of it having occurred. Moon refuses to accept as given the right of the state (and state-like discourses) to define in advance what this relation must be. Moon was asking me to fashion, in other words, an ethical response rather than take recourse to transcendental moral commandments.\(^10\)

An ethical response for the anthropologist does not have to be, indeed cannot be, the same as that of Atma Ram Moon. Moon and I inhabit different social pragmatics, different language games Wittgenstein would say. The response that I offer by way of this chapter is a demonstration of the social effects of this structural impasse between the transcendental assertion of the equality of circumstance of deaths in the law, and the empirical assessments and practices through which a singular individual suicide is rendered meaningful within a field of social pragmatics. It is the latter that I am calling an ethical, as opposed to a moral, economy.\(^11\) My task then is to understand the

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\(^{10}\) This way of thinking the relationship between a social pragmatics constituted on inter-subjective relations between persons in socially constituted authority—a social virtue ethics—against a structuralist, here legal, system of commandments by which inter-subjective recognition is organized (ideologically and materially) by reference to a ‘system’ outside pragmatics, develops from an ongoing conversation with Xenia Cherkaev and a reading of her work. She develops this idea through examining how workers’s ‘illegal but morally commendable’ actions in the late-Soviet planned distribution economy interacted with the formal domain of rules to divert, share and make social and material objects. Some of these theoretical frameworks are explored in her conference paper: ‘Rhetoric Positioning in a Revolution From the Top’, Semiotic anthropology conference. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. May 5-6th, 2016. Also see her dissertation Language, Historiography and Economy in Late and Post-Socialist Leningrad (Columbia: 2015).

\(^{11}\) This chapter is of course responding to the long tradition of thinking about moral economies beginning with E.P. Thompson’s ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd’; famously extended to an analysis of relationships to risk in peasant societies, drawing on Chayanov’s analysis of the peasant household, by James Scott in his The Moral Economy of the Peasant; responded to by Popkin in The Rational Peasant. Alongside is another large body of work from the new left histories of the political vs pre-political nature of the peasantry, particularly the south-Asian peasantry. Here of course is E.P. Thompson’s The Making of the English working Class, Eric Hobsbawm’s large body of work including Primitive Rebels. The question of the insurgent politics of the south-Asian peasantry was taken up as a central epistemological challenge by the Subaltern Studies School, centrally addressed in Ranajit Guha’s masterwork Elementary Structures of Peasant Insurgency in India. I am intervening in this literature through an ethnographic analysis of peasant society and notions of obligation and accumulation in a context wherein capitalized agriculture is now the dominant norm of
nature of this ethical economy, and the peculiar counterintuitive form it assumes in contemporary Vidarbha: to describe why at this specific historical juncture peasants seem to describe suicides not as a collective tragedy but as an individual failing.

Social Pragmatics
In this context, an empirical problem immediately suggests itself: how does this square with the many venues in which villagers vociferously assert that farmers are killing themselves for debt? What of the several thousand pieces by journalists, not to mention academic writing, scholarly papers, government documents, NGO reports, in which the voices of peasants appear reiterating the pitfalls of cotton cultivation. Are these simply cynical statements performatively enacted for a local and national public for specific purposes?

Or, am I asserting through a disingenuous gesture of proximity that before an assumed national public farmers say one thing; and in the ‘private’ domain (howsoever broadly construed) they say what they ‘really’ think. Yes and no in so far as, what is now a post-structuralist cliché, there are no authentic subjects with ‘true’ desires; there are contextually specific utterances wherein the subject of the utterance comes to be through occupying a dialogical position in language (Benveniste 1975; Jakobson 1956; Voloshivov 1982). This language is socially, and historically, determined.

For the first few months of fieldwork, while I was very much a non-native outsider, I attended farmer’s meetings and peasant rallies, visited villages in the company of fieldworkers from ‘capacity-building’ organizations, and attended to the connection between spiraling rural debt and recent transformations in the practices of cotton cultivation. In these venues I heard farmers say what I had expected to hear. Likewise, once I settled on a field village and began visiting regularly, I was daily regaled with vociferous assertions of the catastrophe of cotton farming and the production, where the question of a moral economy must now include capitalism’s logics as not external but constitutive of the life-world of contemporary peasantries.
inevitability of suicide. It was only in some months, once I was living in Tirjhada full time, that persons began to interact with me in a different register.

The shift was not because I had graduated from rank outsider to trusted ‘insider’ before whom villagers could reveal their authentic selves. The passage to a more proximate form of speech has nothing to do with intimacy at all; it is precisely the opposite. In living in Tirjhada I learned the ‘techniques of the body’—the praxis—through which subject-hood is made socially intelligible in this linguistic and cultural milieu (Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 2006). I too became part of the social pragmatics of the village, enmeshed within its caste, class, and gender dynamics. I learned because, in language I was taught the social codes, mores, forms of submission, deference, authority, and challenge through which male and female, adult adolescent and child, virtue and dishonour are constructed in this world.

In inhabiting these material discursive practices—forms of dress and address; bodily comportment; how to give and receive gifts; how to crack a joke; vulgarity and grace; familial dynamics; caste-relations—I became both a social socialized person, and an individual personality, to the others with whom I lived. When then discussing deaths in the village, persons spoke to me not only in the stilted translational tones of conversation with, ‘the fair-skinned girl come from America - Aymerikabun ello pandhari potti’, but now also with Aarti: the Punjabi-unmarried-recently Varhadi speaking-meat eating-higher educated-salaried-teacher-Hindu-North Indian-woman who lived with a Baudh Dharmi household in a predominantly OBC-Kunbi village. What I have just relayed is commonsense: just as in time the social categories through which persons could locate me expanded and became more detailed, my growing conversational abilities in Varhadi and increasing familiarity with social codes (and how and when to break them) enabled me to establish forms of friendship and intimacy with persons in Tirjhada. When then speaking with me about the deaths of others in
the village, my acquaintances could gesture to the socially constituted web of meanings in which the
death became intelligible, on the understanding that I had some means of making sense of them too.

By way of example I offer a reading of one death that occurred in my field site in 2013 in
which the account from the case-file opened on this death housed in the tehsil office and
descriptions from my field notes in which persons in the village, differently positioned in relation to
the dead man, vary wildly in their description of the circumstances of the same death. What I wish
to mark is not simply that the ethnographic descriptions have more of a ‘story’ going on. They do,
but that is a matter of style and genre. The case-files provide vitally important information that does
not figure in the ethnographic account and, depending on the proclivities of the policemen writing
the panchnama, occasionally have richly textured and evocatively written descriptions of the
circumstances prior to death. A legal document concerned with the immediate event, created for the
purpose of adjudicating monetary compensation, cannot be expected to have the same texture as
ethnographic description. Therefore of interest to me are the categories—legal and social—through
which a singular suicide is rendered meaningful and eventful. That is the forms of naming and
narration through which causal, and temporal, relationships are established between individual
decision, material circumstance, state recognition and social evaluation.

**Autopsy of a Case-File: The Suicide of Vinod Shamraoji Shinde**

On 3 April 2013 Vinod Shamraoji Shinde, resident of Tirjhada village, drank endosulphan at
approximately 16:00 hours in his own field. His neighbours took him in an autorickshaw to the
Primary Health Center in Kadam. From there he was transferred to the civil hospital at Yavatmal

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12 Kadam is the block-head quarters at a distance of about 20 kilometers from my field-village Tirjhada.
where he was admitted at 19:10 hours. The death certificate states he passed at 1:30 hours, on 5 April 2013, almost 48 hours after he consumed the insecticide.\(^{13}\)

The first page of the case-file groups relevant information under a series of headers, compiled from documents appended by the police, the tehsildar, the civil surgeon, the block agricultural officer, the agricultural PAC credit society, statements by immediate kin, and the post-mortem report. Thus we learn that Vinod Shinde, 42 years of age, owned 3.69 hectares (approx. 9 acres) of non-irrigated land. The land being rain-fed (kordvahu), it yielded one kharif (monsoon) harvest a year sowed in the rainy season. Shinde cultivated the kharif cash crops of Vidarbha—cotton (kapus) and soybean. Reading from the amounts and dates stamped on the land-tile and crop report included in the case-file (village extract 7/12: saathara), to raise capital for inputs, Shinde borrowed a sum of Rs 88,600 (approx $1327) on 5 May 2011 from the famers credit society in Rajur. On the date of his death Shinde owed the society the principal with interest (Rs. 21,330), making a total sum of Rs. 1,09,930 (approx $1644). A copy of the deceased’s APL card (Above Poverty Line) reflects an annual income of Rs. 40,000 (approx. $600), not an insignificant sum in this rural milieu.

More documents illuminate why Shinde defaulted on the loans: the report by the block agricultural officer states that in the 2010-2011 growing season Shinde planted cotton and soybean on his fields. The crops failed. From the crop reports for these years also included in the case-file can be seen that he harvested only 6 quintals of cotton and 2 quintals of soybean.\(^{14}\) The next year, 2011-2012, he planted cotton intercropped with cowpeas (turi) and soybean. This year too the harvests failed—Shinde reaped 8 quintals of cotton and 3 quintals of soybean. There is a discrepancy in the documents over the crops sown in the third year, 2012-2013. The report by the block

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\(^{13}\) Case-File 2456/Vinod Shamraoji Shinde/2013/District Collectorate/Yavatmal.

\(^{14}\) This works out to less than a quintal of cotton per acre, a catastrophically low yield.
agricultural officer states that he did not plant cotton this year; he only planted soybean and chana (legumes). The saathara (village extract 7/12; the land title and crop record), however, shows that during 2012-2013, on a total cultivable area of 3.69 hectares, cotton was sowed on 2.8 ha, soybean on .40 ha and cowpeas on .36 ha, with no mention of legumes. We will come to the significance of this discrepancy in a moment. The agricultural officer states there was no recorded crop failure in 2012-2013.

The land records confirm these statements and provide more details. Ten family members jointly hold title to the land—6 brothers, 1 married sister, 2 unmarried sisters, and the deceased’s mother. Despite the fact that every individual is listed as a landholder on the property, Kusum Shamrao Shinde, the deceased’s mother, is the only family member noted as specifically holding .04 ha of potkharab (uncultivable) land. The bhudharana padhiti, indicating occupancy type, designates the land as ‘Class-1’, indicating the owners are hereditary title-holders; confirmed by the assessment (akarni) column reflecting they are hereditary tax-assesses (for a sum of four rupees fifty paisa). While legally caste identity cannot be recorded in a land title, that the family are ‘Class-1’ occupants further demonstrates that they do not belong to a Scheduled caste or tribe, indicating they are probably OBC-Kunbi, this confirmed by the clan patronym Shinde.

We also learn from this document that in 1994 the land was mortgaged to the Gramin Vikas Bank for an unspecified loan amount undertaken by a Shamrao Harba Shinde. Shamrao Harba

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15 The marital status of women is indicated by the honorific, middle and last name. Married women take their husband’s first and last name as their middle and last name respectively. Unmarried women take their father’s first and last name as their middle and last name respectively. Thus one sister is listed as Saubhagyawati (fortunate) Varsha Ashokrav Jhade; the other two as Kumari Pramila Shamrao Shinde and Kumari Nirmala Shamrao Shinde.

16 The mutation entry is interesting: every individual listed as a landholder has the same mutation number and, excepting Kusum Shamrao Shinde, separate parcels are not listed against individual title holders. So while the history of the transaction cannot be reconstructed from this particular document, the mutation numbers being the same indicates that on some specified date/s, each listed individual was included as a title-holder, but the land was not legally partitioned amongst family members.

17 Potkharab is land that cannot be cultivated. The uncultivable land is designated as class-A, which indicates that Kusum Shamrao Shinde alone has a legal right of alienation to the land on which the family home stands.
Shinde does not appear as a current title-holder—he is the deceased patriarch of the family. In 1996 a sum of Rs. 19,600 ($294) was borrowed from the farmers credit society (Rajur) against this land title. This sum is still outstanding. The next entry shows an outstanding amount of Rs. 1,40,000 ($2094) borrowed from the farmers’ credit society, but we see that this amount is listed against the mother of the deceased, Kusum Shamrao Shinde. Every title holder to land is issued an account number (khata kramank); thus two separate title holders, with different account numbers, can take a loan out on the same survey number (gat kramank), i.e. the same land. Bank details from the credit society concur with the amounts listed on the land title.

Moving to the statements by his immediate kin, there are two brief depositions. The first by his wife, Nilu Vinod Shinde, states that her husband, Vinod Shamraoji Shinde, was the primary cultivator of a combined family landholding of 3.69 ha. He had an outstanding debt of Rs. 1,09,930 ($1644). Two years of successive crop failures weighed heavy on him and he often worried about how the debts would be repaid (karzche paratphed kassa karaiche nehmai bolat bota). On the day of his death, Nilu Shinde heard from people in the village that her husband consumed poison in his field. They took him to the hospital where he died on 5 April 2013. The statement by his brother broadly repeats the same version of events, except he includes two significant details. First, that in their family of 6 brothers, the deceased was the third in number. He states that the brothers jointly cultivated the family landholding, but notes that they did not share a kitchen. The post-mortem, conducted at the Department of Forensic Medicine, Government Medical College Yavatmal, provides a detailed report of the condition of the body and concludes, ‘post mortem findings are consistent with death due to poisoning.’

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18 We know that Shamrao Harba Shinde is the deceased patriarch as his first name, Shamrao, is taken as the middle name of all the sons. His own name takes his father’s name, thus Shamrao Harba Shinde. Wives take their husband’s first name as their middle-names: thus Nilu Vinod Shinde.
The case-file concludes by stating that based on the evidence collected it is clear Vinod Shamraoji Shinde killed himself as a result of increasing debts occasioned by successive crop failures. The suicide death meets the state-defined criteria of eligibility for compensation—the file is thus marked ‘patra-atmabhaya’: eligible suicide. The district collector thereby authorizes the release of a sum of Rs. 100,000 (approx. $1498) by cheque or money order to the wife of the deceased.

*Giving and Taking, Courage and Fear: The Suicide of Vinod Shamraoji Shinde*

With the case-files we can begin to locate this death within a social and familial history: we learn that Vinod Shamrao Shinde was a farmer from a hereditary landed Kunbi family, the traditional landowning dominant castes of Vidarbha. While the combined landholding of 9 acres is not large by any means, it is also not small when compared with an average landholding of 2.7 acres for Vidarbha, The Shindes were thus a relatively (and I stress relatively) well-off clan, as indicated by their annual income.

The case-file also traces the outlines of familial fractures: the first clue is the discrepancy between the report from the block agricultural office which states that in 2012-2013 Shinde did not sow cotton when compared with the land-title (village extract 7/12) which claims that cotton was indeed sown on the majority of this landholding. Let us look at the title holders again: six brothers are listed as jointly holding title to the land, but the brother states in his deposition to the police that they did not share a kitchen. That is, the brothers lived separately in their own domiciles and though title to the holding was jointly held, each brother cultivated a separate parcel of land. Someone in this family sowed cotton on the land in 2012, but it was not Vinod Shamrao Shinde. Shinde only sowed soybean and legumes, this choice reflected in the marketing records also appended with the
According to the MPCS records, in 2010 and 2011 Shinde sold 6 and 4 quintals of cotton respectively to a private trader. There is no record of a cotton sale by Vinod Shinde in 2012.19

Why did Shinde not sow cotton? Because he could not afford to—cotton costs twice as much to cultivate as compared to soybean. When the cotton crop failed the first year, Shinde could not return the bank loan (listed under his mother’s name). Thus he had no capital to invest in 2011. He offloaded the entirety of the meager 6-quintal harvest to a private trader unable to afford the wait for the state federation sale price. Hoping to recover costs he sowed cotton again in 2011, and the crop failed again. The third year Shinde had no capital left, and in desperation invested the entirety of his earnings into the only crops he could afford to cultivate—soybean and legumes. He killed himself before the harvest ripened.

This much, and much else, can be gathered from the case-files alone. But in the village this harrowing story is not how his immediate clan describes the events leading up to his death. I quote now from an extended conversation with a brother, once removed on Shinde’s mother’s side:

‘The night he finally killed himself he came to me and touched my feet (maazhe pay dharla). He had been staggering drunk across the basti touching people’s feet. I drew away (mi dachaklo). I said, ‘Brother you are bigger than me (maajhapeksa thor abat). Don’t touch my feet (pay nako),’

‘He said, ‘I am going to kill myself. I am going to drink endrin.’

19 From 1971 till 2002, The Maharashtra Raw Cotton (Procurement, Processing and Marketing) Act forbade all private trading in raw cotton within the state of Maharashtra. Enacted to encourage cultivators to grow more cotton in the early post-Independence decades by assuring them of a remunerative price guaranteed by the state, the Act created a state marketing federation which bought all raw cotton produced within the state boundaries. Cultivators were forbidden from selling their raw cotton to private traders. On this act, which was sharply critiqued by economists for creating a distorted cotton market and encouraging uneconomic and inefficient cultivation, the state announced a guaranteed price at the start of the harvesting season, with price bonuses if prices rose elsewhere through a Price Fluctuation Fund also created under the act. This price was often much higher than the minimum price support announced by the central Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices. Thus for almost the entire duration of postcolonial cotton farming in Maharashtra specifically, cultivators did not need to reckon with an open pricing mechanism, and received some of the highest prices for their raw cotton in the country, with simultaneously the highest costs of cultivation and the lowest yields of all the cotton-growing states in India. The scheme ran up enormous losses, and finally the Reserve Bank of India refused to extend the credit cap of the Maharashtra state government resulting in the ending of monopoly state procurement in 2002 (incidentally the same year when Bt-cotton formally entered the Indian market). The long life of this Act, despite continuous criticism, is explained by state-level political imperatives: for many years the MPCS was politically untouchable as political parties must needs reckon with cotton-growers as an electorally significant constituency in state politics. (See Godbole 1999).
These low people (kbalche loka), they laughed. They spat on the ground and mocked him (gamat kelō), ‘Really (kharas)? Just like you said the last time? Do it then (za kar mug karta ta).’ He bought two pawwas (a quarter bottle of alcohol) from the theka (alcohol shop). He drank one, but it wasn’t enough. He tried (pratyna kelā), but he was too scared (pan bhiti valli tyanna). Then he mixed the pesticide with the second bottle, and then he was strong enough to do it (daring vaadli). In this way he died.’

‘Why didn’t you stop him?’
‘I wasn’t there! If I had been do you think we would have let him (kela dila asta ka)?’

Of significance in this narration is that at some point the speaker moves from describing Vinod Shinde’s actions, i.e. what other people saw him doing (touching feet; staggering drunk; saying he would kill himself) to a reflection on his internal state in solitude when no one was there. In his account the narrator stands in the place of Shinde’s unaccompanied terror—‘He drank one bottle, but it was not enough. He was too scared to die.’ What is the texture of this fear in which the speaker is able to think himself? The account continues:

‘Before his marriage everything was fine. His father had died (buḍḍa melā), so they put the house on aayī’s (mother’s) name and he became responsible for everything. He got his sister married, by himself (i.e. even though he was the third son), he did everything (sagde kela to). But people knew things were not going well…the girl’s sasra (the in-laws) made a fuss so they settled land on her (i.e. the sister was given a share in the title). And then he got married (tyancha lagn zhala). And then they (his own clan) cut him off.’

‘I know what people in the village are saying, but his was a hundred percent true suicide (shambhar takke khari atmabatya). In the market his name fell. He used to be a data (giver) before marriage. Then after marriage partition happened. The water went there. Earlier he used to give, and now how to give? People stopped lending to him. He began drinking heavily. So fights broke out in the house, the in-laws said many things…He was scared to die. That night people thought he was just saying things like he always said, then he mixed the alcohol with the endrin (endosulphan) and drank it.”

The person relaying this description is an agnatic kinsman of Shinde. Vinod Shinde, and the narrator, let me call him Shinde Z, are OBC-Kunbi and belong to a Dani clan. Since both are from agnatic clans, hence Shinde Z’s insistence that Vinod Shinde killed himself for ‘correct’ reasons.

What are these reasons? Debt is not mentioned anywhere in this account, though it is the sole

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‘factor’ in the government case file. And indeed, the scale of monetary debt is not itself very large if divided across all the title-holders. Instead, in this description, financial hardship and change in material circumstance acquires meaning as a question of honour, shame and loss of face based on the distinction between a ‘giver’ (dani) and a ‘taker’ (alutedar).

Some Kunbi clans as I have described are traditionally patron (dani; lit. ‘giver’) castes in Vidarbha, owed labour and other agricultural services by service-tendering castes (alutedar/balutedar, lit. ‘recipient of a share’). This system of caste-based prestation—wherein agricultural production is organized around caste-specific roles—involves a network of service-tendering castes (carpenters, ironsmiths, barbers) who provide services for a share in produce. Kunbi patron families are expected to give annual gifts of grain (jwari), clothes (dhotr; lugdyo), and utensils (ganj) in return for work tendered. While this system has more or less collapsed in the past fifteen years, patron/service caste identities are an important axis along which social power is displayed at the village level. Landed Kunbi families like the Shinde clan are classed, based on family income, as APL (Above Poverty Line) families who do not receive subsidized wheat and rice from the state public food distribution system. Unlike poorer, and/or lower-caste families with BPL (Below Poverty Line) cards, the Shinde’s are givers, not takers, of grain.\footnote{The issue of caste as a mode of production or caste’s relation to production rather, has received treatment in chapter 3.}

When Shinde Z says that Shinde was a ‘giver’, he means that prior to his marriage one facet of his social personhood derived from this position as a patron. After his marriage (lagna), Shinde was given his share of the family land and asked to cultivate it himself individually, and not collectively, with his other brothers. This meant that now he was cut-off from the family’s ancestral name as a patron clan. Moreover, as a result his own landholding became uneconomical to cultivate as the water (paani), i.e. the well, was no longer on his fields. Seeing this, people stopped extending
credit to him on the basis of his name: thus his name ‘went down in the marker’. Being the wife-takers (sasra), to lose face before his in-laws, was unendurable, and at some point he committed suicide by drinking poison.

The narrator locates this suicide within Shinde’s shame; and this a shame (laaj) that is at once personal (the abuse of his in-laws; fights with his wife; alienation from his natal family) and social: for Shinde Z, the lack of respect shown now to Kunbi patrons by persons from low-caste backgrounds (khade loka), such as the neo-Buddhist who now are also substantial land-owners, but till recently were occupied in trades considered menial or polluting. When the narrator speaks of persons before whom Vinod Shinde lost face as a ‘giver’, becoming instead a ‘taker’, he is marking a shift in caste-relations in the village and the loss of social power by traditionally dominant land-owning castes. But this is not all Shinde Z says: this exegesis is not intended as a functionalist explanation of this death, this is not ‘why’ Vinod Shinde killed himself and nor does the narrator explain it as such. Rather in a complex and delicate narration he is locating the decision of death as emerging from breaks across a constellation of social positions, familial relations, and individual decisions.

If Shinde’s family had not partitioned the land, then the debt itself would have been collectively shouldered. With the death of his father, the domicile (.04 ha) was transferred to his mother. But as the third son, when the brothers split, it was his elder brother, not him, who occupied the family home. Despite being the third son, it was Vinod who ‘did everything (sagde kela)’. However, one tranche of debt was taken out, as the record demonstrates, on his mother’s name. When he couldn’t pay that amount back, this caused more trouble since a son is expected to take care of his mother after the father’s death. Shinde began drinking heavily. Traditionally drinking (more on this below) is a mark of the expansive social power of landed Kunbi men. Heavy drinking

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22 Such as barbers (ubarti) for example.
is not frowned upon, rather a Patil (a hereditary title of landed political authority) is expected to
drink and hold court. But in this case, it became the mark of Shinde’s loss of power, of a depletion
that invited the derision of socially inferior others in the village.

There are two further things to note about this account: first that this, not unsympathetic,
description of death is adduced by a close kinsman of Vinod Shinde. Even so, Shinde Z continually
asserts that this was a ‘hundred percent true suicide’ as though responding in the breach to a
contemptuous village consensus that derided Shinde’s drunkenness, whispering about family
troubles. Second, that while the loss of social power as caste status seems to figure prominently in
this account, it does so in the specific context of the Shinde clan’s stature as ‘dani’ (patrons). All
Kunbi families are not dani as I have said previously; this is a social position occupied only by
hereditarily landed clans, of which there are perhaps six in Tirjhada. The large majority of Kunbi
cultivators hold very small plots of land (an average of 2.7 acres) and persons from these families do
not identify caste status as isomorphic with patron status, though they too would distinguish
themselves in some contexts and for some purposes from lower-caste persons. Speaking about the
suicide of his mother, Ramesh Aglave, also an OBC-Kunbi man said that, ‘I’m telling you, all the
suicides in this village are fake (kbotto), only the cheaters benefit.’ Prabha Tai Aglave killed herself by
jumping into the family well at night. Aglave refused the state compensation, asking the police sub-
inspector who was a personal acquaintance to designate his mother’s death as an accident in the FIR
(first Information Report). When I asked him why, he said, ‘I would have lost all face in the market,
no one would have lent to me again - marketmadbe maazha nav down zhala asta; undaya mala konbihi paishe
dila nesta).’ Since most suicides in Tirjhada comprise deaths by Kunbi men, Aglave is speaking then
of his own caste.

23 This is not strictly speaking true. It is not as though families in which a suicide death has occurred are cut-off from all
sources of credit. If this were the case no one would be able to cultivate cotton. Of interest here, rather, is the specific
Indeed when caste features in these accounts, it often does so negatively inflected. Thus Vaikunt Kutte, a Kunbi man and a farmer with 5 acres of land, when speaking of the suicide of his own son, asserted, ‘There are more suicides amongst Kunbis than any other caste.’ When I asked why, he said, ‘Kunbi men are more ignorant (adhnani), angry (krodhi), stubborn (hatti) than any other caste; and they drink more (jast peetat) and are worse drunkards (bewada) than anyone else.’ These unflattering descriptions that Kutte adduces as characteristics of the men of his own caste partake of a general derision of suicides as committed by weak-willed (sust; bekar) men—the impetuous (agavu) actions of drunk wastrels. However in the democratization that is the new economy of hybrid-driven cotton as I have showed across the previous chapters, ‘caste’ itself is breaking down in terms of its contemporary significations in village society. Vaikunt Kutte’s intuitive sense agrees with hard statistics: based on caste-wise primary data sets I created from over 3000 suicide case-files held in the Wardha District Collectorate, a very large majority (at least over 70%) of suicide deaths seem to be of Kunbi men, though there are suicide-deaths by cultivators of all castes now in Vidarbha since as has been described the pattern of land-holding and cotton-cultivation has radically transformed in the preceding two decades with large numbers of new social groups entering the economy of cotton.

In what follows below, I will unpack this contemporary ethical economy of the cotton farmer, to show that in the context of the generalization of risk as a result of changes in the mode of agricultural production, the event of suicide is isolated as an individual failing, rather than narrated as collective tragedy.

Empathy Without Sympathy
The common response by farmers to why someone killed himself is neither compassion nor disidentification. Rather, contradicting public and media discourses, which narrate the deaths of connection Aglave makes with a social assessment of credit-worthiness, ‘face’, and the loss of face produced by suicide death.
farmers as an inevitable outcome of the ‘agrarian crises’, peasants themselves almost always describe suicide as an individual failure. This affective structure, which I call ‘empathy without sympathy,’ responds to the emergence of risk as a structural precondition of peasant life. In the face of an agrarian crisis symptomatically expressed in the massification of self-deaths, individuating suicide as the contingent choice of failed individuals attempts to recover the capacity for ethical action on the part of the living who must nonetheless continue to produce within this very mode of production.

‘Farmer’s suicide’ is a descriptive adverb in that it describes a suicide by someone who is a farmer. But it is also a collective noun produced through the circular reasoning of the law. It retroactively designates those suicides among the peasantry that have been deemed, through a juridical process of adjudication, to conform to certain state-defined criteria. In constructing the juridical category of the ‘farmer’s suicide,’ the state produces, through the illocutionary power of the legal apparatus, a collectivity that while seeming to describe an actually existing set of dead persons structurally describes only the legal process itself. However, it is not as though the suicides of farmers exist only within the law; ‘farmers suicide’ is not a just legal fiction as there are indeed thousands of farmers who kill themselves every year, and the state compensation scheme was itself fashioned as a response by government to pressure from media, civil society, and farmer’s rights groups.

So we could say that the ‘farmer’s suicide’, as collective noun, is akin to a myth in the precise technical sense of the term, in so far as Levi-Strauss describes myth as that form of language that is a pure reflection of structure devoid of particular content (Levi-Strauss 1974). A myth is not a narrative. A myth does not tell a story; rather it combines and recombines representations of events wherein the form of combination, not the particular mythic fragments themselves, displays structural
logic. Indeed, this chapter aims to demonstrate precisely the impasse between the mythic structural language of the law in which the circumstances of individual suicides appear as indexical units of a generalizable combination (farmer, poison, death, compensation, farmers suicide) and the social pragmatics wherein each act of suicide is radically particular and intimately singular. Further, it is my contention that this impasse itself produces certain political and social effects; one effect with which this chapter is specifically concerned is the emergence of this structure of feeling I term 'empathy without sympathy'—a peculiar modality of inter-subjective recognition wherein the living may achieve an empathetic identification with the dead, but have no sympathy for them.

**Empathy as Suspicion**
The legal recognition of a death as a ‘farmer’s suicide’ exacerbates this structure of feeling, ‘empathy without sympathy.’ What is more, the empathetic identification takes a peculiar split form: on the one hand a penultimate identification with the category of the farmer’s suicide such that in it one apprehends the shape/contours of a future possibly awaiting ones self, and on the other hand, a radical suspicion of the known person who has committed suicide.

The designation of a death by the state as a debt-induced ‘farmer’s suicide’ produces the counter-intuitive suspicion in villagers who knew the individual that the suicide was ‘fake’ (*khott atmabatya asan*), furthering the commonly held view that only, ‘cheaters (*chalu lok*) benefit, not the hundred percent (*shambhar takke*) true suicides (*khari atmabatya*). When I pointed out that money is of little use to a dead man, villagers countered with the assertion, ‘well his family got something didn’t they? (*tyache kutumbala kabitar nahi ka?*)’ But this act of dying so one’s family might get

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24 It is not necessary to subscribe wholesale to Levi-Straussian structuralism in order to see the operations of legal language as a kind of mythic language; See Butler 2006 for instance.

25 As we have seen, this statement was made by Ramesh Aglave, whose mother Prabha Tai Aglave committed suicide. Aglave is a Kunbi, talking about other Kunbis, thus caste by itself is not an axis of solidarity.
something was never narrated in the language of sacrifice or martyrdom. On the contrary, it made the situation even more deserving of contempt since surviving kin were now being rewarded for the departure of a man who was worthless (bekar) to begin with, his worthlessness preeminently demonstrated by the fact that he had killed himself. As to who these ‘hundred percent true suicides’ are, as I have discussed above, is not simply a rhetorical or cynical gesture. Rather, the event of the ‘true suicide’ (khari atmabhatya) exists, it has life, on a different plane. There is indeed a true suicide somewhere (which is everywhere), but not this specific one. And it is by reference to this unidentifiable ‘true suicide’ that the particular suicide under discussion receives its sense as ‘fake’.

Now, it might appear as though I were suggesting that there is an empirical consonance, a direct line of transmission, between bureaucratic deliberation and societal understanding/evaluation. It would seem as though the entire village waits on whether a suicide is deemed to be ‘true’ or ‘fake’ by the district collector’s office. Certainly this is not the case. Villagers do not require information regarding the decision of the DC’s office on the ‘validity’ of a specific suicide event in order to arrive at their own assessments of the deceased and the circumstances of his death. Bureaucratic deliberation, legal codification, and social evaluation do not inhabit a comparative register: even the immediate families of dead individuals do not access the files that determined whether they would receive monetary assistance.26 But villagers do not need to know: the structural logic produced by the law is devoid of particular content. Indeed it is precisely through this evacuation that the ‘farmer’s suicide’ is stabilized as a juridical category. In so far as all suicides are legally ‘farmer’s suicides’, all suicides are assumed to potentially be ‘fake’ suicides. The a priori stance of suspicion.

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26 Families could, if they wished to, receive copies of the case-file under the Right to Information Act 2005. It is under the provisions of this Act that I gained access to some of the files, and journalists, NGOs and farmer’s organizations routinely access copies of the files. However no family that I spoke to had exercised this option or deemed it a worthwhile exercise. Nor am I aware if there have been instances of families contesting the administrative ruling on a suicide. I asked the officials in the collector’s office of my field district if in their experience this was a common practice; they could not recall a single instance in the last 15 years. It is possible in Yavatmal, which is a much bigger district than Wardha, there have been such instances but I did not work in the Yavatmal archives (except to pull the case-files of my specific field villages). Since I would not have been able to conduct fieldwork and archival work in two districts, I separated my fieldwork and archival districts so I would get a broader sense of agrarian change in this region.
towards suicides produces the baffling social result that as far as villagers are concerned all suicides are (not) ‘farmer’s suicides’.

Where can the material instantiations of this ethical economy be discerned? In order to sense its phenomenological textures we would have to attend to those domains wherein the nature of the good, obligation, virtue, and their opposite find expression. One significant arena of social praxis for this tussle is comprised of practices and affects around the drinking and consumption of alcohol. I attempt to trace this ethical economy through the consumption of this fluid for two reasons: first because if monetary debt is, for the state, the primary evidence of an ‘eligible (patra) suicide’, then addiction to alcohol is the mark of an ‘ineligible (napatra) suicide’. Alcohol addiction thus provides a potent language for interpersonal, and community, contestations over the meanings of individual suicide deaths.

On the intake form which comprises the first-page of a suicide case-file, state officials tasked with investigating the circumstances of death are asked to provide answers to a variety of questions that solicit information on marital status, caste identity, number of family members, land title, crops cultivated, and so on. The first question on this form (after name/age/sex/caste/address/date of death etc.) is: ‘Did the deceased have outstanding debt?’ If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, the next question solicits information on the sources of the debt—bank debt, creditsociety debt, microfinance debt, debt from private sources, moneylender debt, and ‘other debt’. The third question asks: ‘was the deceased addicted to alcohol (darnche vaysan bote)?’ An affirmative answer to question three does not automatically render the suicide ineligible for compensation. If the appended documents reflect the farmer as being indebted, then alcohol addiction is read as a dependent symptom of the primary etiology, which is debt.

In the monthly meetings in the district collector’s office in which state officials, members of farmers organizations, and social activists gather to examine the case-files and decide which families
will be given state compensation, if a case-file reflects an addiction to alcohol along with evidence of debt, the understanding is that the alcohol addiction is a symptom of the tension and stress caused by debt. If however there is no evidence of debt, or the debt cannot be ascertained through documentary proof, and if statements by family members and the police aver the famer was addicted to alcohol, alcohol then acquires, for state officials, a primary etiology of its own.

Peasants concur with this distinction, but in inverted form—i.e. if for state policy alcohol addiction signals a suicide caused by other social and personal factors not agrarian distress (defined as debt), peasants also agree. Except that it is ‘debt’ that cannot appear with an independent etiology as the cause of death in peasant society, since the fractures caused by this thing called ‘debt’ only acquire phenomenological form as social and personal. Indeed monetary debt undertaken for cultivation is not described as ‘debt’ (karz) at all—this borrowed money is simply described as ‘money’ (paisa), and no distinctions are made between the amount that may have been borrowed or personal savings. This money is described as, appears as, ‘debt’ only when either the anthropologist pushes the informant to break-down capital by source; or then when the borrowed sum is reflected in the state case-file as outstanding debt (sthakit karz) when someone commits suicide. In life, ‘debt’ can only be experienced materially as that without which cultivation (and thus peasant life) is impossible, in which case monetary debt is a necessity as constant capital. And when production begins to break down, as fractures in social and intimate relations. Thus while villagers will occasionally somberly agree, particularly in the presence of visiting social activists and state dignitaries, that alcohol addiction in farmers is a response to debt burdens, this relationship of

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27 I attended several of these meetings as an observer. The meeting is presided over by the district collector or, in her/his absence, the deputy collector. Other state officials present are the chief agricultural officer, the superintendent of police, occasionally present is the civil surgeon of Wardha, and administrative officers responsible for compiling the case-files. Social activists, members of farmers’ rights organizations, local journalists and NGO representatives also attend these meetings. The discussions of individual case-files is brief, other circumstances notwithstanding and depending on the number of case-files the whole session lasts between an hour and a half to two hours. As I have said officials try as far as possible to distribute compensation to as large a pool as can be managed within the constraints of state norms and judicial processes.
causality does not find traction in everyday conversation. Rather it is the consumption of alcohol, addiction, and its relationship to suicide in itself that is a topic of intense discussion in villages. And it is through the practices of alcohol consumption that questions of power, control and masculine capacity are dramatized in spectacular public form. I now turn to understanding the symbolic valance of alcohol and drinking in Vidarbha and its associations with masculinity; to excavate of its pleasures, dangers, and powers.

Alcohol and the Appetites of a Man
Alcohol (daru) is signified as a male fluid, which marks the appetites (bhook) of a man. It is socially gendered as male not just because only men (usually) drink alcohol, but because bottled alcohol is linked to qualities gendered as male, particularly the property of heat: bottled alcohol is a hot (garam) fluid. For this reason beer (called simply ‘beer’ and not daru) is not considered properly alcoholic—young girls who travel to the city for education will occasionally try beer as a daring rite of youth away from parental strictures. Secondly, from my conversations it appears that only industrially produced alcohol, sold in bottles or split up into polythene packets, is considered heat generating. That is, that alcohol produced outside the home is garam (hot); fermented spirits made in the house are, by contrast, considered cooling (thand; gor).

Such drinks were, till quite recently, made by the fermentation of rice (taadi) or various kinds of fruits and flowers (phulli). On enquiring after someone’s sore throat I was told that he had attended an adivasi wedding the night before and had drunk taadi on a cool evening; taadi being ‘cold’, consequently earning a cough (khol) for his pleasures. While middle and upper caste women will usually not partake of either, adivasi women and children freely consume taadi and phulli, and both are thought to have medicinal properties for specific ailments. Beginning in the eighties, spirits made from the fermentation of mahua flowers began to be distilled on a local scale, in stills, for sale
on the black-market. The step of distillation, and production specifically for sale, converts the spirit from a ‘cold’ fluid to a *garam* (hot) one, and distilled spirit is then also brought under the generic term ‘*daru*’.

In being a hot fluid, alcohol is linked to hot foods: particularly meat (*maas*; also considered hot), chilies (*tikhat*) and oil. Meat is cooked, swimming in oil, with copious quantities of chilies; meat dishes simply called ‘*tikhat* (*bhaaji*)’ (spicy dish). Meat is almost always consumed by men accompanied by alcohol (humorously called *tonic*)—‘With meat there should be tonic or it’s no fun —*tikhat* (*bhaaji*) *tonic* *vhai* *pabi* *nabi* *tar* *jamat* *nabi*.’ The absence of alcohol at a meal of meat is a cause of keen disappointment. Men begrudge the lack of *tonic* as indicating miserliness on the part of the host—‘he’s a cheapskate! - *chinddi* *manus* *to*’—leaving eaters with the dissatisfied feeling that all pleasure has not been wrung from the occasion.

Within meats there exists a further gradation—game meat, such as the flesh of wild pigs (*raan* *dukker*), is considered the hottest and, oddly, the sweetest (*godh*). The meat of domesticated animals, primarily goat (*bokda*), is considered ‘cooler’ than wild game. Chicken meat is the coldest and is associated with Muslims and many villagers choose not to eat it, though men avidly consume quails (*lawa*) and partridges (*kawda*; *teetar*). Kunbi and *adivasi* women also eat meat; usually ‘cooler’ meats such as goat flesh (*bokdecha* *maas*) and most refrain from consuming ‘hot’ game meats. Most middle and upper-caste Hindu men and women eschew cow meat (*baddecha* *maas*; lit. ‘the flesh of the big’).

While meat is not forbidden to middle-caste women (as is common in upper-caste households), in many OBC-Kunbi households women will cook meat for the men but will not eat it themselves. Many women stop eating meat once married; conversely some women begin eating meat when they enter their marital homes as, like alcohol, it heats the blood (*rakf*); a euphemism for sexual appetite considered inappropriate for unmarried girls. At this first exploratory stage we can
begin to discern a first-level split through which alcohol constitutes maleness—i.e. through a distinction between the interior and contained space of the home and that which lies outside the home. Outside the home lies, on the one hand, the space of wildness (the forest ‘raan’ where game meat is procured); and, on the other, the domain of circulation and trade. Daru is that substance which is produced outside the home, for sale, to be bought and consumed by men.

The coupling of alcohol and appetite is expressed in the compound noun for a drunkard: *peenara-khanaara*. The termination ‘naar’ is the future participle, which when joined with the verbal root denotes both the intention to do an action, as well as a noun of agency. When employed in the latter sense the final vowel ‘a’ is lengthened to ‘aa’. Thus *peenara—peene*: the gerund of the verb ‘to drink’; *peenara*: the one who drinks. *Khanaara—kaane*: the gerund of the verb ‘to eat’; making *khanaara*: the one who eats. Describing a drunkard the compound noun *peenara-khanaara* literally translates as ‘drinker-eater’, i.e. one with appetites.

The sense of appetite (*bhook*) encompasses both the hunger for food, and the hunger for sex. While *peenara-khanaara* is always employed pejoratively, to express corrupted tastes (*savay*), in themselves appetites are not necessarily bad. On the contrary, when resident in a man with the capacity to control and absorb them they are the ‘shauk’ (literally the pleasures) of a big man (*mothamanus*); his outward consumption reflective of his indwelling, but socially substantiated, power. Thus when describing the lavish household of his father-in-law, incumbent on his social status as a powerful Patil, Azuba Shinde spoke of his enormous capacity to drink, abuse his underlings and distribute grain and clothes on every festival, in the same breath as he described the number of villages under his headship, the horse-drawn buggy he rode when surveying his lands, and the *tamasha* dancers called to entertain men of his acquaintance in raucous night-long *jalsa* (gatherings).

The relation of power, charisma and heat is expressed through a further set of paired connotations: as a heating substance alcohol is associated with the quality of expansiveness (*phelavne*.
lit. ‘to spread’) and extension (vistaar). Heat’s connection with charisma is literally expressed through the word ‘tej/tejas’. Tej, a Sanskrit derivative for which there is no direct equivalent in English, meaning indwelling ‘heat’ (ushnata), ‘fire’, ‘flame’ or ‘light’ (ujjwal), is deployed in a variety of contexts to signify majesty, splendor, dignity. Tej is a bridging term: it refers to an indwelling fierce essence (sattva) of heat and luminosity, as well as its outward personal and social manifestations—hence Tej is also used to describe glory, authoritativeness, vigour, fearsomeness. Grammatically Tej is gendered as a neuter (napunsak-ling) noun in Marathi; in usage, however, it is deployed as masculine given it also means semen and virility.

The potency of Tej in its inherent sense of outward driving force derives from control and an inner restraint—Tej may be achieved through bodily and social practices that are expansive in external reach, because the outward expansion fibrillates against a potent inner disciplining. Such practices could be the ascetic penances of a mendicant (power gained through control over the self and the senses), or martial prowess such as that of a king or a chieftain (power demonstrated through the ability to go to war; or control the actions of others). In village society, a figure of such a person, a motif we could say, are the drinking practices of the Patil—‘Patil’ is a hereditary title marking pre-colonial land-grants and rights of revenue collection conferred on prominent Maratha Kunbi families under Mughal and Maratha rule. While all such hereditary rights of revenue in land were abolished under legislative actions of the postcolonial state outlawing Zamindari, Patils continue to be socially and politically extremely powerful in local and state-level politics. Moreshwar Khadse in contemptuously describing the culture of drunkenness amongst what he considers low people (khalche loka) sarcastically said, ‘the trouble is, they all have the shanks (airs) of a Patil, but in fact they are chillad (small change) people.’ For Khade expansive drinking is fine for Patils, because they have the social heft and breadth to absorb it—the Patil gathers people about him, holding court in his ancestral homestead, meting out justice in village squabbles and generally behaving with the
ample airs of one to whom deference is owed. Even bigger than the Patil is the Izhardar, indicative of a hereditary Mughal title, in Tirjhada this personage comes from a clan called Ruikar.

As the Izhardar, Ruikar’s bulls have traditional right to lead the procession in the annual Pola parade as I have described. The procession is lead by the Izhardar’s bull, burning torches tied to its horns. The second day of Pola is Padwa on which, in carnivalesque inversion, the hired help (ghadim anus) of landholders are given gifts of meat, clothes and alcohol by their patrons. In return labourers hurl zhaade—ritual abusive limericks—at their patrons and bulls, ritually challenging traditional political authority. I will not expand further on this here; the Pola festival has been taken up for discussion in a previous chapter. Of significance for our purposes is alcohol as the lubricating fluid which connects political authority, productive capacity (marked in the figure of the bull) and masculine power. Like in all such spectacles the Pola parade marks the political authority of the Patil, theatricalizes its contingent reversal in the flow of abusive speech by field-labourers, and in doing so marshals an ever-present dangerous excess (of speech, of affect, of challenge, of man twinned with bull) that threatens to breach social and bodily boundaries—the danger of attack from maddened bulls running amok; danger from the drunk abusing men who control the powerful animals; the danger that the challenge to authority may not remain contained within the bounded space of the festival. Women do not attend the Pola procession; they watch huddled in groups from afar, and welcome the man-bulls in the doorway of homes when, once the parade concludes and the madness if over, the again docile animals are taken house to house for money, blessings and ritual offerings of grain and sweets.

Of course it is not just the Patil who can drink in this way, and Patils now have only titular authority. The Patil is offered by villagers as a convenient short-hand, by way of distillation into a social type, the possession of certain authoritative qualities—thus Isu Pathan, a particularly notorious moneylender and sleazy fixer, very powerful in his home sub-block of Selu, described his
garnering of social power and prestige through his daily evening ritual of sitting at a designated spot in the village, with a plate of meat before him, and several bottles of alcohol as accompaniment. As Pathan sits at this spot pouring drinks, a steady stream of men arrive seeking favours and assistance for everything from getting someone out of jail, to help with a land dispute. Atma Ram Moon, who we have already met several times, describes his own rise to social prominence in Tirjhada through alcohol—he would provide alcohol and meat for men in the village who wished to drink, and controlled alcohol supply to ensure the loyalty and compliance of his own gang of thugs. ‘Of course I drank too’, he said. ‘One has to drink. And there is nothing wrong with drinking for pleasure (anand) and fun (maja) and to show one can. But no one in this village has ever seen me engage in loose talk (badbad kartnana nabin pabila).’ A set of intermediate terms, which also have masculine connotations, distribute and modulate the extreme, often violent, energy ofTej: thus expansiveness expresses in forms of speech—as a warm substance that extends the self, alcohol induces joviality (gamat); pleasure (anand), and fun (masti, maja). Abusive speech (shivat) occupies an ambiguous position in this constellation. On the one hand in indicating the lack of control marking weakness; on the other abusive speech, in refusing to adhere to acceptable forms of etiquette, is a weapon in the mouth of a powerful man through which he demonstrates his authority over social inferiors.

Alcohol and The Rage of Men
In its potent association with male vigour and force, alcohol is also associated then, in extreme manifestation, with explosive rage (krodh) and violence. The connection between alcohol and male violence is of course most intimately and brutally born by women in the form of physical assaults and abusive speech by husbands, lovers, and occasionally brothers. This intense masculine rage, which flows through alcohol, particularly in young men, also consumes the self. Thus when describing the suicides of young men in the village, many of whom were not personally indebted, the
affects around their use of alcohol revolve around the inability of the drinker to adequately handle/absorb this masculine power. It went that young men these days were impetuous (*agavu*); they swore (*shivai deto*) and abused and did not listen to the counsel of elders. They were arrogant (*ghamandi*); and took offence at the slightest provocation, and the preeminent mark of this rebelliousness of the young was love—by far the ‘number one’ (*ek number*) reason for suicide amongst young men was that they fell into love-affairs (*lafda*), and then when the affair soured, either because families forcibly separated the couple, or the girl decided she did not wish to be with him anymore, or whatever reason, men flew into a rage of renunciation (*tyagmudhe*), and drank pesticide.

‘So why don’t women kill themselves then?’ I asked. Moreshwar Khadse, whose own son had killed himself for such a reason, said, ‘Because men drink and women don’t, and so when a man’s appetite for love is not slaked, or it goes bad (*ahari*) he drinks alcohol and then drinks pesticide.’

The association of controlled appetite as power is thus conversely displayed in its corrupted forms: when consumed by a person lacking control, alcohol dissipates the self in garrulous (*badbad*), foolish (*agadbagad, murkh, mudh, bavdhat*), and bombastic (*ghamandi*) speech. Here the spatial extension of the powerful man who, while remaining seated, extends himself by occupying physical and metaphorical space—the Patil holding court and feasting on wine and meat as social inferiors congregate around him—is comically inverted in the image of the drunk lurching through the village. Yet in its extreme variant, speech becomes silence (*guppa baste*). Alcohol strips the drinker of, or mutilates his capacity for, speech. In this last, the sensation of inward control, which in its power-increasing forms expands outwards as social authority and individual charisma, now becomes a terrifying state wherein the self is experienced as caught in the grip of an extreme constriction.

*Alcohol and The Weakness of Men*

Thus in this constellation if we were to array affects along a spectrum, one end of which is the
outward driving expansive force of Tej, the other is occupied by the inverse: an acute blockage of the self in which the drinker is unable to articulate anything at all. He sits in silence (guppa baste), feels choked (ghutan), says nothing (maun dharla), cannot speak with openness (mokdapanani bolla nabin), is numb (sunn) and feels himself shrink (gatt; kosadla). He drinks to warm himself, to ease himself (rabatsaathi; relaxsaathi) but he feels an inward numbness (sunn), a tension (tainshun), which is something like a soul-coldness. Opposed to the upward thrusting of the affects at the other end, the drinker is locked in a heaviness (jadd): so someone described the brooding silence of her husband before he killed himself as though, ‘he had rocks in his chest (chhataladhe dagad); he would never speak to me about what he was feeling’. In this state even when the drinker says things—such as ‘I will drink endrin’—others cannot hear him. Or, conversely, their distrust of his words—which he may say over and over again (nebmi assa bolat hota)—renders them nonsensical. We will explore this association between alcohol, speech and silence further below.

In its corrupted state appetite becomes ‘savay’: a word that signals addiction (particularly in the harsh synonym vyasan, also used in the suicide case-files); lustful taste (also expressed by the raunchy cognate chaska); greed (lobi). And the perverse sexual form of appetite as licentiousness circles back to the tight association between eating, sex, orality and power in the word ‘ahari’ from ‘abar’; a Sanskrit derivative meaning grain/food/comestible substance. ‘Ahari’ then becomes a cognate of ‘khanaara’, i.e. an eater; that which lives on or feeds upon abar. Ahari (eater), in both senses, is a pejorative word designating licentiousness: when speaking with Moreshwar Khadse about the suicide of his son, he shook his head and said, ‘He had begun taking [i.e. drinking] by then. He went ahari (ghenn suru zhala hota. Ahari gela).’ Almost immediately Indrajit interjected, ‘was the woman from our village? (Bai gavat hoti?).’

When coupled with the verb ‘jaane’: to go, or ‘paadne: to fall [under]’, abari padla/gela (he went/fell [under] abari) signifies to fall under the spell or influence of another’s power; in its
common usage under the power of a bad/loose woman. This meaning is further consolidated by the verb form ‘aharane’ to imply slothfulness, torpidity. Abari thus encompasses an interlinked set of connotations and usages that signals the inverse of power/vigour as controlled, thus expansive, appetite. However, unlike the terrible inner tension of speech as silence, this is a kind of generalized depletion. A man gone abari is a slothful consumer (sust) dissipated by his addiction to alcohol, a lazy (aadhsî), dissolute (lucba) wastrel mouthing stupidities (lubdo). This sort of dissipation is neither the raging (krdbh) mania expressed in abuse (shivai); nor is it the cold heaviness described by Sangeeta Kale of her husband, or Kutte of his son (a young man called Atul). Rather, it is a kind of weakness so contemptible that the man does not even have the courage (the ‘daring’) to actually commit suicide. He becomes then a sort of pathetic absurdity.

The Failed Suicide
One day, about a year after I had begun living in Tirjhada, I arrived on a Tuesday morning after a weekend in Wardha to find the village buzzing with excitement. Sitting on the bus stop was tiny Maruti Chahare waiting with a sack of soybeans for the bus that would take him to the weekly market in Kadam. Maruti Chahare is a small sprightly man, probably in his early 70s. From the Gawari (cowherd) caste, the Chahare family had become close acquaintances in my time in Tirjhada. I spent many evenings walking with him and his son, Badu Chahare, in their fields as Maruti regaled me with tales of his youth, which according to his laconic son, had been spent in a drunken state of suspended animation. On seeing me arrive, Maruti flagged down my motorcycle and, hardly able to contain his laughter, immediately launched into a description of recent events: ‘Aarti dear (agga)! You should have come two days ago (don diwas maage aali asti tar bar asta). Jinkya almost killed himself. Sadly he’s such an arsehole (labad) he didn’t succeed. We were all thinking, if he’d managed to do it, wouldn’t that have been fantastic for your research?’
Startled by this news, I worriedly enquired, ‘Who is Jinkya? Why haven’t I heard of him before? Is he all right? Did someone take him to the hospital?’ Chahare brushed aside my solicitations: ‘Oh don’t worry! He does this drama (tamasha karto) every year. But he’s such a loser (chootiya), he can’t get one damn thing right.’ Chahare spat on the ground, the bus arrived, and telling me to meet him in the evening, he left me standing on the bus stop. For my part I was thankful I had been saved from confronting a possibility I had dreaded for two years in Vidarbha: that someone would commit suicide while I was living in Tirjhada.

A few minutes later the elder Karmore zoomed up on his motorcycle. Flicking his tongue in and out between his lips (a tic I found intensely disconcerting) he had more details to offer, ‘He fought with his wife, and she slapped him across the face (changla dbada sbikanli) and threw him onto the street (vatarar), he began bawling (bonibalo) and screaming (oradla), and drank a bottle of something (kabzitari paajla).’ ‘Then what happened?’ ‘Well then he began swaying this way and that, yelling I’m going to die (melo mi melo), so people came running to me (dharpad zhali mug mazhekade aalo).’ In his own estimation people were always coming running to the elder Karmore who, with his equally pompous younger brother, insisted they were the duo who took persons to hospital on all such occasions. Given their own father was a famous drunkard himself, villagers sniggered, they must have had much practice. Anyway, the elder Karmore then took Jinkya to the primary health center in Kadam.

By this time two other men, one of whom had accompanied Karmore to the hospital, had joined our conversation: at the hospital a puzzled doctor checked Jinkya for signs of pesticide poisoning, found none, and put him on a saline drip as a precautionary measure. Except that as soon as the doctor had left the ward, Jinkya got up off the bed and began walking to the door dragging the stand behind him. ‘He lied! (khott hota sagda) He hadn’t drunk any poison! Well apart from the usual poison he drinks day and night the drunk mother-fucker (bewada maderbod). We brought him
back, chucked him into his house (*tyaile ghari parat aanle*) and let his sixth [wife] (*tyachi sabavi*) deal with him.’ An explanation of the last clause was soon forthcoming from Sagar.

Sagar, Atma Ram Moon’s middle son, was even more scathing: ‘This was a poor effort (*maaja nahin aali*). Last year was much better.’ Apparently on this occasion Jinkya had tried to hang himself, and changing his mind, managed to wrap his arm around the conveniently low branch he had chosen for the purpose, dangling on till someone arrived and cut him down. But Jinkya was not always the butt of jokes, and ten years ago no one would have dared laugh at his antics.

Jinkya used to be a rogue (*badmash*) and a gangster (*gunda*). Now a thin stringy man, he was then a robust dangerous figure sporting several police cases ranging from dacoity to murder. He had done time in jail, controlled a gang of thugs, and ran an extortion racket across several neighbouring villages. Jinkya’s writ (*dehsbat*) ran large the local police refused to enter Tirjhada, preferring to ignore complaints from harassed villagers than risk a drubbing at the hands of this fearsome personage. The old Jinkya had style: ‘When his daughter got married he rode the horse instead of the groom can you believe it?’ goes one story.

Jinkya was renowned for his sexual prowess, demonstrated by his many wives and female companions: ‘He had seven wives!’ Sagar exclaimed.

‘What rubbish!’

‘No he did! I’m telling you. They left him one by one. Who would stay with a man like that? He drank and swore and beat them. But then the sixth came back, and she’s still around. But now he’s rubbish (*kacchar zhala*). He herds goats (*mendra charavto*), when he isn’t drunk off his mind.’

Jinkya’s current wretchedness is the result of a series of misfortunes—he was injured in a fight; a dynamic young sub-inspector arrived in Kadam eager to make his name on the force by breaking up robber-gangs; Jinkya spent some years in jail where he was badly beaten, his absence seized on by upcoming thugs. Jinkya’s wives deserted him. Eventually ill-health and fatigue
dissipated the dread he had once commanded, and since he had no longer had any land of his own, he now made a meager living herding others’ goats when he was not passed out drunk—a pathetic figure asleep in the mud; the recipient of the occasional kick by passersby. Every so often Jinkya was paraded before visiting social activists as a miraculous survivor of ‘attempted suicide’, much to the merriment of other villagers. While Jinkya’s fall from a figure of dread to one that provokes social contempt is almost cinematic in texture and narration, I adduce it here as it dramatizes in one biography the connections between masculine power, consumption, sexual virility and respect that I am attempting to delineate here. I close Part I of this chapter with one final account, much less dramatic, and much more painful in its quiet horror in which I address the communicative failure of men’s speech.

**The Suicide of Atul Vaikunth Kutte**
Atul Kutte, a young man 23 years of age, killed himself by consuming pesticide in 2012. Kutte, who used to work with a ‘company’ in Pune before he suddenly returned and decided to begin farming, had no debts of his own. He is survived by his mother, father, elder brother, sister-in-law and two young nephews. His death, inexplicable to his parents and sibling, has ravaged this family. When I met them in 2015, his father, who also drank heavily in his own youth, had sunk into a depressive solitude interrupted by bouts of irritability and rage. The family owns 6 acres of good land along the only metaled road, but they no longer cultivate it themselves, preferring to rent it out for a small sum every year. His elder brother, an electrician, can neither understand why Atul took his own life nor how to reach his father who has drifted into his own world; the mother now stays mostly at home, caring for her young grandsons and feels estranged from her husband. I describe below a long conversation with Vaikunth Kutte (the father) on the death of his son, and other deaths in their village, wherein Kutte tries to create causal relationships between events, intimate relations, affects,
and the decision of death. While the Kutte family received state compensation for Atul Kutte’s death (as revealed by the case-file), Vaikunth Kutte does not mention ‘debt’ anywhere in this narrative; instead what emerges is the failure of speech of the now deceased, and the failure of hearing on the part of the living. In Kutte’s narrative it seems as though if only there had been some translational means by which his son could have said what he was feeling; or if they could have heard what he was saying, then they might have reached him. But opacity stands between himself and his dead son, an opacity of misunderstanding wherein all the available signs, linguistic and material, lead Vaikunth Kutte astray.

While I do not analyze other accounts of this death here other villagers explain Atul Kutte’s death as caused by a failed love-affair and the demands of a ‘rapacious’ older woman (vait mothi bai) with whom he had entered into intimate relations. His father does not describe his son’s death in this way. Instead he returns, over and over again, to the day on which his son died and here again alcohol and appetite are linked as the scene of a failure—a failure of Atul’s parents to provide care, a failure of Atul’s to speak in a language his family could understand, resulting in the, to them, fatal failure in their inability to hear what he was (not)saying. Kutte’s account comprises a series of repeated statements that revolve around three moments of opacity: his inability to tell whether his son has consumed alcohol or pesticide; his bewilderment because the day his son died, Atul had told him to come back from the fields early because he was going to buy meat (and thus a special treat for the family) that day; and that his son was playing with his nephew, taking pleasure in familial intimacy and closeness on the day he killed himself.

‘Should I tell you the truth? Before someone dies no one can know that he will do it. When he will drink poison, no one knows. Now suppose you are here, sitting with me. Now you leave me. What ghost enters your mind, what comes into your head, I cannot know. That morning the two of us (himself and his wife) went to the fields. He (his son) was sitting near the pan shop. He said, where are you going? I said to the fields. He said, okay but come home early I am going to buy some meat today. Okay, I said and we went. We came back at 4. He was playing with the child. He said
baba get something from the village. Ok I said, I went to the village. I drank a tilu (an eighth-measure of alcohol) I was coming back, the elder (son) came running and said baba get an auto quickly, he (Atul) is not well. I ran to get the auto, meanwhile I saw him (Atul) walking over the bridge towards me. He had something in his hand. A bottle. I cannot see in the dark, my eyes, they are not good. From this distance I could see he had something in his hand. I called out, ‘Who is there?’ He didn’t say anything, I walked four steps more and saw he had a bottle of poison, or a bottle of alcohol, which it was I couldn’t see. He threw it in the river. I ran to him. I pulled his face down towards me, I smelled it on his breath. A scream ripped from my throat (kinkadi phadli). What have you done? Why have you done this? He died on the crossroad.’

His son’s speech fails instead his son’s body speaks revealing an intention, which since he never spoke it in speech, his father was unaware of. However as soon as his father nears Atul’s body, even though he cannot see him in the gathering darkness, his silent motivation is made materially present through the smell of pesticide on his breath. Talking to me some years later, Vaikunth Kutte returns again to the scene:

‘I asked him, why did you do this? He said nothing…But just that morning, that very morning, he said baba get home early I am buying chicken meat today…But he said nothing…It was not as if he would sit silently, not as if he would sit sadly. I’m telling you, he was playing with his nephew at 4 that evening. Is it alcohol or is it pesticide? It cannot be said. Only when it is drunk can it be said it maybe this or it may be that, or it is both. Otherwise can something this large occur?...No man has the courage to commit suicide without alcohol…He drank it and even then he said, ‘I’ drank it’, but we were talking and we couldn’t hear it. We couldn’t hear him’

The day Atul drank pesticide he returned home and while lying on the ground he said, ‘I have drunk pesticide.’ But his family says they could not hear him. His elder brother who was in the house at the time relayed this to me. ‘But if you didn’t hear it, how then did you know he said it?’ I asked. My question didn’t seem to reveal a paradox—‘He said it, but we didn’t hear it’, he repeated again. Atul Kutte was saying things, but what the referents of his speech were could not make sense, and so the speech itself became loudly silent since all the other material referents seemed to point to something else—his excitement at eating meat that night, playing with the child and so on.
Alcohol and The Mishearing of Men
That day Atul had spent drinking with other men in the village and so his family did not attend to
the slurred statements he was making even as he had already drunk the poison. The failure of speech
and listening, mediated by alcohol which renders speech itself as suspicious or laughable, that Kutte
marks as the terrible enactor of his son’s death is repeated in narratives of almost every death I
encountered in Vidarbha. Over and over again persons said, “he would say, ‘I am going to kill
myself,’ but we didn’t believe he would do it till he did it.” I would ask, ‘But why didn’t you believe
him?’ To which villagers responded, “Because men say these things when they are drunk (darumadhe
boltat), it doesn’t mean that they will do it. They say these foolish things, and when they do it, even
then they say ‘save me! (mala vachva)’. Does this mean they mean it?” Indeed
the moment at which
persons remember that they have heard these words before, is when the person kills himself and can
no longer be reached through words.

Strangely, those most impervious to this speech are the deceased’s own family members—so
Sangeeta Kale said of her husband who drank pesticide, ‘he said this all the time, and obviously we
ignored it. Because he said all kinds of foolish (bekar) things.’ The speech of some men, then, in
contemporary Vidarbha seems to have become a form of Lacanian ‘empty speech’ in which the
subject’s words are not taken at face value; are not taken as expressing the intent to go through with
actions. This is surprising because the assumption of the emptiness of masculine speech persists
despite the fact that persons kill themselves every day, every year, year after year. The event of male
suicide is itself a strange kind of gift—even though presaged by speech, every individual event of
suicide is narrated both as an exception and as something expected. Expectation and inevitability is
not the same thing. Like the Maussian gift the event of suicide hangs suspended between
anticipation of its arrival and surprise at its appearance. In the concluding sections I briefly turn
from the speakers to the listeners—to women and men who received this speech and what they
made of it. I will argue if alcohol speaks through excessive, and thus meaningless, speech pesticide speaks through the body: it is only in smelling the acrid fumes on his son’s breath, who was an alcoholic and spoke things they couldn’t hear, that Vaikunth Kutte realized what Atul Kutte had done.

**The Body In Pesticide - Words In Alcohol – Signs In The Air**

When I say the body in pesticide speaks something that words in alcohol cannot communicate it is not my intention to erect a false division between ‘language’ and ‘body’, ‘discursive’ versus ‘material’, and most certainly not ‘materiality’. I mean something specific and within the realm of the social as embodied in the linguistic constitution of subjectivity and humanity. Atul Kutte’s body made public an intention his family, and possibly he himself, didn’t know he had because many others have spoken these un-hearable words and other bodies have come to produce material signs of opaque intentions in contemporary Vidarbha. Vaikunth Kutte could read the signs on his son’s breath and from the bottle Atul held in his hand, when he could not fully decipher the semantic content of Atul’s words or see whether the vial contained alcohol or poison, because other bodies before Atul Kutte’s had also transmitted this intention in the air through signs to others who knew how to read them in the sudden sharp reek of pesticide and the stench of vomit.

Over and over in the case-file depositions family members mention the acrid smell of pesticide and the alcohol fumes rising from the prone man as the first indication that something was wrong. We should mark here that this sign in the air, this smell of pesticide, alerts those who watch for it when it enters the man’s breath. It is when a smell that pervades the very air in Vidarbha, that saturates the cotton-fields and flavours all the water with metal and the earth with acid, when this smell of pesticide which is everywhere emerges from inside the human body, when a father turns his son’s face down towards him to taste on his breath for the sign that will tell him what is in his hand
and in his mind, that those who were waiting even if they didn’t know it, inhale these signs and know in the air what all the words on the suicide of farmers have not yet been able to communicate.

This male body, which has taken anguish has been able to do so, as I have described above because alcohol has made it possible—‘daru daring vadunte – alcohol increases daring, courage.’ Alcohol makes it possible for the drinker to consume pesticide because it momentarily stems, or increases the capacity to bear, the bodily fear of and gag reflex against the swallowing of poison. It bestows a kind of courage and temporarily mutes fear enough that it has allowed over 250,000 persons to inhabit a kind of courage and drink poison knowing, since others before them have also drunk poison mixed with alcohol and they have seen them taken to hospital and attended their funerals, that they will not die but live for the next uncountable number of hours suspended between life and death in a state of unassailable physical agony. This courage, which flows from alcohol and male arrogance, is a false one. Or at least that is how women, who watched their men drink poison, described it to me on more than one occasion.

*Alcohol and the Contempt of Women*

As part of my fieldwork I had begun visiting the psychiatric ward of a local rural hospital to understand how the resident doctors and their patients made sense of a world in which suicide is no longer exceptional but has become an everyday reality. I visited the Out Patient Department and mental health wards at the Sawangi Datta Meghe Rural Hospital Wardha for almost 8 months, including in my capacity as a local resource person in Tirjhada village for families wishing to access medical treatments in Wardha city. For various reasons the materials gathered during these visits is not analyzed anywhere else in this dissertation and I adduce ethnography here only as encounter between two unconnected persons who coincidentally found themselves sitting with time to spare outside a hospital ward. During one of these visits I got into a conversation with a woman called
Pushpa who was here with her son. Her son, an ITI graduate of about 23 years of age, was addicted to marijuana and had suffered periodic episodes of paranoid states in which he believed persons were coming to kill him, or malevolent powers and demons were watching to take him. He did not like being left alone even in sleep he called incessantly for his mother. The father was an electrician but had not held a stable job since they had married almost 25 years ago. He was addicted to alcohol and Pushpa blamed him for the addictions and terrors of their son. As we talked about her son and my work in Vidarbha on debt, suicide and cotton cultivation, as a farmer’s daughter who had grown up in a village near Selu and knew families in which persons had committed suicide, Pushpa offered me a reading of fear and courage, what men thought they showed and what women saw. To conclude I adduce below an edited transcript of my field-notes from that day as they contain both remembered fragments of our conversation and the specific words she used, and the beginnings of an interpretation that her words that day offered, one I had come some way towards sensing through my work in Tirjhada and the suicide case-files by this time.

Field-Notes: Sawangi Datta Meghe Rural Hospital, Wardha: 24 August 2015
Pushpa is here with her younger son who she says is addicted to marijuana. He seems to have reacted very strongly to the drug as it has produced episodes of severe paranoia and anxiety. She locates her son’s addiction in the environment of her home and the violence of her alcoholic husband. Her husband who is an out of work electrician does not contribute to the family income, the household running on the slim earnings of her elder son. Her husband is a violent man and frequently beats Pushpa, and also swears and abuses her in front of her two sons. Her son smokes ganja from a chillum and then shuts all the doors and window in the house in the grip of an extreme fear. Explaining the terrors of her son Pushpa said—

‘I asked him – so you feel this fear when you smoke ganja – so I thought – if the house was different he would not feel scared – so I told him – you are spoiling your own self – your
own youth- if you keep on in this way no one will come near you – no one will speak to you with words of love – you will become an object of jokes – you will think people are your friends when they only laugh at you – and you will think they respect you when they only fear you.’

She continued—

‘You know what he said? – he says he thinks he is actually doing a good thing – tyaile assa vat-te ke the changla kaam karat abet, mi changli gosht karat abo assa vat-te tyanna – he thinks if I behave in this way then others will fear him – they will speak with [him]me – they will be mine[his] - and look how strong I am – tyanna assa vat-te jar mi assa karin tar tyanna bhitii vatel, te mhyashi bol-lo – mng the mlya bonaar – mng mi kiti takatvar aaho – mhanun hesh changli padbitti.’

In her account what her son didn’t understand was that this courage, this strength, was nothing—

‘tyanna mahit nahin ke be bhitii be kaising be kaisch nahin abet’, and behind both the weakness and fake strength (khotta takat: lying strength) of the son was the weakness and fake strength of the father, who displayed his fake power through hitting his earning wife. This husband who drinks every day and beats her also swears at her in his rage when he does so. She says he says, ‘when I don’t drink you talk incessantly, when I drink you shut your mouth – jeva mi pil-lo nabin tu badbad karte, mng jeva pillo tu gappa baste.’ Since he drinks most of the day there is now almost no exchange of words between them. Her husband operates according to his own wishes as per his desires, in her words his ‘shauk’ (pleasures). These shauk take the form of explosive rage, which he vests on his wife as a mark of his dominion, who reads the outbursts as indications of his weakness and inability to manage the home and the fields, the illness of his son and the meager earnings of his wife, he only demanded food when he wanted and drank away his bonds to his family by eschewing labour.

In our conversation Pushpa echoed a distinction I heard many times in Tirjhada when speaking with women whose husbands had killed themselves: their narrations of the agitated male violence that took the form of a death-dealing courage, or a silent numbness, that indicated to the living their incapacity to shoulder the burdens and exchanges, the debts and repayments, that life in Vidarbha now demands. In this speaking now through the body and language, through pesticide and
alcohol which also includes words which cannot always be heard even when they are spoken, through the retching, vomiting, corroded body, suicide becomes the assertion of a kind of akrasic will. The return of the desire for social-debt in negative form, an individual expression of a generalized desire of which one characteristic I have so far been able to deduce—the flight in addiction (perhaps now one of the last possible) from the regime of contract. Here now at the limit of ethnography I reproduce below in Marathi and English translation the complete texts of three recensions of suicide letters (one tranche of only two such letters) I found in the archive of case-files in the Wardha District Collectorate.

*Gift-Debt-Contract: The Letters of Dilip M. Chaudhary*

This case-file of a suicide that occurred on 15 March 2003, the death eventually deemed ineligible for monetary compensation, contains three notes handwritten in Marathi on postcards. In one of the versions the writer’s name is written in full with his address on the lines marked for the sender’s details, in the other two his name is written below the notes along with his full address. All three letters were found next to Dilip Chaudhary’s body, photocopies of which are included in the case-file, and there is no way of ascertaining the order in which they were written. Before I append Chaudhary’s letters however, I include a small excerpted English translation from the Wardha Police Superintendent’s report to the District Collector. The two single-spaced letter begins:

‘Sir,

Pertaining to the above issue/topic

Dilip Chaudhary, he being unmarried, did not do any work-business whatsoever (*konta*). His elderly mother (*tyachi mhatari aayi*) by doing daily-wage works sustains herself and her son Dilip. Dilip Chaudhary, on his name there not being (*nasun*) any kind of field whatsoever (*kontyahi prakarchi sheti nasun*) there is not on him a debt of any whatsoever (*kontyahi*) kind from any whatsoever (*kontyahi*) bank, PAC (*patsanstheche*) or private moneylender. Therefore (*tyamudhe*) the question of coercion resulting from debt does not arise - *tyamudhe karzababat tagada lavanyacha prashbich udhbbavat nabin* (the mere question itself is not born).’
I have retained as far as possible the exact translation of the words and their order in official Marathi though it makes for a clumsy translation in English, to draw attention to the number of negations in this document: there is absolutely no – *nasun* – debt on Chaudhary’s name since he has ‘no field of any kind whatsoever’, from any source whatsoever – *kontyabi* – and thus the question of coercion for debt simply does not arise – *karzabat tagada latanyacha prashnch uddbhavat nabin*. What is the file so insistently negating in what then becomes a long and detailed description of Dilip Chaudhary’s brief life? In marshaling this cavalry of negations, the above paragraph being a small selection, the state official’s letter is stating this is not an agrarian suicide, it has not been caused by cotton cultivation and thus the question of what force of debt may have acted on Dilip Chaudhary to make him commit suicide does not arise. I end by transcribing Dilip Chaudhary’s three letters on contracts and debts, arrivals and departures, dreams and gifts, which he left to be read before he left his world.

**Letter #1**

‘police ghari traas deyil mbanun mi be chitti libun thevla aabe mi be endrin svatabun gheta: mi konachya ragavar gheta nabin. Babirhi kabi zhala nabin mi sukbroop anandane chalo agar kabi galati zhaali asel tar maaf karsheel hi vinti kabi kele nabin aani kabiche gamavla nabin nang alo nang challo baki libayla
Dilip M. Chaudhary
Bus

The Police will cause troubles at home so I have written and left this letter I have drunk this endrin not out of rage at anyone. Nothing happened outside either I am leaving in a state of happiness in pleasure if there has been a mistake if you (*karsheel*) will forgive me this plea [I] didn’t do anything and didn’t lose anything
Came naked leave naked
The rest has been written
Dilip M. Chaudhary

**Letter #2**

*Chalto*

*Mi divasbhar swapn sochle rabto pan be swapn kotte rabte an mi khoop anandani — mi divasbhar swapn sochle rabto pan be swapn khoti rabto. Aani mi bi manant zhaal vihar kela ki zindagi kabi karu shakla nabin*
I leave
This whole day I thought a dream that these dreams remain lies and I with great pleasure – I this whole day thought a dream but these dreams remain lies. And I in my mind thought [in] this life couldn’t do anything

Letter#3

Challo aayi
X
Dilip [English script in original].

Ghar dar sodun nighun challo
Ha zindagi pasand nabin aani mala zindagi bi vatat nabin
Dilip M Chaudhary
Sarvadi

The police will cause troubles at home so I have written and left this letter. I have drunk this endrin myself. I did not drink it out of anger towards anyone. Nothing has happened outside either. I am leaving in pleasure and happiness. And I earned nothing and lost nothing at the time of my coming I came naked at the time of my going I go naked. I came carrying nothing and in my mind I did a very good thing. Because I was pacing on the busstand and on that stand my head went mad. And I left that stand and till now I had dreamt of making something. Later the thought came this dream remains a lie: and I couldn’t do anything in this life either.

I leave mother
X
Dilip

Casting off home and door I leave
Don’t like this life and it doesn’t feel like life to me

On the address:
Dilip M. Chaudhary
Sarvadi, Vidarbha
CHAPTER SIX: THE FLOWER-INFANT: RITUAL AS IMAGE-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY VIDARBHA

Phul dekhte the janazon pe aksar
Kal Gorakhpur mein phulon ka janaza dekha.
Of a day we would see flowers on biers
Yesterday in Gorakhpur we saw a bier of flowers.
——Gulzar

At an appropriate time when the sun is high, on a convenient day falling in the months of September/October, a group of women leave for the cotton-fields. It is very hot and stickily humid. The fields shimmer in the rising heat, the sun forcing the earth to give up the water received during the brief monsoon. The day smells verdant and green: sharp odours of pesticide and chemical fertilizer detectable in the swampy mix of dry earth, manure and growing things. The women walk in slim file, bare feet lightly stepping on narrow raised mud-ridges demarcating one field from another. One of the women balances a wicker basket on her head, another a steel or earthenware-pot filled with water, still more walking ahead brushing prickly cotton branches away from faces, eyes and clothes. The group makes it’s way diagonally across to a secluded space between two rows of cotton, chosen to lie some distance into the field though not necessarily at its center. The women hunker down on the dappled ground, tall cotton-plants creating a loose canopy of white-flecked green. Some begin taking objects from the basket; others go in search of stones, hemp, and twigs.

A cotton-thread (dor) is strung between two cotton-plants, fording the space in which the women sit. This first action composes the rectangular spatial frame in which the rite will be made. On the horizontal axis of the cotton-thread the cultivator wraps a folded piece of new, market-bought cotton cloth (kora kapad), making a small hanging cradle (palna) of the sort in which infants are placed in village homes. She then places a plucked cotton-flower in this cradle, covers it with
cotton-cloth, touches the flower with vermillion (shindoor), and occasionally, the flower-infant is sung to sleep with a lullaby. In some narratives surrounding the rite, the flower-infant is symbolized as the infant form of Sita, the mythological figure in the epic Ramayana. In many versions of the epic this Sita, who essays a central role as the abducted wife of the protagonist Rama, is narrated as having been discovered in the earth by her father Janak (Sk: genitor) as he was tilling his fields. Sita is often glossed as taking her nomination from the split in the earth in which she was discovered: Sita from the Sanskrit ‘Sit’ meaning furrow. The rite takes its name from this figure, it being called Sita Devicha Kapus – Sita Devi’s Cotton.

Participants place five small stones (khade) below the cradle, two large round stones (motthe gotte) at the base of one cotton-plant, and three at the base of the other. All the stones are coloured in specific ways with slaked lime (chuna) and/or coloured powders (halad, gulal), sprinkled with raw rice (tandool) and flower-petals, and through this process receive nominations—the five stones are variously glossed as Sita herself, her sons, her brothers etc. The large round stones are nominated as ‘Marwari’ (a caste-group hereditarily associated with trading and money-lending). Offerings of cooked rice mixed with yogurt (dahi bhaat) are sprinkled on the cradle, the small stones and the round stones. Then cotton (kapus) is picked and placed on top of the stone-Marwaris.

Meanwhile four small sticks are pushed into the mud, composing a quandrangle (dhola) filled with cotton. Scales (dandi-panda) are constructed from hemp-fiber (ambadi) and stones and hung from the cotton-plants. A small fire is lit on which is placed an earthenware pot (gadga/i) filled with milk (dudhi). When the milk comes to a boil a burst cotton-boll (bond) is placed on the foam. As the cotton-capped milk boils over (ukdun gela) spilling out of the pot, the female participants are prodded to, and occasionally shyly do, laugh (bastê), clap their hands (thapada vajavte) and dance (nachte). The remaining yogurt and rice is sprinkled in the four corners of the field. Except the cotton-thread, nothing of what was brought is taken back: all the remaining substances (powders, incense, rice,
petals, food offerings, etc.) are scattered on the stones, or in the field. The now-empty wicker-basket is filled with fresh picked cotton (*topli-bhar kapus*). The women leave for home taking the basket with them. It will be placed at the altar of one’s family deity (*kul-dev*) and remain there for the rest of the harvest season. Eventually this first cotton too will be sold with the last batches of the year’s cotton.

For the next six months the days are long: women begin early, completing domestic tasks before departing for the cotton-fields, carrying a wicker basket containing work clothes and the midday meal. Faces are wrapped in scarves and long-sleeved men’s shirts worn over saris to protect arms, waist and back from the blistering sun. From now until end-January women cultivators will spend between 8 to 12 hours in the fields, individually picking up to two hundred and fifty kilograms of cotton a day. Fingers, hands and arms work in rhythmic unison as the cultivators bend, pick and stuff the fat white bolls into cloth saddles hung from the forehead and carried down the back. The cotton is brought home and stored in rooms. Most families cannot afford to construct separate storage sheds: the activities and infrastructures of daily life are rearranged to flow around, over and atop quintals of cotton stacked from floor to ceiling. Trade commences in thousands of villages and hundreds of market towns across Vidarbha, all manner of conveyances bearing down narrow rural roads carrying Sita Devi’s cotton to market.
Ritual as Image-Making

This chapter analyzes the ritual described above conducted by female cotton cultivators in Vidarbha.

I recorded several different versions of this rite in my field-village Tirjhada during the month of October 2015. Cotton begins to ripen and burst open some time around late September/early October and all performances of the rite conclude within the first two weeks of the harvest season. The rite occurs in the field just prior to the first cotton picking for sale. It is a private but communal affair, conducted in their own fields by mothers, wives, daughters-in-law and daughters (usually present are also the husband, father and/or son), accompanied by other women bound to them by ties of kinship, service or friendship; it is thus a collective ritual and groups of women will help conduct the rite in each others’ fields. The rite occurs sometime during the day when the sun is high. It is performed only for cotton not any other crop. Cotton cultivators often mark the ritual as commencing the ‘official’ period of sale and picking, many asserting that till the rite is completed in their fields they do not sell their cotton.

My reading of this ritual is an interpretative possibility, offered alongside the interpretations of the participants of the rite. It is not aimed at being a comprehensive analysis in that while I recorded several variations, the analysis does not stabilize different iterations to arrive at the most

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1 Lisa Stevenson has evocatively argued for the image as being both a concept metaphor as well as an object of ethnographic analysis in her work on suicide amongst native and indigenous youth in the Northern Canadian territories in her beautiful book Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in The Canadian Arctic (California: 2014). I was prompted to think with the image after a reading of her work. However in this chapter, for the purposes of my ethnography, by ‘image’ I mean a much more restricted universe of objects than hers: I mean quite specifically a constructed, material social object with a semiotic purpose which refuses an indexical or an iconic relationship with its referent. This thinking with the image draws both on image itself within cinema, film and aesthetic studies (Barthes; Benjamin; and also the theorization of the meaning, the semiosis, of the image as lying outside itself in the writings of practitioners such as Eisenstein (New York: 1949). Alongside, specifically for the purposes of ritual analysis, I am writing against the backdrop of a large body of work from within art history on photography in India, as well as Indic visual culture more generally which have stressed the centrality of vision, the importance of the icon/image/photograph/lithograph, to religious and devotional practices: here see the work of Christopher Pinney, as well as the work of Naman Ahuja (2001; 2013), Kajari Jain (2007).
‘complete’ version of the ritual. Instead as I attend to what female (and male) cotton cultivators say they are doing and making as they do and make it, and what I made of what they said at the time and subsequently, I offer my own readings of their readings. And as people while seemingly performing the same set of rites have different interpretations of what the ritual does (and what they are doing), so too my reading keeps open this space of social debate over the significations of signifiers.

The chapter begins with a long methodological note on how I present the rite: which is polysynchronously and figuratively, i.e. through a non-chronological reading of the figures that appear in the rite. This choice is certainly a question of method but the method responds to the rite itself, specifically the way it is organized along the axis of time (linear and poly-synchronous), language (figural) and space. These dimensions I will show are autonomous and thus related. Together they compose the meaning-making practice of this rite, which I am arguing is ritual as the making of image-figures. In analyzing the ritual in this way I am also formulating what I hope will be a useful method for thinking with this class, or kind, of Indic ritual in general. Turning first to language: the ritual comprises a genre of linguistic practice which is, amongst other things, a mode I am calling figural.² By which is specifically meant: the production of ritualized materializations in the form of image-figures (through linguistic and non-linguistic objects) of abstract (while historically determined) concepts. Linguistic practice of the participants, I am arguing, interprets (and thus performs) the ritual through figurations of the signs (the flower-infant; the box, the stone-Marwari) that appear in the ritual space.

To take one example: one stable ‘element’, a configuration, to be found in every version of the rite I saw, are five stones placed underneath the cradle of the flower-infant. I am suggesting that when a participant responds to my (the anthropologist’s) question, ‘What are these stones – be kbade kay abe?’ and she says, ‘they are Sita’s rakshak (guardians), they are her brothers – thay tichewale bhan

² See Paul De Man’s discussion of the grotesque and disfigurement in Shelly’s poetry (De Man New York: 1984).
’abet,’ the participant is here nominating and making (through the action of daubing them with vermilion powder and sprinkling raw rice) these stones into an image-figure standing for Sita’s brothers but also kin-relations in the abstract, and all that comprises the ideology of kinship is figured here through the nomination of the relation of protection and care obtaining between sisters and brothers. However it is because the relation between these signs (stone, Sita, rakshak) is figural and abstract, that it permits a certain plasticity of nomination within the rite such that in another version the five stones were figured as Sita’s sons and placed inside the cradle not before it, in yet another version in a quintuplet splitting as Sita herself, and in still another version as five Marwaris here seated beneath the cradle of the flower-infant (See Figs 1.1 and 1.2).

Fig 1.1: Daubing stones with _gulal_ (Yavatmal, October 2015).
While I am employing ‘figuration’ here in its broadest sense meaning to give a body, to materialize, an abstract concept in a linguistic or material object, in marking the stone/flower/cradle as the vehicles of figuration I am also specifying its character in this ritual space-time as the production of materialized images. So while figuration can, and does, partake of several kinds of representational structures at once and would be a component of many different kinds of ritual speech, if not a primary characteristic mode of all speaking, it is here specifically fused into the making of images.

Thus I am arguing that the cotton-flower in the cradle is a materialized image-figure of an abstract concept—here, of feminized potency— provisionally nominated as Sita; the lime-stone covered stone named ‘the Marwari’ is a materialized image-figure of (but never only) ‘the cotton trader’, the scales constructed of hemp fiber and stones are an image-figure of (but never only) quantification, and so on. They are never only one thing because the image-figure always carries an excess of signification that is not bound to the object of its materialization, an excess that is
brokenly radiated, finds expression, is contingently fixed, in a given historical narrative which is the 
diegetic space-time of the present ritual performance. So while the personal nominations (Marwari, 
Sita), material figures (the scales, the box, the cradle), narrative lineages and discursive formations 
(the many Ramayanas) seem to provide a loose significatory grid along which the ritual proceeds, 
these are linguistic place-holders to receive the semiosis of the materialized image.

Interpretation and Interpretants
Now the question is whether this is how participants themselves interpret the rite, and whether it 
would thus be correct to call this ‘interpretation’ at all: whether my claim about language as 
materialized image-making resonates with what I think participants do, and second, whether it 
accords with what participants think they do. Do participants also thematize the relationship 
between linguistic and non-linguistic signs as the production of image-figures within the ritual space? 
Were I not present asking questions in the form of—‘what are you doing? What is this? What does 
this mean?’—would participants still speak/interpret the ritual in the way I am calling figurative 
image-making? Is it possible I am glossing explanations offered to me as image-figures, as somehow 
constitutive of the meaning-making practice of the ritual. To this particularly tricky incarnation of 
the Heizenberg uncertainty principle in ethnography there is no conclusive answer. 

My provisional answer is as follows: since the time-space of the rite\(^3\) appeared 
phenomenologically contiguous with the realm of everyday speech, enmeshed in the registers of 
daily conversation, and it was in this register of talking that the rite was represented I adopted an 
analytic of radical phenomenology, i.e. I analyze the form in which language appears in the diegetic 
time-space of the rite, as comprising the performative space-time that comprises the ritual, while 
distinguishing this genre as operating at a different level of linguistic use/function from the genre we

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\(^3\) I take ‘space-time’ to mean the entire embodied moment of social practice from Nancy Munn’s model in *The Fame of Gawa* (Munn 1992).
can loosely call ‘ritual speech’. By the latter I simply mean those instances in which language also has a more specialized function to play (i.e. as sacred words, as an institution marked by genres, rhetorical forms etc.) within the economy of ritual time-space. This seems to me an adequate provisional work around for my task here: i.e. ethnographic attention to linguistic practice in this context wherein language is not institutionally the medium of transmitting ritual energy (a provisional placeholder for whatever is being transmitted/transacted within the ritual economy).

Within the economy of this ritual, language is used and expended loosely and there are no specific verbal markers that distinguish the realm of speech about the ritual from everyday speech forms. The ritual is an event in the open field and no one is enjoined to silence. People talk freely, there are no songs, spells, or incantations that must be chanted. Even Sita, the supposedly stabilizing ground of the ritual, appears here not in a determined mytho-biographical form—i.e. as a deity associated with a particular cult, image-making and iconizing practices, entitled to social objects such as specific forms of worship, ritualized address, myths, lays etc.—but figured as an infant for whom there are yet no specifically determined forms of authorized ritualized address, i.e. sacred words do not comprise one of the offerings to the deity.

Initially language appeared marginal to me, such that I thought in my absence the ritual could have comprised in its entirety the silent performance of actions. Except that, as immediately became clear, it was not that language was absent I was just not paying attention. The ritual is not a silent affair. People were talking throughout it, and they were primarily talking about it in a genre of speech which, for lack of a more precise vocabulary I am calling, vaguely following Bakhtin, the speech genre of ‘everyday speech’. Within this talking about and around the ritual I noticed that the ritual was often marked, represented back to those doing it, and interpreted (as regards questions of meaning etc.) as the making of image-figures not simply as signs. This figuration was not only for my benefit, rather through this linguistic practice of figuration the ritual itself came to be performed
as discreet, poly-synchronous actions of the conversion of found and brought objects into image-figures, within the ritually bound space-time. Indeed this is how it was interpreted to me by at least two informants.

_Bhulva – Bhulai – Babuli - Cartoon_

In the early days of recording as many versions of the ritual as I could, while I was still unsure of all the various ‘elements’ comprising the ritual complex or even what it was, I was offered two interpretative gestures for what I am calling ritual as the making of materialized image-figures. Interestingly, it had to do with my confusion over the signification of the rite’s ur-stabalizing element—the flower-infant. As I mentioned a cotton flower essays a central role in this rite, figured as a female infant. In some narratives, the flower-infant is symbolized as the infant form of Sita, the deified mythological figure who, in many versions of the epic Ramayana was found by her father in a furrow in the fields.

I say the flower is symbolized as the infant girl-child Sita in some narratives because my initial mistake was to assume I had ‘understood’ what the flower symbolized (i.e. Sita in some supposedly stable field of signification that composed the rite), since this gesture came nested in the ‘frame-story’ of Sita’s birth in the Ramayana, a tale with which I was intimately familiar. This assumption seemed also to agree with the rite’s ‘name’: Sita Devi kapus –Sita Devi’s Cotton. I was forced to reconsider the meaning making practice of this ritual in the startling encounter I reproduce below. In an early instance when I asked, ‘what is this flower?’

‘It’s a _bhulva_,’ said my friend.

AS: ‘What is _bhulva_? I don’t understand this word.’

GA: ‘Ok, think of it as _bhullai_ then.’

Still in the dark I asked again, ‘I don’t know what _bhullai_ means either. Can you try and explain it to
me another way?’ My informant thought for a moment and then said, ‘Well in Marathi we say bhulva or bhullai (Marathimadhe aambi bbulva ani bhullai mhanto) – you must have seen a cartoon (tu cartoon pabili a)?’ Slightly disoriented I said, ‘Cartoon? How do you mean cartoon (cartoon mhanje kay)?’ ‘Like the cartoons that come on TV (TV madhe yet nai kai)?’ he responded, ‘Those kinds of cartoons. Phulla cartoon samjha - think of the flower like a cartoon.’

Still confused but assuming he meant the flower represented Sita Devi and hesitant now to keep asking further, I turned my attention to what Aglave’s mother was doing. She picked up five small stones, washed them with water from a steel pot brought for the purpose, and carefully placed them in a row below the cradle. She then dipped her ring finger by turns in vermillion powder, balad (turmeric) and gulal (pink/red powder) and marked each of the stones with the colour, sprinkling a little raw rice to end. ‘What are these stones (khade kay ahe)’ I asked her. ‘Sita Mai,’ she answered. And her son responded, ‘These stones are Sita Mai (he gotte Sita Mai).’ His mother clarifying, ‘you have to worship the stones – he khadechi puja karas lagte’. When Sita Devi alights provisionally on the stones, and the flower-infant in her cradle is left free of nomination we cannot forcibly stabilize the flower-infant as Sita through reference to the non-diegetic ‘frame-narrative’. This signification may be present, but only in reference to the semiotic saturation of the image-figure.

Image, Illusion, Figure
At the time of this conversation (which is a direct transcription) I was video recording on my Iphone. So it is not as though the metaphor of the photographic image is unavailable to my informant, not to mention the dense mediatic field comprising phones, television, cinema etc. of contemporary Indian life. My informant drew on this vocabulary to turn to a very specific representational image—that of the cartoon. The flower-infant in his description is an image. It is of course not just an image. But part of its character in his description of its representational force is
that it is a specific kind of image: not a reflection but a made image; not a still image but a moving image. This dimension of the symbol—its sensuous, embodied, constructed quality—is marked as a constitutive feature of this sign such that the meaning is carried by its materialization.

This is clearly marked not only in how objects are chosen and treated to be vehicles of figuration, but also in the designation of linguistic signs themselves as containers of objectified image-figures. So, as an example of this double movement, when asked why she was slicking the stones with lime, a cultivator laughed and said because, ‘te pandhre aste (they are white),’ and in another instance when told by his wife to get bigger rocks this cultivator responded, ‘Marwarile motthes pahijet – [for] the Marwari requires a big rock – Marwarile jhevle deiyo – serve/give the Marwari some food’—a pun on the adjective ‘motthe’ and how much the Marwari eats, ‘Motthe’ literally translating as ‘big’. It is used in all three senses to mean big, physical girth, as well as lofty social standing. This is made clearer in Kumud Bai’s use of the verb ‘karane’ (to do; to make) in a direction to her son—‘Bring two big stones (don mothe gotte ghe),’ ‘What for?’ he asked. ‘For doing [making] the Marwari (Marwari karayle),’ she responded. Here the nomination ‘Marwari’ derives from the size and shape of the stone—the stone is the Marwari’s image; and the Marwari is he who is a big stone.
Recall that ‘cartoon’ is itself a translation: it is the term my informant turned to when faced with my incomprehension of what he had said in Varhadi, which was that the flower-infant is a bhulva, a bhullai. When I returned I began searching for the meanings of these terms. Varhadi has a vast living repertoire of words that have faded from use in the Marathi spoken in other regions. It is thus not surprising that they could be found in none of the standard dictionaries (including the Molesworth). They do appear, however, in Tulpule and Feldhaus’s *Dictionary of Old Marathi* as the Prakrit recensions of a constellation of terms sharing an etymological root in the Sankrit ‘bhram’, broadly meaning illusion, illusory. Bhuḷva and Bhuḷḷai thus appear as bhul (illusion), as bhuḷavana (a conjurer, agent of illusion), bhuli (illusion, infatuation, error) and bhuḷīv (illusive, illusory). What the terms retain of these assonances in contemporary spoken Varhadi I have not yet established since the only times I encountered them were in this ritual context. And further how precisely this significatory system translates bhuḷva to ‘cartoon’—a recent image-figure that has made its appearance in this milieu through the flat screens of televisual media—is also difficult to characterize in a determinate way,
since this would involve understanding the social field of representation more generally and its mediatic quality, an endeavor I have not undertaken.

However, on the most restricted reading, on the specific question of representation in this dialogic context the informant’s associational chain went like this: flower – infant - bhulai; bhulva - cartoon. So whatever specific figure bhulva or bhulai may indicate within the constellation of rhetorical genres, and aesthetic strategies that circumscribe its use in Varhadi, when asked to translate this concept as the descriptor of an object’s (the flower) semiotic conversion, the informant turned to metonymy to indicate that a bhulva is a cartoon, i.e. it is something that may also be described through reference to a pictorial representation, a made moving image. There are two significant dimensions that are compressed out of this forced translation of bhullai into cartoon: ‘cartoon’ fixes the image as a (disfigured)representation of a provisional referent, and renders this inscription flat onto a one-dimensional planar surface that its moving nature attempts to escape. Bhullai—with its primary meaning given in illusion—sounds a fuller note in refusing an indexical or iconic relation between the image-figure and what it may signify.

This is clarified in the second instance in which I heard the term, this time in relation to another indigenous Varhadi representational figure. I was recording the ritual in the fields belonging to Indira and Moreshwar Khadse. Indrajit was urging Indira Khadse to sing a song, which she laughingly refused saying, ‘Bhulaiche gani mala yet nahi – I don’t know the songs of the bhulai.’ Before I could ask her what bhulai meant here, she had already begun folding small strips of cotton cloth into a roll. Curiosity piqued I asked, ‘Atta kay karta – what are you doing now?’ ‘Phullachi bahuli karaychi – making a bahuli of the flower’, she replied. Bahuli is an old polyvalent Marathi desi word meaning: puppet; a figure made of cloth, wood or mud; an effigy; and more generally a figure, or image, or
doll or statue. It has one other primary meaning, which is the pupil of the eye.4 In this instance (the only one I saw), as can be seen in Fig 1.4 there is no cotton-flower. Instead a small roll of cloth now substitutes for the cotton-flower (making the cotton-flower itself a figure), which stands for the flower-infant bundled into the cradle.

Fig 1.4: Cloth roll instead of cotton-flower (Yavatmal, October 2015).

That linguistic signs do not (only or primarily) communicate semantic content but are pressed into activated image-figurations as the emic representational strategy of this ritual is interestingly revealed in a sonic object: a lullaby (angai) sometimes sung by the gathered women at the rite’s conclusion to the flower-infant, a woman gently rocking (balavne) the cradle with her finger. In every single instance featuring any singing this was the song of choice, a lullaby written for and popularized in the 1977 Marathi film Bala Gau Kashi Angai (Little One How Should I Sing a Lullaby). The first two lines go: nimbunichya jhadakhali chand zhopita agha bai – aaj mala palsa kahe zhop yet nabi - under the lemon tree the moon lies sleeping my dear girl – today[this night] why does sleep not come to my

4 Tulpule defines desi Marathi words as those whose etymology is unknown, i.e. they cannot be derived from Sanskrit, Prakrit, the Apabhramshas, Arabic, or Persian (Tulpule and Feldhaus 1999).
*palsa:* lit: ‘the one whom I rear’. From the domain of popular cinema, with the varied richness of its linguistic, emotive and visual registers, language is drawn into a semiotic process in which a film song sung to the *palsa* (cotton-flower-infant), saturates the image-figure into movement as the gathered female cultivators sing of rearing and nurture before the *palna* (cotton-cloth-craddle).

**Seeing and Doing: Pahane and Karane**
The desire to be received as (if not solely) an active-activated image is marked in the way in which participants represent the rite to the viewer, particularly one whose familiarity is not assumed—so I was often smilingly asked, ‘*tu pahili asli Sita Devi bo aga?* – you would have seen Sita Devi no my dear? – *tujbekade aste ka bi Sita Devi?* – is there towards your-side this Sita Devi?’ using always the verb ‘*pahane*’ – to see, rather than ‘*karane*’, to do. To which I often responded, ‘but there’s no cotton my-side – *pan aamebekade parati nabi,*’ and everyone assented then this Sita Devi was unlikely. This is not to say that ‘*karane*’ is not used with reference to the ritual, of course it is since it is *karane*, in both senses of doing-making, that composes the entirety of the rite. It is when the rite is presented in its whole embodied experience for another’s consideration, that the other’s gaze is returned as a (non-threatening?) specularization in the address: ‘*tu pahili asli Sita Devi chi?* – you would have seen Sita Devi’s [rite]?’ This specifically scopically marked representation is certainly not unique, for in many instances one is asked if one has seen (or done) something before. Having said that, it is a marked feature of this rite not so much for the inclusion of ‘*pahane*’ but the exclusion of ‘*karane*’.

In many other contexts in which questions of rite and cultural habit arose, on the assumption of a loosely shared vocabulary of major and minor festivals and special days pegged to the Hindu calendar and pantheon, particularly in the matter of ritual I would ask for some clarification, or would be given some instruction, in the verbs of ‘*karane*’ and ‘*pahane*’, along with other verbs specific to the context—*mhanane* (for instance when it came to incantation), *bolne* for
chanting, or *eikane* when it came to listening. In the case of this ritual the invitation to participate was almost exclusively proffered in the extension of sight, and of being given to be seen, though not yet in a reified form. Or so it seemed to me from how little notice anyone took, the ease I felt as I recorded on a camera-equipped phone, itself a deeply familiar and widespread technology of image-production. No one ignored the camera, as much as its presence was absorbed through a kindly and indifferent interaction.
Fig 1.5: Rocking the cradle (Yavatmal, October 2015).
The Field-Born Girl

My first encounter with this ritual was in the form of an anticipatory narration I had elicited from Kaku Moon, the wife of Atma Ram Moon, about a week prior to seeing it performed. I had been asking around in Tirjhada whether there were any specific rites and rituals that marked the harvest of cotton in the agricultural calendar and my enquiries had primarily elicited gestures of casual dismissal. ‘Oh we do nothing very special, just Sita Devicha Kapus, thats all.’ ‘What’s Sita Devicha Kapus?’ ‘Oh just a little prayer before the cotton picking, nothing very special – kaysch khaas nabin.’ I finally pinned Kaku down and made her describe this rite for which I had only a name. She offered me a story saying something like this:

‘There was a king called Janak (Sk: genitor). One day Janak was tilling his fields. As he tilled, the plough (nangar) struck a wooden box. When they dug out the box and opened it, inside was a baby girl. She was small and fair, a little like you.’ Kaku laughed and continued, ‘Janak took her home (tila ghari gheun aala) and raised her as his own. She was found in the field, she was field-born (vavaratun aali), and so the first row (pahar) of cotton is hers (teecha aste). You buy a small dhol and nice clothes for her, and make a cradle (palna), and put haldi (turmeric) and kunkun (vermillion powder) and break a coconut (naral) and bring one topla (wicker basket) of cotton home and keep it near the Dev (the family deity), and this is called Sita Devicha Kapus (Sita Devi’s Cotton).’

In Marathi/Varhadi the inflection ‘cha’ (Sita Devi-cha) marks the genitive case expressing a relation of origin or possession between two substantives. When I first heard this story, prior to actually seeing its performance, I had assumed that the rite’s name meant that the first cotton picking was dedicated/offered to the goddess Sita. Once I saw the rite about a week later, I realized I had jumped to exactly the wrong conclusion. It is Sita Devi’s cotton not because it is offered to her,
but because it comes from her. The cotton is hers because it belongs to her; she is the generator of cotton, or is invoked as a figure of its generation, not its recipient since the picked cotton is placed at the domestic alter of one’s own ishtdevi or kuldev once the field-specific parts of the rite have been concluded. Once having inhabited the temporality of the ritual myself a few days later, I realized this is what Kaku Moon had said in her description: the first ritual figure is the cradle (palna) of market-bought cloth (kora kapad) wrought to receive a cotton-flower-infant, from whom a generative potency and then cotton flows, this cotton eventually offered to a family/clan (kul-dev) and/or personal (isht-dev) deity responsible for one’s overall well-being in this lifetime. In this narration marking Sita’s birth, and as we will see in the rite where she is figured as the flower-infant, Sita appears not in a determined mytho-biographical form—as the goddess Sita—but as an independent feminized potency emerging from and relating to the earth.

_Sita As Feminized Potency_

Long after I had returned from the field with video recordings I made in 2015, I found four mentions of this cotton-picking ritual in the colonial archive. These scant (but for that extraordinarily detailed) lines appear in *The Agricultural Ledgers* for Berar (1892-1894), and the *District Gazetteers* for the Wardha, Akola, Amravati and Yavatmal districts (1898 – 1911). Let me begin with the most divergent description, which appears in the *The Agricultural Ledgers* (1892-1894). In a section describing beliefs regarding the sowing and harvesting of cotton it notes: ‘Five women are taken before five plants located in the center of the field. The plants are then sprinkled over with “haled” (turmeric) and kunku (a red powder) and an offering of a little boiled rice mixed with curds are placed before them. The rice is then thrown in all directions of the field, and the cotton from the five plants is picked before the general picking of the field commences.’ Immediately below in the same text follows this more recognizable version:
Another ceremony is the following—. Five small stones are besmeared with chunnam and taken and placed in the field; these are called ‘pandawas’. They are then sprinkled over with a little yellow powder and red powder by a woman whose husband is living. A coconut is then broken by the same woman. Then a small cradle is improvised by means of a little cotton spun on the spot, with a piece of cloth for the seat. This is suspended between two adjoining cotton plants, and one of the stones is placed on the seat on the cradle; this stone is called “Krishna.” The cradle is then rocked five times and five pods of cotton are offered to the stone. Then the picking begins. The deity propitiated is known by the name of “Seeta Devi” in some places.’

Almost all the elements and objects we recognize, organized in the familiar prime numbers 5 and 7 (five women, seven Devi, five/seven stones, five cotton pods, the cradle rocked five times) are here present in this description. There are significant variations however, since we are trying to identify the figure now occupied by the flower-infant. The Akola gazette from 1910 has this to offer in which instead of a stone, earth is placed in the cradle: ‘Before cotton-picking begins unwidowed females take two or three plants and form them into a cradle; they put into this an idol of earth, to which they offer curds, boiled rice, and incense.’ And from the Yavatmal gazetteer of 1908 where the cradle signifies the principle of generation without requiring a corresponding figure: ‘Before harvesting any crop they offer vermilion to the gods, and before the cotton harvest Devi is worshipped. Two or three plants are joined together by a cradle of cotton thread, and beneath this seven stones are placed to represent the seven Devis, and an offering of some new cotton picked from the trees is made to them. A fire is kindled and some milk is heated on it till it boils over so that the cotton bolls may burst with fullness[sic] as the milk boils over.’

A cotton-flower is not mentioned as essaying the role of the palsa, the infant in the cradle, which is given different nominations and materializations. The infant is figured as an idol of earth, or one of five lime-stone smeared stones, the pandawas (the five brothers), one of which is feminized when placed inside and called ‘Krishna’, or as left empty above seven stones signifying the seven
Devi. The nominations *pandava* and Krishna have a mythological relation certainly. Here however the five stones nominated (and made into) *pandava*, one of which is then chosen to be ‘Krishna’, also serve to mark feminized generation as a figure through gesture to the multiply wedded woman (the joint marriage of five brothers to the same woman) who is herself a figure of the feminine generator divine—the five *pandava* were wedded to Draupadi who is a figure, an *amsa* (a materialized essence) of Devi Parvati. Here ‘Krishna’ is the androgynous god Krishna, a common name for boys and also especially for girls, a feminine name for the sacred Tulsi (basil) plant worshipped by wedded women, is a special friend, protector and lover of women. But again, ‘Krishna’, commonly used to speak of all infants, is simultaneously a word rich with conceptual, ritual and aesthetic assonances, expressive of cosmological principles and divine orders, the preserver and creator principle (Krishna being an *avatara* and an *amsa* of Vishnu), as well as the mundane pranks of a child: thus besides the ritual and mythological specificities of the god Krishna most beloved in his infant form, it also signifies a playmate, a knot of exceptionally hard solution fabled to have been tied by the god with the braid of a woman and the topknot of a man, an absolute offering or gift with no expectation of repayment, the dark half of the month, and the thin black beaded necklace worn by married women, among other significations (Molesworth).

The idol made of earth, the stone-Krishna in the cradle, and the empty cradle placed to receive the benediction of the seven Devi figure and materialize a feminine, earth-derived principle of generation, a propitiation of child-bearing (unwidowed) women and the cotton-plant, so the field

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10The *pandava* being the five sons of Pandu who waged battle of kingship against their cousins the Kauravas in the epic Mahabharata; the god Krishna acting as Arjuna the *pandava* warrior’s charioteer. Partha Chatterjee in a personal communication has offered an interesting counter-interpretation, which is that Krishna is also a name for Draupadi, in which case the final vowel ‘Krishna’ is lengthened to ‘Krishnaa’. The issue is the source The Agricultural Ledgers, which are written in English so the question of the extra vowel remains open.

6 Krishna clothes Draupadi as she is stripped of her garments by the Kauravas with an unending length of cotton cloth, saving her from public dishonor when her husband Yudhistara has gambled all his possessions away (including his brothers and his wife) in a game of loaded dice. Following this defeat the Pandavas are exiled for 14 years to wander the forest, as had Rama, Sita and Laxama been similarly exiled from Kingship into the wilderness in the epic Ramayana.
may be fecund and produce an abundant cotton harvest. The women standing before the cotton-plants, and the woman who in breaking the coconut assumes the position of the sacrificer (yajman); and the invocations to field-born Sita and the seven Devi—these figure a feminized circuit of generation, I will argue, specifically for cotton.

In the first part of this chapter I made the argument that the relation between the vehicles of figuration (the stone, cradle) and their corresponding nominations (Sita, Marwari, Pandawa) in being figural and abstract allows for a plasticity of nominations within the present unfolding space-time of the ritual. I showed several variations of how both the objects through which a concept is materialized may be different (a cloth-roll instead of the cotton flower; the earth idol instead of the flower; two cotton flowers instead of one), as also the nominations they receive change: the five stones are variously figured as Sita, as her sons, as the seven Devi, as the five pandawa. I had made the point that it is history—but as specifically experienced through present social relations, divine and ancestral debts, prestation and exchanges in the market and money—as materialized in the present moment of ritual performance that forges the relation between the semiotic possibilities of the image-figures, the present nominations they receive and the narrations about them as figures within ritual space-time. The kind of analysis undertaken here (which for economy of space is descriptively brief) attempts to demonstrate what is meant by this argument.
The Exuberant Pot

In the concluding actions a small fire is lit. In all the versions I witnessed this fire was constructed outside the bounded space demarcated by the cotton plants containing the interior zone of the cradle. The fire is kindled from twigs and a split cow-dung cake in this context usually referred to in the feminine noun *gauri*, an important source of fuel for cooking fires. If there was none to be had, either because the family did not own animals or it simply wasn’t available, no one had a fit about it but most cultivators tried to procure it for its ritual significance. The dried cow-dung cake (*gauri*: meaning ‘of the cow’, also a name for Goddess Parvati) is distinguished in its use here from (male) manure (*khat*) and as having been shaped into fuel from plain cow-dung (*shen*). Cow-dung as manure – *khat* – is the male generator deity of subsistence, the sowing of *jwari* (millets) commencing with a rite conducted by the male owner and ploughman to the manure deity Khat Dev/Deo, also installed
in the field in the form of sacralized stones (District Gazetteers Berar 1894-1911).

Once the flames have subsided a small earthenware pot (gadgi) filled with cow’s-milk is placed on the embers. Sometimes a few grains of rice, some grains of sugar and/or flakes of turmeric and vermillion powder are also sprinkled in. As the milk comes to a boil it rises fluffy and white above the round enclosing rim of the small fat pot. Kumud Bai places a cotton boll on the milk foam and as the milk boils over, the gathered women are instructed to burst into laughter, dance and clap. In some of the performances I witnessed, they placed their hands on the belly as they observed this spontaneous expression of joy. Since the laughter is inscribed in instruction its iteration has not been left to chance or affect. Laughter is the only moment in which what happens inside the ritual frame is agentive on its interpretants—in which, the direction of command reversed, a ritual event enjoins participants to perform a corresponding action.

When I asked my friends why they were laughing they replied with amused bewilderment, ‘to celebrate the cotton harvest! – parati chen nighalees byacha anand prakat karte te.’ Pleasure – anand- is an interesting concept since the event one is glad for and is enjoined to express as laughter, tells us both where and to what a society thinks its fortunes and necessities are pegged; and which kinds of words will best protect them. What does it mean to ritualize, by women, open laughter in the field specifically for the cotton harvest? By which I mean, the ritual injunction of the expression of pleasure as compared to what dread; an enjoined moment of spontaneous laughter, as opposed to what kind of protective silence?

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7 I do not have the space here to analyze, and compare, the rites surrounding the sowing, picking and threshing of millets (jwari) and cotton: the first the primary subsistence crop, and the second grown for market-exchange. I hope to do this in the book.

8 On the significance of the figure of the pot in Hindu rite and cosmology see Babb (1975). I vividly remember the Janamashtami duels between young men trying to break an earthen pot hung high up on a tree containing curds, milk and money for Krishna Gopala, the cow-herd’s, birthday as a young child growing up in Bombay.
Laughter for Cotton
The Yavatmal District Gazetteer (1908) has this description: ‘A fire is kindled and some milk is heated on it till it boils over so that the cotton bolls may burst with fulness [sic] as the milk boils over.’ And in the Akola gazetteer (1910): ‘In the southern taluks, at least, a white onion and some parched jawari are sometimes applied to cotton seed before sowing it, the idea being apparently that the cotton boll may burst like the opened grain with cotton as white as the onion.’ And continuing from the same account to compare with practices around the primary subsistence crop millets (jwari): ‘In the same part it is thought unlucky to take jwari to the field in a bamboo basket…; it is placed in an earthen pot, white-washed, and having tied to it with the hair of a woman a large white onion and a piece of leather. Some people merely apply cow’s urine to the seed, saying this will prevent the grain turning black.’

And again to compare with cotton which is picked only by women the threshing and preparation of jwari for subsistence requires, here from the Yavatmal gazetteer of 1908: ‘When the
post is to be erected in the threshing-floor they place in the hole an egg and some water and some grains of jwari. Before the jwari is threshed an image of a bullock is made from cow-dung and worshipped… While the juari or wheat is being threshed the women must have red powder on their foreheads and must not wear lamp-black on their eyes.’ And from the Akola gazetteer (1910): ‘People usually take off their shoes before walking on the threshing-floor [for millets]. The man who measures the grain sits facing the east, and while the grain is being measured nobody will speak, while women are not allowed on to the threshing-floor at all.’ In contrast for cotton from the Agricultural Ledgers Berar Districts: ‘There is a superstition in some parts about the sowing, i.e. the feeding of the ‘sarta’ (the wooden seed dribbler attached to the top of the plough) being done by women, the goddess of wealth will be propitiated. Cotton being the first crop to be put down in the season the cultivator entertains the idea that if the seed is handled by women, the goddess of wealth will be propitiated, and the result will be a prosperous season.’

I do not have the space here to analyze and compare in any depth the rites surrounding the sowing, picking and threshing of millets (jwari) with those concerning cotton: the first the primary subsistence crop, and the second grown exclusively for market-exchange. This is something I hope to address in subsequent endeavors. For now, comparing these archival and ethnographic descriptions of rites around cotton with those around jwari, we see that the axes of what we could call maleness and female-ness as sets of discontinuous embodied, performed, ritualized and normativizing principles, discourses and linguistic practices of self, other and thing nomination in this social order (and as should be evident these are neither real ‘types’, nor exclusive categories, nor to be found in real persons), as they are expressed in these practices surrounding the two primary crops of this region, one for market-exchange and the other for subsistence, appear as complex and mobile inversions of each other.

Jwari, the crop on which life (subsistence) depends is hemmed in by prohibitions and taboos,
the pot ringed by charms of impure substances (onions, leather, women’s hair) aimed at warding off evil eyes from noticing the sacred seed within. Its production is assigned to a male genitor, materialized in cow-dung as manure, shaped into a bull on the threshing floor. Its seed is not carried in the objects of women’s use (bamboo/wicker basket), but inside an earthenware pot which is whitewashed. The most impure parts of a woman’s body (her hair), are tied to it as a charm along with leather. Likewise while it is being converted by threshing into grain that can be eaten, it must be protected from contact with women, and those women who are present at its threshing must be childbearing and wedded (red powder on their foreheads). Whereas for cotton women handle the seed before it is sown, as incarnations of the goddess Lakshmi (herself an incarnation of Devi) who sits astride a pot of money. The harvest of cotton is marked by propitiating the Devi as a generative principle; five women are brought before five cotton plants; a cradle with a female infant is constructed from cotton-cloth, the stones are coloured with the marks of women’s daily use; a pot on a fire kindled from gauri filled with milk from the cow, capped by a cotton-boll, bursts demanding laughter.

Subsistence, Prestation, Market-Exchange: Millets/Sesame/Cotton
In contrast to the laughter that an abundant harvest of cotton incites, the preparation of jwari is a solemn affair the gazetteer having this description: ‘In the evening when the first heap of threshed jawari is to be measured the master himself should take the tokri, basket, walk once round the heap with the sun, and burn incense before the first full basket. Silence should always be kept while jawari is being measured.’ And for til, sesame, an important and interesting crop in that it occupies both the status of a daily-use oil, and ritual and festival, crop; as well a lucrative source of cash-revenue in the market, the gazettes give us this extremely interesting description, echoes of which are to be found in the work of Michael Taussig, June Nash and Olivia Harris: ‘When til has been cut the plants are
first tied in small *pendya, pulya*, bundles, and then equal numbers of these are-to prevent the grain being wasted-bound in large bundles, *kothal*. When the crop is large these *kothal* are in some places made of 40 or 50 *pendya* each, but often they contain only three or four. If the outturn of the second *kothal* is greater than that of the first it is believed that some demon has taken possession of the grain and that the life of the cultivator is in danger. To avert the evil the grain is sometimes flung out beside the threshing-floor, or burnt, and the work is postponed till the next day.’ And for both *til* and *jwari* from the same description, ‘If the outturn of any crop is amazingly high people sometimes sacrifice a goat, but they complain that the circumstances very seldom arise. When *til* is very good the sacrifice is sometimes made by goats being turned loose in the field: they are said to die on account of the *daitya*, the evil in the crop, but no doubt they also suffer from over-eating.’

To be schematically structuralist about it, which is unsatisfactory but will have to do for now since I do not have space to present a detailed analysis of the material above: it appears then from these descriptions that the rites surrounding the cultivation, harvesting and sale of cotton in this society enact a very complex relation between women’s labour, social authority, ritual force and cotton cultivation for market-exchange when compared to other crops. For some class of crop, *jwari*—millet, its sowing and threshing are hemmed in by social prohibitions, ritually enjoined silence, the ritual authority of men and taboos many of which center on the bodies of women.\(^9\) For *til*, sesame, the intermediate crop of subsistence, luxury/sumptuary, ritual and festival food (social prestation), historically traded for cash in local, regional and sub-continental markets, as well as earner of cash in the new arenas of capitalist market-exchange though not produced at this time for them, its production and over-production must be managed through blood sacrifice and other means. This is also true of an unexpected overabundance of subsistence (*jwari*: millets), a fortunate but dangerous

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\(^9\) On silence as an important component of ritual actions, see Clastres (New York: 2000) for a description on the careful silence maintained during birthing rites by the Guayaki Indian, with no expressions of joy or welcome, so as to not draw evil attention to the new born.
event intensifying a primary debt to the world, which demands blood sacrifice (goats, chickens). And the cultivation of cotton, its seed passing through the fertility-bestowing hands of women, its abundant harvest is nominated for market-exchange by women’s ritual authority with one moment of laughter.

The Many Logics of Exchange
To return to a point that has been made in some form throughout this dissertation, these descriptions of rites surrounding three crops—one signifying subsistence (jwari), one signifying market-exchange (cotton) and one occupying an intermediary status (til)—the logics of capitalist market-exchange are here encompassed as one amongst a diversity of intersecting routes of transmission and redistribution of social objects, goods and resources in this agrarian cultivating community. Thus it is when the gathered women have also birthed—when the pot has burst—that the ritual’s potency-generating phase is complete. After the milk has overflowed, the remaining yogurt-rice (dahi-bhaat) is scattered in the four corners of the field.¹⁰

The descriptions in the gazetteers are here again instructive since this action, the sprinkling of the rice and yogurt (never conducted for jwari) is also done for til (sesame). The Akola gazetteer notes: ‘Before til (sesame) is harvested boiled rice and curds are thrown out on all four sides of the field.’ And to conclude this analysis of overflowing milk signifying the generation of cotton, by comparison with the propitiation of cows milk itself in deified form for the generation of another interesting intermediary crop, rice. In these parts of central India the rice grain is feminized as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and its cultivation is intimately associated with the labour of women, feminine generation and is a traditional high-value crop of subsistence, festival and market-

¹⁰ See here Lawrence Babb (1975) on the significance of leavings of food offered to the gods as the route of transmission of ritual energy.
exchange (see Gregory on Lakshmi and rice cultivation in Chhattisgarh). Here from the Chanda Gazetteer of 1909: ‘The Dudhara (Milk-god) ceremony is performed on any Saturday or Sunday in Ashadh\(^\text{11}\) before commencing rice transplantation. The god is enshrined on the bank of a tank and goats and fowls sacrificed to him. Miniature winnowing fans and grain baskets with grain, fruit, etc., are presented and milk is poured over the god to induce him to grant good rains and a fertile year’ (Berar District Gazetteers).

From even these short descriptions without going into the specificities of each individual crop, we can see that the ritual for cotton incorporates into itself rites conducted for two other crops (rice and sesame) also cultivated for market-exchange, that do not appear in rituals conducted for crops grown for subsistence. Rice and sesame were traded in both historical mercantilist markets and the emerging capitalist market but were not exclusively or even primarily grown at this time, unlike cotton, for commodity exchange in the capitalist market, nor indeed even today is the entirety of sesame and rice production at village level exclusively governed by cash-crop logics.

As the festooned bull garlanded with cowries (and an amulet fashioned of dead cow-skin on its forehead) is propitiated in Pola, so the cow bestows grace on wedded daughters and is worshipped on the day before Diwali, the day before the mythological Ram, Sita and Laxman re-entered the city from exile. Here from the Yavatmal gazetteer: ‘At the Diwali the cows are worshipped, their horns being coloured with red ochre and necklaces of cowries tied to their necks. On this day parents always invite their married daughters with their husbands to their houses.’ When comparing the rites around cotton with other crops they often appear as contrary, or rather, parallel significations of closely related substances deriving from the living cow as itself a polyvalent,

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\(^\text{11}\) The 40\(^{\text{th}}\) month in the Hindu lunar calendar, usually occurring by the Gregorian calendar in the hot summer months of June/July. Also known as the ‘shunya masam’, or the ‘nil month’, Ashadh is considered inauspicious for weddings, births, house constructions and other life-cycle events requiring the gods be happy and avert the malice of the planets, though it is auspicious for pilgrimages and fasts (\textit{vrat}). The famous Maharashtra pilgrimage to the Vittal temple in Pandharpur occurs during the month of Ashad.
feminized, sacralized and deified figure of generation, nurturing and abundance (*kamdhenu*). For *jwari* the seed is touched with cow-urine and the pot is tied with a piece of cow leather (as a charm against *nazār*); for rice oblations of cows-milk mingling with the blood of sacralized victims signifies abundance, and for cotton an overflowing milk-pot invokes an abundant harvest. In the case of *jwari* cow-dung is installed as the male manure deity Khat Deo; in the ritual for cotton cow-dung appears as the feminine *gaurī*; and milk is deified in the form of the ambiguously sexed and gendered deity Dudhara for the cultivation of rice; offerings of yogurt and rice (*dahi-bhaat*) appear in all three as sacralized foods; and interestingly offerings of raw food (grains, fruit and cows milk) are made to the generator deity of rice, the milk god Dudhara. On a final note to connect back with a point made earlier and again compare now between all four crops: meshed with new and old markets in various ways the cultivation of millets, rice and sesame all demand animal sacrifices for the management of their scarcity and overproduction. While the failure of the cotton harvest dispenses radical penury and debt-bondage, its overabundance seemed not to demand the expiation of a primary debt requiring the spilling of blood.

With this series of actions the dramaturgy of the ritual’s specific ‘story’ is done. Participants are invited to partake of the blessings generated by the sacrifice through actions accompanying broadly Hindu-seeming rites in general: those present are offered a piece of coconut, a little water or sweetened milk, invited to run their hands over the flames and take the *dhoop*; the incense, and sometimes the family ends with an *aarti* (a sung propitiation) to a commonly revered deity – Ganesh, or Mahesh, or Durga, or Jagadamba. The women now commence picking cotton, for which they are paid a wage by the owner/cultivator if they are not from the immediate household, this cotton is taken home and placed before one’s domestic altar.

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12 In some districts/regions, the rice seed is also touched with the blood of victims sacrificed to Bijora, the seed-god, propitiated at the time of paddy transplantation (See *Berar District Gazetteer*).
The Missing Marwari

In the gazettes and agricultural ledgers while we find described almost exactly the rite I recorded in 2015 it is again in the nominations, specifically in the omissions, that the stark variations occur. Four significant nominations and figurations do not appear in these otherwise detailed descriptions in the colonial archive: the limestone coloured rocks nominated ‘Marwari’, the cotton-flower infant, the dhola, and the scales (dandi-panda). In every single version I recorded in the fields all four are present, their construction composing one of the longest sequences in the ritual economy. When I asked who is ‘Marwari’, each time I received a variation on this answer (which is a direct transcription) on what the lime-slaked stone signified: ‘the, the kapus ghete the – them, the ones who buy cotton them.’

Significantly not even one interlocutor said ‘Marwari - the sabukar (moneylender)’ in this instance, though it is with moneylending that this community/caste-group is most intimately associated in Vidarbha, as has been described in the preceding chapters.

In other contexts this association between Marwari and moneylending often came up in conversation—among the Pardi, for instance, who also speak Marwari having migrated from Rajasthan, and both groups are socially extremely distant since the Pardi come from the raan (forest); however in a dream sent by the Devi, Pandit Pardi is directed to a Marwari sonar who will make her image from a specified amount of silver; or amongst caste cultivators who might talk disparagingly of the usurious tendencies of the Marwari. I have described in preceding chapters the very complex exchanges between cultivating, nomadic and trader/moneylender castes/communities in Vidarbha. In this instance, however, the Marwari was always identified as a historically specific nomination signifying an abstract figure given by the market as a realm of commodity-exchanges distinct from that of social exchanges. The Marwari is: kapus ghenewale the - ‘the one who buys cotton, them’ – the, the kapus vechte the – ‘them, the ones who trade in cotton, them’. One person expanded and specified this association: “Marwari asse the kapus ghenewale – peble Marwari kapus ghete asse – mng phederation aala –
atta sagde kapos vebte the – Marwari are the cotton buyers – earlier, the Marwari bought cotton – then
the federation bought cotton – now everyone trades in cotton.’

The figure of the Marwari is semiotically coded as not just ‘the cotton-trader’, but also as one
with whom cultivators have exchanges of other kinds, is again reflected in an omission. In one
instance after the stones had been slaked with lime one of the women present asked: ‘chunari aanlees
nabi? – you didn’t bring a chunari (a scarf-like piece of cloth worn over a woman’s upper body)?’
‘What for?’ the woman conducting the rite asked. ‘For the pangartha. Our-side we tie a pangartha
(turban) on the [Marwari]stones – aamebekade aamhi Marwarile pangartha ghalat ban.’ There was no
chunari so this detail was omitted and its inclusion was not suggested in any of the other versions I
saw, but regardless, a pangartha (turban) is both the seat of honour and also bestowed and lost as a
mark of honour. Tying a pangartha is the mark of paying obeisance and respect to an honoured and
socially elevated guest, as well as the mark of the bestowal of political and other favours by a social
superior. It is in this capacity that in some versions the Marwari is seated beneath the cradle, in some
a pangartha is tied on the stone and in all instances is offered ritually sacred food (yogurt-rice). On
this then is sprinkled raw rice, and picked cotton.

The transformation of the caste-specific figure of the Marwari into the abstract signifier of
‘cotton-trader’ is then not so much a transformation as an addition. The Marwari as both the
moneylender with whom one has words over rent-payments and debts undertaken for children’s
weddings and parents’ funerals, and the Marwari who figures a logic of exchange in the capitalist
market as the cotton-trader is revealed in an exhortation to the Marwari at the conclusion of one
session: ‘yeda muka maaf, dyala mala bhav – Forgive the harsh words exchanged, now give me a good
price for the cotton.’ The nomination ‘Marwari’ I have been arguing identifies then not just a
historically specific figure, but one who is also representative of a logic of exchange other than, and
not reducible to, the realm of social prestation and even mercantilist relations between money-

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lender-traders and cotton-cultivators.

The innovations and omissions through nomination and figuration in the contemporary ritual space-time, narrate a historically specific encounter with the logic of exchange-value that came to be enshrined through the colonial-capitalist economy of cotton as a logic of production within peasant communities cultivating cotton for the market in this part of the central Deccan. The ritual does not simply mark cotton production for market-exchange, rather it is production for a historically specific mode of exchange: commodity-exchange in the capitalist market. Thus the two other elements that do not feature in the colonial record—the scales identified here by a price dandi-panda and the dhola—materialize the figures of quantification (dhola: storage shed for cotton) and abstraction (dandi-panda: ‘market-price’ signified through the figure of scales), and in their speech cultivators mark the third term that performs the conversion between production and exchange, the matter of the price — bhav.

*The Scales and The Dhola*

To make a brief spatial point as it has a bearing on what follows: in the descriptions of the ritual I have offered and from the images accompanying the text, it can be seen that the rite is organized around horizontal planes (earth, cradle, sky) and vertical axis (cotton plants), within and outside which image-figures are made/placed and actions occur. Of these most ‘elements’ are mostly fixed within definite zones that move in concentric circles from the most interior containing the cradle, the realm of kinship and prestation signified by the stones under the cradle, and then zones of market-exchange; with corresponding kinds of offerings made in each zone (coloured powder, halad and incense to the cradle stones, Marwari; cooked rice to the stones and Marwari; cotton to the Marwari, dhola, scales; many offerings move between zones etc.). On a 180-degree plane of vision, two points seem to tether the ritual action, the cradle as the most interior and the pot as an exterior
orientating point which is always placed outside the frame of the cotton-plants to the right of the cradle. Two elements move between the interior and exterior zones demarcated by the ritual frame, the dhola (an image-figure of the shed in which cotton for market is stored) which is sometimes created outside the ritual frame to the left of the cradle, or sometimes constructed besides the stone-Marwari inside the ritual frame, or sometimes constructed on top of the stone-Marwari and filled with cotton. Wherever it may be placed, it is not constructed in the frame containing the milk-pot, i.e. it is usually placed to the left of the cradle. The second are the scales, which are usually hung on the cotton plants over the stone-Marwari, on the outside towards the pot, and in one instance strung directly over the cradle of the flower-infant. (See Figs.)
Fig 1.9: Dhola with Cotton (Yavatmal, October 2015)
The scales are usually constructed of hemp fiber (ambadi), its fruit look remarkably akin to cotton and it is spun in village homes into rope. Two stones are hung on either end of a long stick with strings of amabadi. If amabadi is not available, then the scales are constructed from cotton-thread and stones. When asking what this was – be kay abe - Kumud Bai laughed: ‘be dandi-panda – this is a market-price - bhav dyala pahije na-ji – (they) must give the price mustn’t they?’ And then she clarified: ‘peble be gotte asse – atta be aali kathi – earlier there used to be stones – now this has come, the scales.’

What is of interest here is that in this instance Kumud Bai explicitly cites a historical transformation in distinguishing between a popular name for a price, and the instrument used to measure cotton for that price. In saying ‘be dandi-panda - peble gotte asse – mug be aali kathi – this is market-price – first there were weight stones and now this has come, the rod’, Kumud Bai is here comparing two different instruments (weight stones: gotte and the metal scales: kathi) for a specific kind of exchange, the market-price set by weight of cotton, since dandi-panda is not the name of an instrument but a price, here from the Molesworth: ‘dandi-panda: the market-price’ (559). In Varhadi and Vidarbha, in some contexts the metal scales (kathi) taking in popular speech the name of the price for cotton they were/are used to adjudicate.

In the version I showed with the scales hung over the cradle Indira Khadse explained what she was doing as, ‘ambadichi bhaji vai – be kilo karta – byala bandhayche vazan-kathi – this is the fiber of ambadi (hemp) – for doing the kilo – to this one is to tie the weighing-rod.’ It is thus not just for an abundant harvest of cotton that the rite is conducted, and so it does not stop at the figuring of generation. Rather, the image-figures receive cotton as a gift from Devi and sell it to the Marwari, its price set by the dandi-panda. For which we can finally turn to Moreshwar Khadse’s explanation in which he brings all four figures together, the cotton-trader, the market-price, the image-figures of quantification and abstraction. In explaining what the stone-Marwari, the dhola and the scales signified he said (dandi-panda here employed explicitly as market-price), ‘Atta dhola bauvaiche, dandi-
The Earth Idol, The Stone Krishna, And The Cotton-Flower

To conclude this exploration we finally return to the first and lost image-figures: as we have seen in almost every version of the ritual I recorded (bar one in which a *bahuli* of cotton-cloth featured as *palsa*) it is a cotton-flower that essays the role of infant in the cradle. It does not feature in a single archival description. I do not know when the cotton-flower displaced the earth idol/stone Krishna, or if the archive simply doesn’t say. Based on what the ritual looks like today, it appears that at some point in the twentieth century the cotton-flower becomes the primary vehicle for the signification of feminine generation of cotton, such that presently the infant is almost always figured from a flower and in no version I saw did an earth idol or a stone essay this role. I do not have the evidence at this stage to speculate on when and how the earth idol and stone Krishna parted ways with the cotton-flower. I will make just one observation and leave it, which is that, the earth idol and the stone Krishna are deification (earth and stone is converted through shaping and daubing) and propitiation; the deification of the flower-infant figured from a plucked cotton-flower is also a ritual sacrifice. In the first instance it seems as though one deifies and propitiates that which is given; in the second one must first also sacrifice something of what one has produced. Further than this I cannot go so instead I offer a story.

This session was unique in many respects since the elements described below did not feature in other versions of the ritual I saw. I was offered an alternate story of Sita, instead of one two cotton flowers were placed in the cradle, and the five stones which usually sit beneath the cradle were placed inside it, on top of the cotton-flowers. I transcribe below some part of this conversation in full. Of note is that she is not referred to as Sita Devi here even once, rather she is called Sita Mai:
Mother Sita, the form of the Devi invoked in her tender, loving and nurturing aspects.

Field Notes October 2015: Sita in The Fields

AS: ‘kiti phulla pabijet – how many flowers do you need?’

UM: ‘Don – two.’

I hand her the flowers and she places the them in the cradle, arranged head touching base, and touches the flowers with vermillion, turmeric and *gulal*.

AS: ‘be kaam – who is this?’

UM: ‘He Sita Mai – this is Sita Mai.’

She touches five small stones with *balad, kunkun* and *gulal* and places them inside the cradle sprinkling a little raw rice to finish, and covers the stones and flowers over with the cloth.

AS: (usual question) ‘He kay? – what/who are these?’

UM: ‘be khade sitamaiche porga – these stones are Sita Mai’s sons.’ She continues:

‘Ramale Sitale vanvas dila hota na – Ram had exiled Sita to the forest right – chaudavarsya – for fourteen years – mng chaudavarsbi vanvas dilya var – and on receiving fourteen years exile – tile ranat laag – the open ground was now her lot – ranat tile ek mulala janam dila – in the forest she gave birth to a son – mulala janam dilyar tina ya padbatine manjhe tila, vagli ti sbetatmadhe – on giving birth to a son she had to adopt this way; I mean she wandered/walked in the fields – kaam keli ti sbet – she worked in the fields – sbetat kaam karun aapple pora bharayli – having worked in the fields she filled her son – mbanjhe kban-piyun-jiyun – I mean eating-drinking-living – kaam kela mbanayche – the point being, she worked – mbanum ambi be puja-pathi, be mbane Sita Maichi puja vbe – so we do this prayer-propitiation, this is Sita Mai’s puja.’

AS: ‘kiti lekara jhale tichewale? – how many sons did she have?’

UM: ‘Sita Maiche jhale don, Luv an Kush – Sita Mai had two sons, Luv and Kush.’
AS: ‘Mug don theyvayche? — so you place two?’

UM: ‘Nahin jhale don, pan paach theyvayche — no, there were two but you place five.’

In this account the woman cultivator conducting the rite invokes Sita neither for her divinity nor her birth. Rather it is her labour in the fields, her work with her body as a newly laboring woman who from being the wife of the divine King, the forest was now her lot. Expelled from the security (and strictures) of the patriarchal home and kingdom, publicly accused as an unchaste woman for having (forcibly) lived in Ravana’s house, in the forest she births sons. To raise her sons she must needs learn a new way (be padbatine). To provide for her sons (porga bharayli), to keep them alive (khan-piyu-jiyu), Sita learns to work in the fields, ‘shetat vagli ti’. The point being, as the cultivator repeats, she worked (kaam keli ti). And it is for this that she is propitiated so her divinity and the labour of her body (also) as a mother, as Sita Mai, may bestow abundance on the endeavors of the women picking cotton. Both the figure of Mai is doubled (two flowers instead of one) and those she rears multiplied (five stones figure her two sons).

And so the cotton-flower may return us through re-tracings to the lost figures of the first description in the Agricultural Ledgers (1894) which had read if we recall, ‘Five women are taken before five plants located in the center of the field. The plants are then sprinkled over with “haled” (turmeric) and kunku (a red powder) and an offering of a little boiled rice mixed with curds are placed before them. The rice is then thrown in all directions of the field, and the cotton from the five plants is picked before the general picking of the field commences.’ The fertility of the land, the gifts it gives now acquire their meaning again, if it has ever been otherwise, only through the laboring bodies of rural women rearing their children by cultivating cotton for exchange in the market.
I have ethnographically analyzed what the historical record has to offer, as a way of practically demonstrating what I mean by image figures as history. In doing so I am employing seemingly structuralist techniques towards hopefully different ends. The kinds of readings through which ritual may be analyzed within broadly structuralist or discursive parameters certainly have something to offer. Analyzing the ritual as composed of significatory chains, and/or an object of discourse, may get us some part of the way towards an interpretation: to sets of significations, for instance, that contingently stabilize along formalizations within the diegetic space-time of the ritual, or in the circuits of discursive circulation of extra-diegetic elements. The ritual could be read against varied figurations of the legends, myths, lays and folk narratives of Sita in this part of India, as I have done with the story of her birth and her work in the fields for instance.

Or, to turn to the rite itself, I also could show that the figuration of the flower-infant in a cradle made of unused market-bought cotton as the first ritual action, finds resonance in the bursting of the pot-milk-foam-cotton-boll and the injunction to exuberance, and it is to a future of cloth that cotton is sent. The significance of unstitched, new cloth in the propitiation of Devi for the harvesting of cotton is attested to by comparison with the significance of used cloth in the propitiation of Devi as Marai (the goddess of smallpox, cholera and other ills) who is worshipped at the start of the sowing season and, among other things, cures diseases besetting humans and animals and sends rain. Here from the Chanda gazetteer of 1909, which says: ‘In a dry year work is stopped on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday and each family pours a ghara (pot) of water over her [Marai’s] image to induce her to send the wished-for showers. Goats, sheep and fowls are sacrificed to her, the blood of the victims is sprinkled on the fields, and rice soaked in it is sown, in order that the crop may be abundant and free from blight…Rice, kunku, turmeric, water and cloth, which must always be sewn, are also commonly offered.’ Or, as I mentioned, that the rite inscribes negativity as co-constituting generation in the figure of the plucked-[dead]flower-flower-infant. Or the mediating
action of first offering food to the lime-stone-Marwari as to a guest, the placing of cotton (i.e. as not gift) onto the lime slaked-stone-Marwari, the construction of a *dhola* in which cotton is placed, and somewhat later the construction of the hemp-stone-scales.

Or to the fact that except for two objects—the first and the last—every other object that enters the ritual space does so as inert to serve as a vehicle of image-figuration, is converted/potentized only within this space and constrained within the diegetic ritual space-time, since nothing that enters (except for cotton) leaves. Except for the market-bought cloth which constitutes the first object that undergoes ritual conversion (into a cradle), marked as exceptional in its nature in this ritually bound space-time (that it must be *kora*, market-bought), every other object is taken from the fields (stones, hemp fiber, cotton flower, sticks, cow-dung, cotton) or produced within the home (cooked rice, yogurt). Three singular objects (the earthenware pot, the cotton-thread, the figure of the wooden box in which Sita is found) are marked as having been socially produced for circulation in the realm of social reproduction. Conversely picked cotton is the single object, unlike all others, which is not ritually converted into anything. Whereas every other object is touched and daubed with colour, including dyeing the threads and the cloth if they be white, sprinkled with rice, or sprinkled with petals, cotton is a figure by itself, of itself and for itself. And it is in this form, as a figure of all the cotton that hopefully will be picked in the coming months, that it is taken home in the wicker basket in which the cloth and other objects arrived to the field, to be placed before one’s *kul-dev*.

Analyses in this vein would not be in themselves wrong, and they certainly tell us something important about this rite at a certain scale of its significatory practice. But soon, just by itself this begins to present as a somewhat unsatisfying exercise, since here it is not at this level of signification alone that the whole semiotic practice of the rite, and its capacity to symbolize, is enacted. This enactment occurs in history. So to go to the joke that I once heard cracked at the Marwari’s expense,
we will have to find other ways of sensing the texture of symbolic practice which does not necessarily, or solely, make its meaning through signification as negative differentiation of the sort that even a deconstructionist technique attentive to reversals (the cloth come at the beginning leaves as cotton at the end), doublings (the multiplication of the sons), splitting (of the figure of Sita), retracings (the many forms in which flowers, cotton, milk appear), displacements and metamorphoses (the earth idol becomes the cotton-flower becomes the cotton-cloth roll) and so on, can adequately register. Different social objects require different lenses to texture the scales, and stakes, of social practice. It is something of this lived enactment in history that I have tried to find a means of communicating. So when asked about the foaming milk-boll with its cotton hat, someone winked and told of the Marwari’s appetite, and that could mean any number of things when peasants’ selling wet (making it heavier by the bale) cotton (also the subject of jokes) is the persistent accusation and grouse of the money-lender trader.

Part III

IMAGE – DISCOURSE – INTERPRETATION

Image, Culture, Relic
Something may go from objectified image-figure to relic without necessarily being culturalized. By the latter is meant the freezing of a field of semiotic activity contiguous with the material domain of social and productive relations it symbolizes, into an image of a culturalized form in which its status as public artifact is now also the mark of its hollow character.\(^\text{13}\) Such as has happened to some extent

\(^\text{13}\) For a beautiful discussion of culture as frozen semiotics in the context of contemporary Japan see Marilyn Ivy (Chicago: 1995). My discussion here occurs in the backdrop of the critical thinking of the relationship between capitalism, culture and the image in Adorno and Horkheimer (Stanford: 2007), Lukacs (MIT: 1972) and Benjamin (Belknap: 2008). I take exception with this tradition however as being located entirely within a discourse of western modernity in which the technologized image of mediatic circulation—cinema, photography etc—is seen as projected onto disembodied urban citizens in thrall of the alienation and desires of modern mass society, as theorized in a range of work in cinema and visual studies emerging from the Frankfurt Critical School (Kracauer, Bruno, Susan Buck-Morris,
with, or at one level of, Pola—the annual bull parades described in a previous chapter. Unlike this rite conducted in the solitude of one’s own field, Pola is a public ritual and not to be found only in the village. As Pola is ritually, politically and mediatically marked as Maharashtra’s festival of ‘farmers’, it is accordingly inscribed—from village square to state capital—in the circuits of consumption and spectacle attendant on such events signifying ‘tradition’ in modern politics. Pola parades lead by sumptuously festooned bulls, bazaars selling a riotous array of colorful adornments, children’s toys and clay bulls, are extensively portrayed in the local media, the festival advertised as a regional tourist attraction. Patronized by politicians appealing to rural constituencies prominent figures—such as the Chief and Agricultural Ministers of the state of Maharashtra—make sure to attend and crown the winning animal at Pola parades staged in public fairgrounds across peri-urban Vidarbha. It is when one attends a village Pola that in some aspects it comes off as an oddly ramshackle affair because the forms of caste/occupational/landed political authority it once signified, and that have been gestured to in the last chapter, no longer obtain.

However the fading away of something, the dissipation of its historically bestowed thus contingent capacity to communicate that something is being communicated, need not proceed through reification. For lives, experiences and productive forms such as those inhabited by women, in and through which women often symbolize without authority, this embattled exclusion can also bestow a kind of silent protection from the reification that is attendant on publicness So too with Pola: while the public performance may now appear as ‘culture’ and thus anachronism, a still resonant kernel continues to transmit the secret play of servitude and invitation between the farmer and the bull.

etc.). This mode of analysis cannot account for the very different histories of image-making, representation and urban modernity in, broadly speaking, the global south. I discuss some of these issues in an ethnography of spectatorship practices and cinema as public space in early and mid-twentieth century Delhi. See Sethi (JNU: 2009); (Seminar: 2010); (Orient-Blackswan: 2013). Balamurali Natarjan has recently advanced a provocative argument that caste itself has been culturalized in contemporary India based on fieldwork in nearby Chhattisgarh. See Natrajan (New York: 2013).
Zhali Sita Devichi – Sita Devi’s is Done
Such a possibility is marked already in a ‘new’ ‘version’ of Sita Devi’s rite which I, appropriately enough, never actually saw. The rite was described to me by Moreshwar Khadse as something other
people occasionally did as I was recording the ritual in their own fields, so only a trace structure is available for analysis. As it turned out I could not have captured it had I attempted to. I was asking some point of clarification regarding whether they remembered their parents doing something similar, or if there were any variations they specifically recalled. To this question of lineage, Moreshwar Khadse shrugged his shoulders:

‘Atta pehle sarkhas rabila nabin – now, it has not remained like it used to be – some people what they do – *koi koi kay karte* - they bring some cooked rice from home – *gharun bhaat aante* – in that [they] pour some milk mixed with yogurt – *tyachat dabi ghunn dulb takte* – come to the fields – *shetat yete* – in the field whatever deity/god they believe in – *shetat kutthetari ambi dev mhanun manto* – they give[smear] that dev with vermilion – *tya devale shindoor dete* – scatter [the cooked rice] in the fields – *vavarat phikun dete* – and begin selling cotton – *kapus vechne chalu karte* –

that’s it, Sita Devi’s is done – *mng bas, zhal Sita Devichi* – just plain – *sadda-chi*

Indrajit thought to ask, ‘What happens if they don’t do it?’ ‘Nothing at all – *kaych nahin*,’ Khadse replied. ‘Does that mean you can’t sell cotton?’ Indrajit persisted. ‘They sell – *vechte* – what is in this[the ritual]? – *byachamadbe kay abe*?’ Khadse responded, ‘People will sell their cotton regardless.’ Indrajit asked a direct question, ‘Suppose while selling cotton something happened - *samjha kapus vechta vechta kabitari jhala* – then will they say, we didn’t do Sita Devi that’s why this happened – *apan Sita Devi kayles nabhti mhanun assa jhala.*’ ‘They may,’ Khadse responded, ‘But things happen – *gbatna bote* – they happen if you do it, and they happen if you don’t do it – *kela tar bote, nabin kela tar bote* – what’s in your fate happens – *je kabi aamebe nashibat aala, te bote.*’ He continued, ‘we do this because it is a hereditary practice - *vansham padhat abe* – it makes us feel good, so we do it – *aamhala thodsa baru vatte mhanun aamhi karto*.’

So first, I am not sure exactly how to describe this trace of a rite I did not see in its relation to what I saw—whether it is better described as a ‘new’ version of this rite, or as a simplified version
(which is how Khadse marked it – *sadder*, plain), or even in relation to this rite at all, since it is possible it has existed alongside Sita Devi’s ritual even while Khadse marks it as a recent innovation. From this bare-bones description, however, we can mark certain interesting reversals such that it may be described, in at least some aspects, as an in-version of the rite I have been describing.

To begin with, the field-sequence comprising the construction of the cradle, the signification of the cotton-flower, the propitiation of the Marwari, the conversion of cotton from Sita’s gift to saleable commodity, even the figure of Sita herself, is absent. Instead, the rite seems to have reversed direction: instead of cotton going from Sita Devi in the field to the house, here generative potency is taken from the home to the field. This is marked, for instance, in Khadse’s description of the transformation of the rice offering, and the combining of milk with yogurt and rice. In the rite I have described, first raw rice is sprinkled on the cradle, the small stones and the Marwari; then cooked rice mixed with curds is fed to them, milk is boiled till overflowing in a pot, and then what is left (ritually marked as ‘the leavings’) is sprinkled in the field carrying the potency it has acquired through the ritual. In this version, as Khadse describes, raw rice is brought home (‘ghari bhaat aante’), the rice is cooked at home, mixed with yogurt and milk (‘tyachat dudh gheun dahi takte’), offered to one’s own *kul-dev* (family deity) and scattered in the field. Second, in the absence of the flower-infant and the foaming milk boll, cotton neither seems to require ritual generation and ripening, nor ritual commodification as is reflected in the absence of the scales and the figure of the Marwari.

Rather than engaging in an alluring speculation on the coincidental co-emergence of this contracted inversion and the intensification of cotton cash-cropping wherein hybrid cotton-seeds must now be acquired for sowing from the same market to which one sells cotton—the replacement

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14 See here Lawrence Babb on feeding the gods and eating the leavings as a central aspect of central-Indian popular Hindu practice and cosmology (Babb Columbia: 1975). Sacrifice through the conversion of food, and the transfer of pollution through food between castes/groups, is a fundamental aspect of Hindu ritual both popular and Sanskritized, and finds mention in Charles Malamut’s *Cooking The World* on the Vedic texts, as well as in Gloria Raheja’s ethnography *The Poison in the Gift* in late 1970s Haryana (Raheja Chicago: 1988).
of Sita by Lakshmi as CA Gregory might say—we can attend to Khade’s own description, which is ambivalent. I read Khadse’s gesture as first one of commonsense, which in recognizing the rite as a representation marked its non-essential and non-binding nature. There is certainly the suggestion of a contraction of the full sequence, but he does not judge the new rite as a degradation. And it is not as though he assigns any negative agentive power to its non-performance. In Khade’s narrative it appears as though something has simply fallen out of use for some people. Like as with Indira Khadse’s mother, who used to perform the rite in the fields of her maternal clan till she felt too old to do it, her brothers who continue to till the family land no longer perform it. When I asked her why, she said, ‘aayi karat hoti – mother used to do it – atta mbatarya jhali, jagavarchi jhali mhanun karat konich nai – now she’s old and taken to her bed so nobody does it.’ When asked why they continued to do it, Moreshwar Khadse answered quite simply: it was something received (‘vansham parampara chalat abe’ – ‘it is a hereditary practice’), and they continued to do (thus to give in this way) because, ‘ambala bara vat-te – we feel good - anandi vat-te mhanun ambhi karto - it feels pleasurable so we do it.’ And in this particular recording I too can be heard chiming in, ‘bo na! bara vaat-te thodsa – yes no! It feels good,’ and it was true. It did feel good to be there out in the sun, in the open fields recording with these people I had come to know. Still, things don’t remain the way they are (‘pehle sarkhas rabila nahi – ‘it has not remained the same’). When it is no longer good, or because the woman who used to do it is does not feel up to it, or for whatever reason, its performance does not seem necessary to some cultivators.

Interpretation and Interpretants
What could such a reading of such a rite yield on the, to me, interesting question of how an anthropologist fashions her frameworks of analysis. In which she attempts to describe a social object

Rites compose one of the gifts given and received in Marcel Mauss’s classic formulation.
or practice, through a practical combination of theoretical commitments received through the
discipline, and a sort of sussing-out modality of how those she is interacting with make, describe and
inhabit this object. This becomes an interesting analytical problem when one turns to
ethnographically accounting for the interpretants themselves, in this case female cotton cultivators.

In this rite the female cultivator figures a space of generation over which she, as the enactor
of the ritual action, is simultaneously also its interpretant.\textsuperscript{16} It is significant then that the ritual occurs
not in the home but in the field, for a crop that is cultivated not for subsistence but for sale. And it
is female cotton cultivators who jointly convert this crop to something that can be sold in this
specific and particular way: i.e. for a futurity of exchange. It is to Lakshmi, incarnated here in the
figure of the Devi, the raw rice and her worshipper the Marwari moneylender, to whom the gift of
Sita’s cotton is given, but not solely in the idiom of gift (cooked-rice), but in that of market-
exchange (the scales, \textit{dhola} etc.). The ritual thus goes beyond simply asserting the facticity of
women’s participation: rather it suggests that in a corner (which is also a center) of this social world,
participation in commodity-exchanges in the market (and not simply production) is symbolized
through the ritual authority of women. In this ritual figuring the generation and sale of cotton it is
thus the symbolic authority of women that mediates, interprets and nominates cotton farming,
produced within a domestic mode of production already riven through by the logic of market-
exchange, as production for the market. The infant and the moneylender, the cradle and the scale, all
are here figured in the ritual space presided over by female cultivators.

Having said this, however, is not to be done with the question of ideology, for it is precisely
here that it arises. For how then has women’s labour been constituted—discursively and
materially—if not marginal in the Real, then derivative to the symbolic? In constituting something

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\textsuperscript{16}I thank Anna Miljanic for telling me to focus on the participants and their interpretations of what they are doing, rather
than a structuralist analysis of significatory chains.
called ‘the domestic mode of production’ a dominant strand of agrarian history, and peasant studies more generally, has stabilized ‘the peasant’ as an epistemic figure always-already male. And so the empirical fact will have to be restated that if one set of (male)cotton-cultivators are taking their own lives in this time in the history of agrarian India, then another set of (female)cotton cultivators persistently continue on this side of the realm of the living.

If this interpretation of a harvest rite performed by women figuring production, labour and exchange is persuasive, then it points to the material truth that men and women as together constituting the social are not just co-generators of social meaning, but are co-interpretants of those meanings. Women not just participate in social exchanges alongside or as corollaries of men, but these exchanges are not, and indeed have never been, restricted to the sphere of the ‘domestic’ howsoever porously construed. Rather, in this peasant society of small-commodity producers, women have been participants alongside men, and I have been arguing self-nominate as such, in production for a market-economy for a very long time. The domestic mode of production—i.e. the intensive cultivation of cotton as a cash-crop for capitalist market-exchange organized through the domestic labour of households—on which the modern and early modern economies of cotton depend, was itself incarnated in the shadow of colonial-capitalist wage-relations, including the partial commodification; tenure rationalizations and consequent subinfeudation of land, peasant indebtedness to traders and money-lenders who acted as agents to Imperial cotton companies, and the first incursions of market-exchange into the realm of subsistence during the colonial regime.

The peasant household has been further politicized (to use Joas Biehl’s helpful formulation)—produced as the site of social reproduction and commodity-production—through the long years of the postcolonial era in the wake of Green Revolution technologies, hybrid cultivation, quasi-protected and open export markets, scientific experimentation and genomic technologies, and the fractured alignment of rural social and economic life to the demand and supply chains of
national and international markets. However if the affective economies, metaphorical registers and aesthetic strategies of this rite, illuminated in the metaphors of daily domesticity, intimate relations, religious experience, productive work, and commodity-exchange are taken seriously, it appears that necrophilia is not the whole history of even capitalism.\(^{17}\)

**The Sublime of Exchange**

In my reading I have made, what I suggest is also, an emic argument: that this ritual conducted by female cotton cultivator ritualizes, and thereby objectifies, the logic of abstract-value itself (the scales, the money-lender etc.), here incarnated in the cash-cropping of cotton for sale in a capitalist commodity-market. This is a historical claim about the economies of contemporary (and recent historical) cotton production in this part of agrarian India: one that has been worked out in its historico-political dimensions across previous chapters. This rite enacts, in a significant aspect, a ritual commodification in which cotton is received as a gift from Sita, here figured as independent, feminized potency relating to the earth, and semiotically commodified so it may be sold (and thus also produced) for a future of not just market-exchange (which predates capitalist relations by some centuries in this part of the world), but colonial-capitalist market-exchange. In this privately communal ritual, conducted by female cotton cultivators in the fields in which they work every day, the anticipation of a future oriented towards cotton produced for exchange-value is figured through metaphors of life not death. Through the construction of metonymic image-figures, the ritual figures a space of generation and a future of market-exchange for the products of labouring.

Am I suggesting then the joyful embrace by cultivators of cotton cash cropping for a capitalist commodity-market? Not quite because in no other season, except the time of sowing, is

\(^{17}\) Marx speaks of capitalism’s necrophilia in metaphors of blood across his writings, in the *Grundrisse* for instance capitalism is described as ‘constantly sucking in living labour as its soul, vampire-like’, or as ‘sucking its living soul out of labour’ (*Grundrisse* transl. Harmondsworth 1973); in ‘The Working Day’, *Capital Vol I* Marx describes capitalism’s necromancy through reference to the life-blood of living labour: ‘capital is dead labour that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’
the anticipation of the possibility of plenitude or simply getting by, more riven through by dread, doubt, anxiety, fear, worries and powerless dependence on the caprice of the climate on which agricultural production, and thus one’s entire life, depends. Waiting to sow, cultivators desperately hope and pray the rains will arrive so the seeds will germinate and not rot in the ground; at harvest cultivators pray the late-winter rains will hold off as burst cotton sways starkly white in the fields. This moment inaugurates a long period of the hard labour of picking cotton from 8 in the morning till 6 in the evening and hauling it home on the back, where awaits the watchful anxiety attendant on debts and the fluctuating prices of lint in the national and international markets.

In the fields the big green plants will continue to flower, fruit and burst for the next six months. Every dead, damaged, wilted, fallen, plucked, stolen, eaten, lost flower is one less cotton-boll. So I felt particularly hailed by the richness of the rite’s constitution of the figure of generation through sacrifice: the flower-infant is figured from a dead flower. The vital potency of negation generated in this sacrifice travels through social bonds/relations of prestation (the offerings of cooked food), touched with hopes of prosperity (raw rice), through the market (the Marwari), to the figures of quantification and abstract-exchange (the scales, the dhola, the cotton-trader). This first flower picked to figure generation and receive its own semiotic transformation as image, into an image of its own future as cotton in the burst-pot-milk-boll, will wither. It will not itself ripen. But rather than a lamentation, celebration or valorization of the regime of exchange-value the rite is more subtle, because it is made as prosaic. And in this form perhaps it could also be thought of as a charm. The image-objects with their precise but contingent nominations offer figures for symbolization and thus for making ways through, which is also living in, the times given by the historically constituted world.
Speech, Discourse, Image
To return to the question of language and interpretants: what is achieved in the linguistic and semiotic practice of this rite marking the ripening, harvest and sale of cotton by those who perform it? What does its nature in the speech of these particular speakers, in assuming its particular significatory character as lying in the realm of daily chatter, enable? Two consequences obtain: first, that while the figures that appear in the rite and their placement are formalized—meaning every version has a flower-infant, Marwari, the scales etc., placed in a specific relation to each other—this formalization only appears practically, i.e. in the collective making of these figures, not as a consequence of their stabilization in a discourse about the rite.

So, before I had seen it myself I would ask, ‘what is this Sita Devicha kapus – be kay abe Sita Devicha Kapus?’ ‘Oh nothing, just a prayer in the fields that’s all.’ ‘And what do you do exactly?’ To which prodding I would either receive a version of Sita’s birth story, or dismissive shrugs, or boredom. It is only when I was present for the first time that I was stunned by the complexity of its figuration because nothing I had heard prepared me for the detail I saw. And I realized no one had been interested in saying very much because the rite cannot be relayed purely as semantic content in an individual narration, and loses meaning when it is; its nature rendering it somewhat pointless to talk about. Like the embodied semiotic fullness of the image that may be described but not imparted, so too with this rite: it is only in collectively doing it, in making it, in being present to witness it, in seeing it and yes perhaps also in explaining its meaning to the visiting fieldworker, that it holds the interest of those performing it.

In this ritual of the commodification of cotton, the encounter with exchange-value is not inscribed in a secondary symbolic mystification, in other words through some authorized and authorizing discourse. Rather it is the logic of abstraction itself that appears to be objectified as an

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image-figure. The image-figures insert the realm of social reproduction and spiritual life—work and laboring, worldly and ancestral debts, propitiation and sacrifice, birth and feeding, the raising of children and animals, cooking, calculation and cunning, bargaining, placating, tenderness and exuberance i.e. the realm of speech itself as use-value—as here marked as being contiguous with, though also differentiated from and marked-over by, production for exchange with its attendant figurations of quantification and abstraction (the stone-Marwari, the stick-\textit{dhola} the \textit{ambadi}-scales). But it is not through an aesthetics itself stabilized on abstract-value (through the totality of a system of signs which acquire their meaning as negative differentiation in relation to other signs) that the phenomenological life of exchange-value, its materialization as an embodied somatic ideational process of production and social reproduction is symbolized. Rather than a valorization in discourse then—the ritual is not grounded on a myth, a discourse, a text, an oral narration, a set of instructions, or any kind of text or textualizing form for instance—the logics of exchange-value receive their own objectifications: as materialized image-figures (the scales, the Marwari, the \textit{dhola}, the cloth that must be market-bought) open in their semiotic fullness to the possibility of contrary signification in everyday speech. To put it another way I have been arguing the ritual is historical, it is indeed history that the image-figures transmit, but it is not historicizing.

In order to make this argument in a more complex and robust sense, I would have to trace the varied speech-genres employed by women (and men), in different contexts for different purposes. Such an exercise is beyond the scope of this dissertation. So I conclude with a last image: what we are given to see is that this small corner in a cotton-field is transformed by female cultivators into something beautiful that holds at its heart a delicate, and intimately mysterious, figure of generation. But it does not through this process become a shrine. For the ritual does not institute a place of veneration and upkeep. Prayers are not offered here again, nor do women undertake to see to its maintenance. The little cradle once made of \textit{kora} cloth is left without
ceremony to dissipate its potency in the wind, is watered and leached by the sun and the rain. When
the last cotton has been picked, the cradle with the flower-infant is ploughed back into the earth
from which the tales unearth a girl-child in a furrow in the field.
CONCLUSION:

STATES OF POSSESSION AND THE SOVEREIGN GIFT

In Edgar Allen Poe’s poem *The Raven*, the narrator confronts an unlikely figuration of negativity in the form of a black crow that files into his room on a cold winter night.¹⁹ Poe opens the front door to glimpse where the apparition has come from, but in an instant engulfed in a consuming terror he retreats. He shuts the door on the darkness. Instead he turns to the arrangement of the room. He turns to the order of things in the room and the spaces, sounds and signs on which this emissary from the dark alights: the rustling of the curtain, the line of the window-sill, the deepening pool of lamp-light on the velvet of the cushion, on the mantle-piece, on the back of his sofa. The raven never leaves. It is something like Gory’s guest who came to dinner and stayed: its odd shape found now in the soup tureen, now in the hall. Death is not a marginal theme in Gorey’s macabre and delightful imagination.

In this dissertation I have considered the order of things, the arrangement of the room in which the figure of suicide emerges, but I have stayed away from peering too closely into the darkness itself. As much as this is purportedly a dissertation about suicide, suicide could be as seen the absolute negative limit of ethnography since one ostensibly takes as one’s task the study of informants one can never reach. In a sense this is the field’s first and last protection: since it is impossible to study suicide one studies instead the world which someone departs. As I have tried to explain through the dissertation, it is because analysis till now has attempted to study something that

¹⁹ In her haunting ethnography of suicide in native communities in the Canadian North, *Life Beside Itself*, Lisa Stevenson begins her book with the image of a raven which a young boy takes as the return of his best friend. In his response to Stevenson’s discussion of his own book on starvation deaths amongst the Sahariya tribe in Rajasthan, *Poverty and The Quest of Life* that appeared on somatosphere, Bhrigupati Singh makes the same gesture I am making here: he too turns to Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven* and notes that Poe closes the door on the darkness, perhaps because he is unable to look at it. Both these texts can be read here: http://somatosphere.net/2015/03/book-forum-bhrigupati-singhs-poverty-and-the-quest-for-life.html. Ravens and crows are important birds in Indic folklore and ritual cosmologies: in upper-caste Maharashtrain funerary rites, the period of mourning concludes with a ball of dough offered to a crow which, as a materialization of the spirit of the cremated dead, is invited to eat a final offering before it departs this world.
cannot be studied, that life such as it is in today’s Vidarbha does not figure in the accounts. The question remains then of death, more specifically those who have died. Where have they gone?

To argue from counterfactuals is in a sense bad ethnographic practice. After all I cannot proceed from what things are not, only from what they are, however it can sometimes provide a direction for future exploration. So as a concluding set of thoughts I do not adduce what I am about to say next as an ethnographic argument. I offer it only as my own curiosity. One of things that struck me in Vidarbha for a space so stalked and imbued with death, was the absence of certain ghosts. There seemed to be very few ghosts of the suicide-dead present here, or at least no seemed to mention such entities in the course of ordinary conversations. There were, however, a very large number of dead persons, and other ghosts including of those dead from other causes. And the missing ghosts were of persons who had died in a particularly problematic way for a certain cosmology of death in this world. There is a special pind-daan (the sacrifice of the body, i.e. the funerary cremation of Hindus) as a ritual substitute cremation conducted in the great Shiva temple of Trimbakeshwar in the town of Trimbak (Nashik: Maharashtra) for suicide-deaths, classed as a particularly bad death for Hindus. The rite in which a dough and straw effigy is ritually cremated in place of the suicide body that does not receive rites, alongside the offering of idols in specific weights of silver, aims at expiating the sin of suicide from the kin of the suicide since not conducting proper rites is not just disastrous for the dead, but also burdensome on the living. However the ritual is extremely expensive and I do not know how many families, if any, from Vidarbha go to conduct this rite. Alongside however it is also the case that recently Marathi newspapers report Dhindis (processions) of suicide-prevention groups, composed of social workers and the surviving children and wives of farmers, may be seen alongside groups of devotees at the annual pilgrimages to Trimbakeshwar and Pandharapur. I never attended the funeral of a person who had killed themselves in my two years in Vidarbha, and I did not specifically ask what rites had or had not been
conducted for the dead in this first phase of fieldwork. I did notice however that no one spoke of the suicide-dead’s return. If one wished to take this question as a starting point—where have the dead gone and how and where may one sense their returns—what kind of ‘field-sites’ might yield to such ethnographic attention? In Vidarbha, I want to suggest, the practices and states of possession and the hospitals wards of the psychiatric unit might be two such sites for future ethnographic work, again specifically to do with Vidarbha’s unique socio-political history and current reality.

To turn first to possession: since I am interested here in visitations of non-corporeal social beings, there is a whole class of entities, ghosts, spirits, demons etc., that have historically populated Vidarbha for which there are various kinds of ritual specialists. The Mahanubhav sect were and are possession specialists and still perform this function at Mahanubhav temples. The graves, *mazhars* and *dargabs* of Sufi *pirs* are another important site of ritual exorcisms. Vidarbha is a possession-laden landscape. There are many different kinds of forces operating in the social field, that language, rite and cultural practice mediate, and re-present, through the institution of possession and the gone return also through these channels in myriad ways.

To clarify the relation between possession as a site of future study for the non-return of suicide-deaths, I will here adduce some raw ethnographic data without explication since at this stage I can only gesture to directions, much less arguments. In my two-years of fieldwork I sensed that not only is possession as a form extremely mobile in Vidarbha, but far from being an anachronistic form it appears as a live index, a sign, a ‘current’ as it popularly called locally, of many different kinds of current social formations, extant and anachronistic forms of political and/or religious authority (*baals* at *dargabs* and the Moharram processions), new forms of social mobility (the cult of Viktu Baba a Dalit, Mahar and Ambedkarite Saint), change in caste status (the inclusion of new social groups in the Moharram *jaloos*, tribal cultivators going into *baal* for pastoral cultivator deities), religious affiliation; as well as a personal and public expressive form for personal traumas and
ailments, familial griefs, illnesses and spiritual and mental burdens. Possession as a state and an institution mediates these realms—that of the personal, intimate and familial, and the socio-political/historical, in that the figures one appeals to intervene in states of personal agony are, like in many other places in the world, often forms of anachronistic social and political authority (spirits of Rajput chieftains, the Shia martyrs of Karbala, a fearsome ancestor etc.). However this link between possession as an index of emergent, rather than simply as a figure of old/historical, politico-social power and personal healing is reflected in the emergence of new cults which focus the vocabularies and energies of possession onto unlikely and non-traditional figures such as Baba Sahib Ambedkar.

To one example of what I mean by this: In the early few months of my stay in Vidarbha, I happened upon the shrine of a contemporary saint called Viktu Baba, in Hinganghat, Wardha, also known as Bedi Baba – The Chained/Bonded Saint. His samadhi sthal (the spot where he was buried upright) and shrine is located in Takalghat village near Nagpur. He took samadhi (a willed departure from life), and his charisma derives from the fact that he spent almost 55 years of his life with his wrists bound to his ankles. The shrine itself is constructed along the model of a contemporary Buddhist stupa. Along with his idol, there is also an idol of the Gautama Buddha and Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Besides his shrine, the shrines of his mother Kawda Mata and the saint who predicted his birth, Kishandas Baba, are also worshipped. The other two are a few kilometers distance from each other. The shrine is known as a site of healing and wish-fulfillment. The healing here occurs primarily through the practice of bażiri and baal, i.e. possession in which women go into states of extreme screaming possession to rid themselves of whatever is inside of them that they wish to expel. What is interesting is that in these states of baal, the screamers draw explicit connections in their salaam (salutation) to Viktu Baba to the dargabs and graves of other regionally prominent shrines of Muslim, Sufi, Hindu and Buddhist saints, where also bażiris are held, such as that of Shirdi Sai Baba, Tajuddin Baba, Gajanand Baba, Gadge Baba, Sati Mata etc. These shrines are also the sites of
the baaks during the Moharram processions (jaloos), which in Vidarbha are attended primarily by non-Muslim dalit, tribal and lower-caste participants who also go to Devi temples and the shrines of other Babas and godmen. Thus the same sets of people, or closely connected people, may go into possession states and transmit it between groups for different reasons under the sign of different religious/spiritual and demonic traditions.

Let me give here a final anecdote for this suggestion that states of possession in Vidarbha should be thought in their own terms as an operative channel/route of social-meaning and practice with its own specific vocabulary that registers the times if not the history of the present world: one day when I was in the Sawangi psychiatry wards I was called in by the young intern on duty to meet the wife of a man who had been admitted in dermatology. The doctors in dermatology wished to get him off their hands since it was not for his rash that they had come and his wife had come to psychiatry to ask that her husband be referred to us. The psychiatrist had called me in to meet her because of what he was doing: namely dancing on the bed in the ward and singing songs of Shiva. Since I was an anthropologist the psychiatrist thought my discipline might have better ideas than his. So I spoke to his wife. At this time my ability to parse interior Marathi dialects was quite poor. While I spoke with her for a good twenty minutes, there is much that I missed in that first encounter. To cut a long story short: they were from a village deep in the Bhandara forested district and cultivated rice on their land. They were adivasi, though which caste-tribe I could not make out. Her husband had gone mad on the day before Diwali. He had bent to touch his forehead to the ground before the family altar, and had suddenly lost his mind and gone running out of the house. The other villagers had caught him and brought him back. Now he was singing songs of Mahadev and acting crazy (pagal) so she had brought him here.

Now at this time being a novice I thought to be smart and ask her a question that, only in retrospect did I realize, did not in any way respond to what she was telling me and why she was here,
but had found an informant sitting in front of her and thought this too good a chance to pass up on a matter of her own interest since it so appealingly had arrived garbed in cultural form. So I asked, ‘How do you know he’s mad (pagal)? What if he’s possessed (angat aala)?’ Vehemently she denied the possibility. ‘No (nay). To pagal jhala (he’s gone/went mad). Mahadev does not come amongst us (in their community) in this form and the Devi when she does come, does not come on us (their family).’

The woman not only had an indigenous classificatory system for distinguishing between various states of ‘madness’, ‘possession’, which deities came to which groups in what form, but she had also distinguished something else in her husband, even when it came garbed (to the anthropologist) as cultural practice. She had not (only) taken him to a ritual healer. On further talking it turned out he had already spent two years in and out of hospitals. He had stolen from someone’s orchard. He was in trouble with the police. So even though he was singing songs of Mahadeva and dancing on a hospital bed and calling himself Shiva, she refused to accord this appearance any determinate reality, i.e. he was not possessed, as she told it there was no other entity she recognized staging its appearance through him. Whatever was inside her husband, she did not narrate it in terms of the cultural fragment the anthropologist had sought to extract.

Instead she had brought him singing and unruly, two and a half hours by bus, on a rural hinterland road from Bhandara to Wardha, to be healed by psychiatrists with the aid of modern medicine, drugs, in a modern hospital and told them and then me that he was pagal, a polyvalent term that could encompass states of biochemical mental imbalance, to divine and holy fools, to a state of possession in a powerful emotion or intoxication. I don’t know what in fact was the case since I never met the man nor did the head psychiatrists and there was no diagnosis, since after that first encounter with his wife there was no evaluation or transferal to the psychiatry department. For the reasons of inadequate and affordable hospital provision in rural India this couple could not be transferred from Dermatology to Psychiatry and they left. There were other moments in which
family members of suicide-deaths visited the hospital wards, and other moments also in which it was not clear what the person was possessed by mania or a god, such as the speech of a young man of 23, very ill and anxious from a poor rural family, who had elaborate fantasies of a being in the sky entering his body and the rays and beams that both controlled him and radiated from his arms dispensing death to the others he touched. This may sound something like Schreber’s mania, except what it means in the psyche and speech of a young village boy in Vidarbha is a very difficult question.

In a sense Vidarbha seems saturated not by religious authority but rather by possession itself. Such that while the contexts in which individuals go into states of possession may be and are diverse, possession—a specific state of being which is recognizable on its own terms through varied semiotic and significatory enunciatory and bodily forms it assumes in particular individuals or groups for specific purposes—this state itself is institutionalized not the context in which it appears. For many months I visited the dargah of the Hari Pir in Wardha and was present with many others who were also trying to understand what possessed or was making its way through them, some of whom then participated in the annual Moharram processions, and were also seeking treatment in the psychiatric ward of Sawangi Medical Hospital. It is for this reason that I believe that possession as a channel and the psychiatric ward as a threshold could be possible future locations at which to sense for visitations of the dead in Vidarbha.

Social anthropology in the wake of Heertz tells us that the dead do not, and cannot, just disappear. The social must needs find a way of converting the dead into ancestors by locating the dead in their own place, giving them their own kin and exchanges. When the dead cannot be given a place, they become the untimely dead and return in troubling ways in the minds, dreams and hauntings of the living. Over a quarter of a million people have chosen to take their own lives in Vidarbha in the space of 20 years. The archive holds their names and the walls of village homes hold
their images. Yet it is not clear where they have gone. In this dissertation I have attempted to
describe the world of the living that the dead depart. In the next iteration of life-death in Vidarbha I
hope to turn to a consideration of where the dead have gone, where they may now live.
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