NO PLACE LIKE HOME: HISTORY, POLITICS AND MOBILITY AMONG A PASTORAL NOMADIC COMMUNITY IN WESTERN INDIA

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Introduction

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted among Jatt pastoralists of Kachchh District in the western Indian state of Gujarat.[1] In the semi-arid conditions that prevail in Kachchh, the population is more pastoral than agricultural. Even apart from northern areas like the Banni grasslands in the Greater Rann of Kachchh, that are almost exclusively pastoral, the agrarian economy is an agro-pastoral one (Geevan et al. 2003).

The vast grasslands on the edge of the Greater Rann of Kachchh, known as Banni, are home to large numbers of Muslim pastoralist communities among whom the Jatts constitute possibly the largest group. Towards the end of the summer of 2002 I had just arrived in Kachchh for an extended period, about nine months after I had last been there for preliminary research. I went into Banni in search of some of the Jatts I had first met some months ago. What I saw instead was that village after village lay silent and empty; only a handful of people and some emaciated-looking goats remained in them. Where were all the animals, and the people, their vibrantly embroidered clothes and heavy jewellery a bright oasis in the midst of the drab desert surroundings, who had captured the imagination of numerous visitors to the area and whose photographs adorned many glossy picture-covered travel books? I soon discovered that most of these pastoral populations had migrated closer to the towns or large villages, where they had pitched camp adjacent to agricultural farms or *wādīs*, and had converted temporarily 'from nomads to dairymen' (Salzman 1988) as they supplied milk to the towns to earn a living; here also the animals had access to fodder and water, both entirely absent in Banni. This would appear to be a perfect illustration of the kinds of processes described by Salzman of pastoral nomadic groups in transition; access to markets and livelihood opportunities leading to a steadily advancing sedentarisation process. When I encountered these pastoral groups in their camps, I was struck by the temporary nature of this move. They were waiting – endlessly it seemed – for the rains to come. When it rained, they told me, they would return to their abode in the Rann, their *āzād mulk* (free or independent territory)[2], far away from the life of the townspeople, unencumbered, to live the life that they pleased. How long they might have to wait like this they could not say, other than

that *maut* (death) and *barsāt* (rain) were the two things that did not give much warning of their arrival.

This article asks, Why do these nomadic populations continue to adhere to a lifestyle that has clearly become economically and ecologically difficult to sustain? Why has their seasonal transformation from nomads into dairymen not led to the kind of permanent transformation described by Salzman in his study based in south Gujarat? Other regional pastoral communities like the Rabaris continue to herd animals but often only as a supplement to other sources of income. Why do the Jatts of Banni continue to hold so tenaciously to the possibility of return to a land that is barren and dry most of the year and flooded over on the rare occasions it rains? It will be argued that nomadic populations should be situated not merely in regard to the ecological constraints that dictate lifestyle choices, even though those constraints are real ones. Instead, I hope to show that the continued back and forth movement of the Jatt pastoralists ought to be seen as an outcome of a network of choices that are political and ideological rather than purely ecological in nature.

My fieldwork was conducted in territory that forms the border with the province of Sindh in Pakistan, among pastoralists who are Muslims, living on the margins, both literally and figuratively, of a state that is increasingly identified with a right-wing Hindu nationalism. Earlier in the year, large parts of the state of Gujarat had witnessed massive, state-sponsored massacres against its minority Muslim population, creating a tense intercommunal situation (see Varadarajan ed. 2002). It will be demonstrated, through an analysis of oral historical accounts as well as textual sources, that although pastoral nomadism in this region once had an ecological and commercial rationale, continued adherence to it under conditions of extreme economic, ecological and political duress can only be understood with reference to larger political structures and ideologically conditioned worldviews.

The article is divided into four sections. Following the tenet that studies of nomadic and migrant populations should be located within the larger social universe in which they are embedded (Agrawal 2003; Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1980), the analysis will begin by situating the pastoral nomadic populations of this region within the larger landscape of movement and trade that has historically structured the socio-economic profile of Kachchh. The second section examines the location of Jatt pastoralists in the historical record. The third section analyses oral narratives to reconstruct the manner in which my informants viewed their movements prior to the partition of the subcontinent and how, in comparison with the present, that period emerges in their narratives as a time of perfect ecological and political nostalgia.[3] The final section discusses how contemporary migrations among the Jatts are considered compromised by political processes yet are also seen as absolutely mandatory from the perspective of Islamic ideological injunctions. This is expressed within the larger socio-political climate in Kachchh and Gujarat, as the migrating Jatts are now forced to move east into Gujarat rather than as formerly, west into Sindh.

Migration in Kachchh

Kachchh District is located in an arid ecological zone. The average annual rainfall is approximately 250 mm and very unevenly distributed throughout the year, most of the rainfall often occurring within less than ten days (Ferroukhi and Chokkakula 1996). Migration in search of livelihood has always been central to the Kachchhi way of life, facilitated both by the proximity of the sea and by the lack of opportunities that a robust agrarian system would have otherwise provided. Based on the earliest records available for Kachchh, the main sources of income seem to have come either from trade or livestock. Known for their maritime prowess, Kachchhis were intrepid seafarers and many fortunes were made from the seas. Port towns like Lakhpat, Jakhau, Mandvi and Mundra retain even today, albeit to differing degrees, reminders of an earlier prosperity. While studies have focused on the seafaring traditions of Kachchh that supported trade and migration (e.g. Simpson 2003), there is almost no contemporary scholarship that refers to the overland migration that occurred across the Rann into Sindh and thence to Central Asia and beyond. This movement for trade was often conducted by and under the auspices of the animal-rearing (*māldhārī*) groups who dominated the Rann territory. Once upon a time the eastern arm of the river Indus flowed along western Kachchh, providing a waterway to the Arabian Sea, as well as north into the Rann. The entire area of the Rann itself was once the sea and Kachchh was an island surrounded by water. Seismic changes converted this from primarily a water body to a desert-like formation which is the former sea bed, a fact borne out by the periodic discovery of sea-fossils (Mehta 1998). Then, traders came and went across these now desolate marshes. An area that was once at the centre of trading routes that connected the subcontinent to Central Asia is now a landlocked border area with no through traffic except under the guise of illegality. The Muslim *māldhārī* communities used to cross frequently, to sell the *ghī* (clarified butter) that formed the mainstay of their income. The Jatts are one of these itinerant *māldhārī* groups who live in the areas surrounding the Great Rann.

Pastoralists of the Great Rann

The Rann is low-lying at sea level, as it was formerly the bed of a branch of the Arabian Sea. During times of rainfall, this lowland gets marshy and then floods over, when it looks astonishingly like the body of water it once must have been. There are some raised islands on the Rann, where the topography makes habitation possible. These islands or *bets* have a limited amount of non-saline ground water and for centuries have served as grazing lands for pastoralist populations. Banni is the largest of all the *bets* in the Rann. Accounts recall the Banni to be a wonderfully fertile land as shown in this excerpt from a nineteenth century British travel account.

> There are several islands on the Runn[sic], and a bright oasis of grassy land, known by the unromantic name of the Bunni[sic]. Thither, in patriarchal style, the shepherds take their flocks, and lead a sunny pastoral life, although surrounded by a desert marsh. (Postans 2001 [1839]: 91)

It is striking that the condition of the pastoralists of Kachchh has always been considerably better than that of its cultivators. An account that uses an administrative report covering the period 1824–1828 states that when the rains came on time and the economy was good,

> [o]n the grazing lands to the north of Kutch, and on the Rann islands, large herds of cows, buffaloes, camels and flocks of sheep and goats were maintained. A strong and hardy population, neither growing nor eating grain, but living mostly on milk, exported enough butter and ghi to keep themselves in clothes, tobacco, opium and other necessities. ... between 120 and 160 pounds of butter were sent away every day from the Banni alone; while from Gadhada on Khadir island the annual exports amounted to 32,000 pounds. (Rushbrook Williams 1999 [1958]: 222)

Even in its prime, however, Banni, like Kachchh in general, has always been subject to the vagaries of the monsoon. Throughout the nineteenth century, annual administrative reports commented on the state of the rains during the year and its subsequent effect on the economy. Thus despite this last comment on the plentiful conditions during 1824–1828, in 1842 a letter from the then Political Agent to the Bombay Government requests a remission in the annual revenues due from Kachchh due to a poor rainy season and the effects this has had on the populations of Banni which 'usually feeding about one Lakh [a hundred thousand] of cattle, and supplying a large trade in ghee is entirely deserted by every thing but the camels and their attendants.'[4]

Migrant Populations, Trade and the State

Kachchh was a princely state within the British Indian Empire and not directly under Imperial rule. A series of British Political Agents negotiated between the Imperial Government and the indigenous ruler, the *Mahārāo,* under what came to be known as Treaty Relations, based on a succession of political treaties signed by representatives of the British Government and the Jadeja Rajput rulers of Kachchh in the early nineteenth century. The Banni grasslands had always been owned by the princely state, and the animal-rearing communities enjoyed customary rights over the products of the land (i.e. fodder for their animals), but these rights did not extend to the land itself. They were thus not allowed to build permanent houses on this common grazing land. During the *rājāshāhī* (rule of the kings), the *māldhārīs* recall that they were given open access to the pasture lands in Banni. They enjoyed unlimited grazing rights and they were not taxed for this

access. What they were taxed for, however, was the right to sell their milk products such as *ghī* when they came into towns like Bhuj, the state capital, or as they crossed the border into Sindh in the centuries prior to 1947. The existence of a cattle census indicates that they were taxed on their animals or the products thereof. This tax was known as *dān* and it is cited as the reason the Dānetā Jatts were so named.

The Dānetā Jatts – unlike another Jatt group – the Garāsiā – who took to other more sedentary occupations over time – are still the quintessential *māldhārīs* or animal rearers today. Prior to 1947, these *māldhārīs* of Banni were known for raising large animals – camel and cattle – and it was in recognition of Banni's status as the main milk producing area for Kachchh that its rulers issued orders prohibiting smaller animals like sheep and goats from grazing there. This was intended to preserve its natural resources. This restriction is long gone, the Jatts say ruefully, and now the scant resources of Banni are fair game to anyone. The measures taken by the princely state to preserve the integrity of the grasslands for larger, milk-producing animals should not of course be taken at face value, for control over natural resources has remained integral to the processes of state formation. Moreover, reserves and protected forests in princely states were especially popular for royal game and *shikār* (hunting) pastimes (Dharmakumarsinhji 1978; Mayaram 1997). However, there is an important sense in which the pre-independence state structure in Kachchh maintained its pastoral populations during times of drought and scarcity, something which is sorely compromised today. Documentary evidence reveals how during such years of scarcity it was an additional drain on state revenues to maintain the families of drought-related emigrants where:

> [d]epots if they may be so called are formed at Mandavee and Lukput [both points of departure from Kachchh] where until the return of their male relations the women and children remain fed and if necessary clothed by the Government while many others receive pecuniary assistance at their own villages.[5]

Revenue earned from the sale of *ghī* was the chief source of income for these pastoral populations. Milk and milk products were retained for personal use in small quantities while most of the milk was converted into *ghī* for sale. *Ghī* is widely associated with nomadic populations for it stores and carries well, unlike milk, which is perishable and can only become the main source of income when the animals and their tenders are within easy access of a market in which to sell it (Salzman 1988). There was a robust trade in *ghī* between Kachchh and Sindh. In 1827 James Burnes, the Residency doctor at Bhuj and elder brother of Alexander Burnes, then assistant to the Political Agent at Bhuj, was invited to the court of Sindh to cure the ailing Mir, the ruler of Sindh. This was the first ever officially sanctioned visit of a foreign agent into Sindh and Burnes' account of the trip became the basis of subsequent British interest in that region (Burnes 1974

[1829]). As Burnes made the journey from Bhuj, riding westward into Sindh with mounting excitement born of his 'feverish anxiety to cross the forbidden frontier, and particularly to view the classic river Indus' (Burnes 1974 [1829]: 11), he camped at Lakhpat, awaiting further instructions from the other side. When final permission to cross was granted, he made his way with his entourage across Lakhpat into Sindh's territories. As he crossed what remained of the eastern arm of the Indus following the earthquake of 1819 and landed on the other side of the stream, he noted about a hundred camels on the beach, which had come laden with ghee from Sinde[sic], together with several merchants who were planning to embark for Cutch' (Burnes 1974 [1829]: 31). Several miles further inland stood the customs gate where '[a] few Sindhian soldiers, not above eight or ten, whose only place of residence is an open wooden shed, and whose chief food is camel's milk, are stationed at Lah to collect a tax on the merchandize[sic] which passes'(Burnes 1974 [1829]: 32).

These merchants could be the *māldhārīs* of the Rann as *ghī* constituted one of the more valued products that was traded between Kachchh and Sindh, 'transported in large leathen[sic] bottles from one country to the other' (Postans 1973 [1843]: 96). For this purpose there were roads that cut across the Rann, providing the chief overland access between Sindh and Kachchh. There were three such routes, frequented by those who made it their business to cross back and forth. To cross the Rann was never an easy business. James Campbell, author of the 1880 edition of the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* informs us that

> [w]ithout a good guide the passage is at all times dangerous, travellers being sometimes lost even in the dry season. In the hot season, from the overpowering heat, and in the cold weather to avoid the blinding salt glare, the passage is generally made at night. The travellers, guided either by beacons or by the stars, generally spend from the evening to the morning in crossing. (Campbell 1880: 14)

More than a century later, it is still advisable to undertake the journey at night, if attempted at all, for quite apart from the weather conditions, the region is now heavily patrolled by the border units of the army and police, on both sides of the border.[6] Besides the trade in *ghī* other commodities also made their way back and forth in the overland trade between Kachchh and Sindh. Sindhi rice, coarse and inflected with red, was a particularly valued commodity in Kachchh (Rushbrook Williams 1999 [1958]: 223). *Kāfilās* (caravans) of camels laden with goods – rice, dates, silks and cloths – would cross the Rann during the trading season between mid-September and mid-June (Campbell 1880: 120). The safety of these caravans was no small matter and immunity from wayside looters was bought from the particular tribes of each area as the traders passed through (Postans 1973 [1843]: 351).

A Historical Perspective on the Jatts

The Jatts of Kachchh and Sindh are distributed across three subgroups – Dānetā? Fakīrānī and Garāsiā. A fourth group is found in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat and they are known as the Hālārī Jatts after a site in the region, Halar. Each of these subgroups is a discrete endogamous unit today. It has been suggested (Eaton 1984; Habib 1976; Singh 1988) that the Jatts were a single 'tribal' group that moved across a large geographical terrain and eventually picked up characteristics peculiar to the regions they began to frequent. Thus, some moved into the Punjab after the Arab conquest of Sindh (Habib 1976; Mayaram 1997) and went on to become agriculturalists. These became the Jāts who subsequently came to be regarded as almost synonymous with settled agriculture (Darling 1925). C. Singh analyses the role of 'tribal' and pastoralist populations such as the Jatts in the so-called 'agrarian system' of the Mughal Empire.[7] The sedentarising Mughal state eventually brought many pastoralists into the orbit of settled agrarian systems especially in Punjab. It would appear then that while the Jatts who moved up into Punjab and its surrounding areas and took up an agrarian lifestyle, those in Sindh and Kachchh retained a largely pastoral or agro-pastoral character. Here, they may have entered into a 'pastoral–sedentary exchange' (Singh 1988: 334) with surrounding settled economies. Their trade in *ghī* formed a part of the economies of exchange that such pastoral populations entered into with their neighbours. Additionally, services such as labour on agricultural land or for fighting in armies might also have been provided by these populations in exchange for agricultural and tertiary products (Singh 1988).

Jatt oral tradition allies them very closely with kingship in Kachchh as well as with Islam. Richard Eaton tells us that they migrated into the plains of the Punjab from Sindh and gradually, over centuries, converted to Islam under the influence of a saint, Baba Farid, whose charisma had become institutionalised in his shrine located in Pakpattan, Punjab. In Eaton's analysis, the Jatts' transformation from lowly pastoral peoples to a powerful agriculturalist caste is paralleled in religious terms with their gradual absorption into the larger universe of Islam through the shrine and the belief system that surrounded it (Eaton 1984). The historian Irfan Habib has closely tracked available historical evidence on the Jatts (Habib 1976). First mentioned by the Chinese traveller Hsuen Tsang in the seventh century, they next appear more definitively in the *Chachnāmā* the history of pre-Arab Sindh. In this eighth-century text, Habib tells us that,

> [t]hey are said to have lived on the bank of the Indus, which divided them into western and eastern Jatts ... they are designated *dashtī* i.e. belonging to the steppes or wastes. There were no small or great among them ... Besides pastoralism, the only other occupations they pursued were those of soldiers and boatmen. (Habib 1976: 94)

In the next century we hear that they had been summoned by an Arab governor of Sindh to pay the *jiziyā* tax that was obligatory payment for non-Muslims (Habib

1976: 95). R.F. Burton also records that the 'Sindhi and Jat tribes' were subject to the payment of this tax (Burton 1973 [1851]: 47). Clearly at this point the Jatts were not yet considered to be Muslims, which brings us back to Eaton's point above. Scattered though they are, most of the available writings on the Jatts focus on their migration away from Sindh into Punjab and then delve into their socio-economic life in Punjab. Even the rich historical detail that is given about them in the work of Habib is rendered as a contribution to a history of Punjab where they were co-opted by the expanding Mughal state. The following paragraph from Habib is representative:

> The four centuries between the eleventh and the sixteenth not only saw a great expansion of the Jatt population; these also apparently witnessed a great transformation in their economic basis, there being a remarkable conversion from pastoralism to agriculture. In Sindh, where the Jatts first appear in historical record, their name is now borne only by a small caste of camel-breeders – 77,920 in all by the 1901 census – clearly mere survivals of what was once a large pastoral population. But in the Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, the name Jatt or Jat is borne by the most vigorous peasant castes. (Habib 1976: 96)

Having entered the historical record as pre-Islamic pastoralists in Sindh, as soon as large sections of the Jatts take up sedentary lifestyles, they also conveniently exit the historical record as pastoralists, re-entering it as sturdy agriculturalists of Punjab (Datta 1999; Gupta 1997). This is representative of the larger bias in scholarship that conforms to the sedentarising vision of the state system. Mobile and pastoral populations are ignored in favour of those peasant-based societies that are seen as constituting the state's 'real' politico-economic base. C. Singh draws attention to this bias when he exposes the historical gloss on the Mughal Empire as having an 'agrarian system', quite eclipsing the significant tribal and pastoral populations that formed an equally significant part of the socio-economic system (Singh 1988).[8]

In contrast to their elusive presence in documented history, the Jatts I spoke with had a firm and, to their minds, indubitable theory about their *itihās* (history). Their accounts never failed to locate their 'origins' at Halab, in modern Syria,[9] from where they came to Sindh as the 'warriors of Islam' in the campaign that finally brought Islam to Sindh in the eighth century A.D. These accounts seek to align the Jatts with Islam from the very beginning of their association with this region rather than as local converts.

In gathering oral histories from the Jatts I was concerned less with the truth value of what 'really' happened as much as what might make people recall what they do (see Amin 1995). Two tropes – a primordial relationship with Islam and a historically close relationship with the ruling élite – recur as dominant motifs throughout their historical recollections. These themes need to be seen in light of history being an instance of 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991) where the present, through which the past is recalled, has a crucial bearing on what is

remembered in the way it is (Trouillot 1995; Duara 1996). The golden age that the Jatts recall fondly, evoke pasts merged closely with the rulers, and times of ecological plenty. In the past, they recall that they were always guaranteed enough fodder by the state. This contrasts sharply with the way they present their status in the present. Today, the Jatts are doubly stigmatised and suspect in the eyes of the state; first as Muslims, and second as residents of an area in close proximity with the Pakistani border.[10] In both senses they are regarded as potential threats to the integrity of the Indian nation imagined in Gujarat as *Hindu Rāshtra* (Hindu nation).[11]

The following will focus on one of the Jatt sub-groups, the Dānetā, who still live as migratory pastoralists. The Dānetā Jatts live in small hamlets or *wāndhs*[12] averaging about ten to fifteen agnatically related families each, scattered across the Rann on both sides of the border. Due to geopolitical contingencies, I was not able to gather any ethnographic materials from Sindh in Pakistan. My account is based on intensive fieldwork in Kachchh, but I was able to travel vicariously through my interlocutor's narratives and stories of the 'other side'. For in many ways their movements were not as constrained as mine and they brought me rich and varied ways of thinking about the place that was as much a part of their past as it continued to structure their present. As a visible researcher from elsewhere, in villages close to an international boundary, I did not have the fluidity of movement that my informants had negotiated for themselves, either by circumventing bureaucratic barriers altogether or by actively engaging with them in a furtive yet complex network of arrangements that allowed them to play with space and mobility in ways that I could not. This is of course the inversion of the classic anthropological position where the ethnographer is assumed to be mobile and her informants fixed in time and space.[13]

Ecology, Movement and the Idea of Home

Today the Banni is arid and dry, the ground hard as the earth cracks under the relentless rays of the sun. The soil, which is marshy when wet, cakes and dries into a hard-baked, almost clay-like surface when dried out. Because of the strategic significance of this area, the Indian army maintains a few good metalled roads that serve as arterial connections between Bhuj and certain border outposts in the Rann. The vegetation consists primarily of cacti and the acacia, *Prosopis juliflora,* locally called *gāndā bāwal. Gānda bāwal,* meaning the wild or 'mad' *bāwal* (Mehta 1998), contrasts with the local *desī bāwal* and is an exogenous mesquite introduced by the regional Forest Department to artificially increase green cover in Banni with disastrous effects on the indigenous ecosystem.

Settlements in Banni are not 'villages' in the classical sense of the term that conjures up images of sedentary, agricultural life. Instead what exist are small clusters of huts often two or more kilometres apart from each other. Styles of

house construction accurately mirror the degree of mobility among these pastoral and formerly pastoral groups. While other animal-rearing *māldhārī* groups like the Mutuwa, Hale Potra and Raise Potra, and the *ādīvāsī*[14] groups such as the Vada Kolis, have round mud structures called *būngās,* the Jatts' traditional house style is the *pakho* (pl. *pakhā*), a more temporary hut, built of reed and branches from the *gāndā bāwal* bushes.[15] These small huts are easily collapsible should the residents choose to move elsewhere. Traditionally the Jatts have been the most mobile of all the pastoral groups in the region and their houses reflect this mobility.

Mobility of *māldhārī* groups with their animals does not preclude the idea of a permanent or semipermanent settlement.[16] The *wāndh* is where a certain number of agnatically related families will set up home, putting up their *pakhā*, and if the land will permit attempt some cultivation, although this is extremely rare. Men and women wander with their animals and they may be gone for months or even a couple of years at a time (Westphal-Hellbusch 1975: 129). In the meantime, a small number of families are left behind in the *wāndh*, keeping with them only a few small animals for their own immediate household requirements. When the dry season finally gives way to a monsoon, the entourage of migrants returns with healthy animals, goods they acquired during their travels and stories of their adventures. Now these *māldhārī* families can settle back into their *wāndhs*, the families reunited, assured of a good life for the next few months at least, during which the grasses will renew themselves sufficiently. This is the time of leisure, for singing of songs and conducting of marriages within the community. Wealth is accumulated, as the animals will breed and grow healthy and strong. With enough buffaloes bred during this time, they are able to amass a resource that can be sold in later times when cash is scarce.

This, at least, is the ideal, that was frequently recounted to me as the *māldhārīs* remembered times past. 'In the good old days, there was so much grass here,' women would tell me, their faces lighting up with the memory,

> So many varieties of grass, some of it shoulder-high, none of this dried up, mottled *gāndā bāwal* that our animals cannot eat. So much grass, that our land [*mulk*] always remained green. Our animals would give us eight kilograms of milk a day and now they give us five kilograms on a good day, but usually it is barely two kilograms.

A man in his late thirties or early forties remembered taking camels to graze as a young boy, letting them loose to eat while he sat down for a while to smoke a couple of *bīdīs* (tobacco rolled up in dried leaves). In no time the camels would be out of sight, lost behind the thick grass and vegetation. Before the Partition of 1947, the *māldhārīs* used to move with their animals into Sindh, a place that is nostalgically endowed by them with ecological plenty, blessed by the abundant waters of the river Indus. Today their faces are lined and weather-beaten, etched with fatigue. The journey to Sindh is out of their reach, an international boundary separates them from the pasture lands that once served as their safety net during droughts.

The Māldhārī Ethic and Islam

The Jatts are Sunni Muslims and in recent years discourses of Islamic reform, such as the Ahl-e-Hadis and Tablighi Jama'at, have acquired a firm presence among them. A rationalised, purist religious ethic provides a highly valued link with global Islam and modernity to a people constantly struggling to define themselves positively against the stigmatised subject positions that they would otherwise be compelled to inhabit.[17] The debate generated by Islamic reform within the community of Islam more generally and the Dānetā Jatts specifically provides a critical insight into the *māldhārī* ethos and their relationship with their means of livelihood. The past is recalled as a time when the *Pīrs* (saints, usually from certain sacralised lineages such as Saiyyeds) commanded great respect and a huge following among the *māldhārīs*. A local *Pīr* family renowned for their following among *māldhārīs* in Banni is the *Sānkarwārā Pīr*. A branch of the family still live at the *dargāh* (shrine complex) in the heart of the town of Bhuj. It is badly damaged after the earthquake in 2001, but in its prime was easily one of the largest and most beautiful *dargāh* complexes in Kachchh. *Sānkar* means 'chain' in Kachchhi, and the *dargāh* space is still demarcated by an old rusty iron chain, barely visible now for the busy market that has sprung up around the shrine. The chain marked out the jurisdiction of the saint, so that anyone within its precincts could not be tried or caught by agents of the royal state of Kachchh even though the palace complex in Bhuj, the capital, was but a stone's throw away from the shrine. This is indicative of the power *Pīrs* could wield as alternative axes of authority in the region (see Ansari 1992; Lambrick 1972). Every year, on the occasion of *Nāg Panchamī* the monsoon festival for the Hindu serpent god, the royal procession would wind its way through the fortified town and always stop first to pay its respects to the *Pīr* and only then continue past the city gates to the hilltop temple. The wife of the current *Pīr* remembers travelling to Banni as a child:

> As a child I used to go to Banni often. In the old days all the *Pīrs* and *Saiyyeds*[18] used to get a lot of respect there. Every year, our *silsilā* [lineage of *Pīrs*; also chain of transmission of grace] would go, in the month of*Śrāvan*.[19] [...W]e would have to drive up to a point and travel into Banni by bullock cart. I still remember how lush Banni used to be, the grasses were green and there were so many animals. I recall the glitter of the shiny black buffaloes. And the *māldhārīs* all respected us so much, they would come out and greet us, a special hut would have been decorated, and they used to make us quilts. Now of course they sell them for money but back then they would inaugurate a new quilt by first having the *Pīr* sit on it. They would give us these quilts as gifts. They had all these animals, they were flush with milk, and they would set *dahī* [yogurt] in huge earthenware vats, and then make *chās* [buttermilk] in big pots. They would give us *ghī* and even animals as offerings. On the night of the eleventh of every month[20] they would not set the milk; they made no

> buttermilk or yoghurt on that day; all the milk would be consumed as milk and what was left over they would feed back to the animals. Now they have lost their *imān* [belief, faith]. They have lost everything.

In this narrative, the loss of an earlier way of life is traced back to the loss of faith and taking to a new Islamic consciousness that decrees saint worship as sacrilegious. The abandoning of a morally correct, religiously sanctioned way of life is identified as what leads to the loss of a formerly enjoyed state of plenty. It was often said by the opponents of Islamic purism that the Jatts were suffering the consequences of years of drought because of their loss of faith – 'If they mix water in the milk they sell, how can there be *barakat*?' *Barakat* signifies not just the charisma that inheres in people who belong to certain lineages. *Barakat* is also the ability to reproduce such charisma or force through the good intentions and morally correct practices of its guardian or owner. Thus a *Saiyyed* or *Pīr* family is the custodian of *barakat*, due to its blood ties with the Prophet's family, but *barakat* can also inhere in land for instance. In a parched, drought-prone area like Kachchh, water is revered, for it is life-giving. When a particular piece of land is described as possessing *barakat*, it refers both to its own good qualities such as fecundity and beauty and to the moral qualities of those who work the land, so that whatever is cultivated on it does well. Even though the discourse of Islamic reform eschews the belief that *barakat* can inhere in any thing or person other than the one god, Allah, the notion that land can possess charismatic qualities can possibly explain the attachment to the idea of a 'homeland' even though it is parched and drought-prone.

The Māldhārīs Today

During the year of my fieldwork most of the settlements in Banni were deserted; the few families that remained sought subsistence wages in the government-organised scarcity relief programmes. These involved a meagre fixed daily wage for manual work such as digging trenches in the sand, referred to simply as 'mud-work' (*mittī jo kam)* which is organised by the provincial government when they declare a 'drought year'. *Māldhārīs* themselves see this as a political conspiracy against them. As Banni is peopled primarily by Muslims and as it is a border area it was hinted that there was a lack of 'political will' to develop Banni. An elderly Dānetā Jatt man, well respected within his community, claimed, 'these people [the government], they just want all our problems to multiply, they think that by withholding water and fodder from us, all the Muslims of this region will just die out by themselves, and that way the matter will be settled, their objective will have been achieved.' This feeling has been exacerbated in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots of 2002, directed against the Muslims.

Believed to be the largest grassland system in Asia at one point, the grass cover in Banni has deteriorated substantially in recent decades. It is estimated that while

the total potential for grass cover in Banni is about 1619 sq. km, the actual grass cover today amounts to only about 350 sq. km (Geevan et al. 2003). Much of this degradation has been wrought by the presence of the invasive species, *Prosopis juliflora* and its subsequent destruction of grasses native to the region.[21] Although this provides good fuel-wood, its pods are inedible for cows and goats. This has led over time to changes in herd compositions of Banni's pastoralists as they moved from herding cows to buffaloes, which are less badly affected by the mesquite (Mehta 1998). Today it is estimated that 80 percent of livestock herded in Banni is buffalo (Geevan et al. 2003). Buffalo herders continue to be exclusively dependent on livestock based income, while those who still own some cattle are often switching over to supplementary sources of income such as wage labour and illegal wood-charcoal making (Geevan et al. 2003). Yet, livestock-based income accounts for 70.3 percent of the revenue of Banni, where milk sales alone constitute 63.6 percent of the income (Geevan et al. 2003). The Jatts are exclusively buffalo herders. In 2002–03, their herd sizes were much diminished due to two consecutive monsoon failures. The contemporary livestock census recorded its highest figure in 1982 when it was estimated that Banni had about 49,400 animals, while the lowest figure was 25,000 in 1977. The figure for 1997 was 30,000 (Geevan et al. 2003).

Banni has never enjoyed any form of land ownership. Despite changes in residential pattern over the years, as some *māldhārīs* actually built cement structures, the issue of land ownership is likely to remain unresolved, as the Department of Forests and the Department of Revenue are both locked in a struggle over control of the area. At issue is the question of reservation of grassland/wildlife sanctuaries, for this region also was once home to large numbers of wild asses, flamingos and other species (Ali 1945). This fact, along with the nonagricultural nature of land use in Banni, means that none of the settlements in Banni classify as 'revenue villages'[22] which means that they are not assessed for revenue, remaining nonagricultural and thus unenumerated. But this also means that they forfeit any development plans that operate in other parts of the district where poverty levels become a qualification for government assistance.[23] After the earthquake of 2001, the selective invisibility of Muslim pastoralists was further heightened, as non-Muslim, nonpastoral groups like the *ādīvāsīs* of Banni began to receive especially large amounts of aid and new villages with concrete houses and temples were constructed for them by Hindu politico-cultural organisations such as the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP).[24]

In contrast with those situations, which describe active state interventions to sedentarise nomadic populations (Agrawal 1999), the case of the Jatts of Banni is one where the state, instead of offering positive inducements to sedentarise, is instead cultivating an invisibility among them. J. Scott has argued that the legibility of its subject populations is one of the preconditions for the modern state's exercise of power (Scott 1998). An illegible society is, Scott points out, 'a hindrance to any effective intervention by the state, whether the purpose of that

intervention is plunder or public welfare' (Scott 1998: 78). The case of the Banni *māldhārīs* shows us that this state project of creating a visible subject body also proceeds along with its inverse, as it also deliberately makes some of its subjects less visible to the state.

Why then, to return to my original question, do the Jatts wish to return to Banni? In the years preceding the subcontinent's partition, which drew a line straight across the *māldhārīs*' homeland or *mulk*, they used to have access to the vast grazing lands both of Kachchh as well as Sindh. It was common practice to move into Sindh, when the pastures in Kachchh suffered the results of drought and scarcity. With closer access to the waters of the Indus, especially after the river changed course in 1819, Sindh had better cultivation and grasses than Kachchh and it was fairly common for entire villages or bands of wandering *māldhārīs* to cross over into Sindh until the rains returned to Kachchh. Over half a century later, the *māldhārīs* still recite poetry modelled on the lines of the Sindhi *kāfi*[25] that speaks of how Partition took these migrants unawares. Having crossed into Sindh, hoping to return with the rains, they were trapped there, their possessions and belongings subsequently ransacked and auctioned by their neighbours and agents of the state. Scarcity-driven migration always occurred into Sindh more often than into Gujarat or Rajasthan, which form the other borders of Kachchh, a consequence of the better-irrigated land in Sindh. This seems as true for the immediate pre-Partition years as it was for the preceding century or more (Burnes 1974 [1829]: 75).

With access to Sindh cut off following Partition, if *māldhārīs* wish to move in search of water and fodder, they have to move around Kachchh or into Gujarat and neighbouring Rajasthan squarely within the ambit of legality and the Indian state. At the time that I began my fieldwork, Kachchh was already severely into a drought period that had lasted a couple of years. The previous year had brought precious little rainfall and, still reeling under the shock of the earthquake, most people saw this lack of rainfall as further proof of their cursed status. The monsoon season came and went in 2002 and Kachchh received no rainfall. The Banni, already dry and parched, became more and more difficult to live in for the *māldhārī* communities. Their animals were dying, they were steeped in poverty and debt, prices were rising and some said that in all their years alive they had never seen a situation like this.

In such a situation, people had to move with their animals to somewhere their animals would be able to survive and produce milk. Jatts had begun to come down from the Banni regions in the north of the district and could be seen in small groups in and around the main towns of Kachchh such as in Bhuj. Typically, they would arrive at a *wādī* a farm owned by a Hindu farming family, and offer their services in exchange for fodder for their animals. They would not be entirely unwelcome, for the presence of their animals would provide agricultural land with abundant sources of fertiliser.[26] Often specific relationships are formed between particular *māldhārī* families and the owners of particular *wādīs* that can last for

years at a time. A group of Jatts who had encamped at a *wādī* just outside the town of Mankuwa, west of Bhuj, had been there for a couple of years before they moved back with their animals to Banni in July 2003 after a good monsoon.

At the *wādī* the *māldhārīs'* day begins long before the crack of dawn. They rise and after a cup of tea men and women set to work milking the animals. The milk is collected and loaded onto trucks, and the men go off to sell it to wholesalers in town. As the town begins to rise in the morning, milkmen are already doing the rounds of neighbourhoods, whizzing by on their motorcycles or bicycles, milk and *ghī* containers strapped to the sides, as they follow their delivery route dispensing milk to their regular customers. Most of the milkmen are Muslim *māldhārīs*, but there are also some *rabaris*, Hindu pastoralists who have also begun to sell milk commercially. It is usually midday when the men return to their *wādī* if they have been doing the city rounds and even earlier if they just dropped off their milk at wholesalers. Then it is time to relax, as they sit around trading stories or even just curl up and sleep in their colourful handmade quilts. Living at the *wādī* brings them into closer contact with the market for milk, yet they yearn for their own *mulk* (homeland) in Banni.

Back in Banni, a few women and children would stay on, with one or two men to hold the fort as it were. These Jatt families were relatively lucky insofar as they were able to find a spot for themselves and their animals not too far from Banni, within Kachchh. Often they have to leave, wandering into mainland Gujarat in search of water and pasture for their animals. These migrations can last an entire year or perhaps more, for they return only when it rains. Rainfall is celebrated as a life-giving and -affirming source. Just before the next monsoon was expected, in 2003, I could hear the sense of anticipation among the Jatts. Living in the *wādīs*, they were looking forward to being able to go back to their own space. Isolated as it was, they felt at home there in a way that they were not able to in another place, even though their temporary shelter might have all the amenities of access to town life that they lacked in their own territory.

Relations between agriculturalists and pastoralists are not always as mutually satisfying as this anecdote shows. The presence of mobile groups in town is often viewed by townspeople with suspicion and dread and commonly used as an explanation for theft and crime. Additionally, most wealthy agriculturalists are Hindus, while the pastoralists of Banni are Muslim, creating a potentially tense situation. Despite this, agriculturalists do benefit from the animals that fertilise their lands. The Jatts still own large herds and are therefore valued for their animals. Sustaining this kind of pastoral-agricultural relationship is ambivalent for the pastoralists as well. They constantly invoke the times when they had enough of a surplus to be independent, while the contemporary political and ecological situation has forced them into an often uneasy symbiotic relationship. However, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in Kachchh, although strained, is not openly hostile in the manner of mainland Gujarat. As wandering Muslim

pastoralists, it is therefore better to remain in Kachchh rather than to wander into Gujarat, described by them as a zone of 'war'.

The Poetics and Politics of Movement

We have seen how movement among the Jatts of Kachchh has had a commercial and ecological rationale to it. It will now be demonstrated that underlying the contemporary desire to move there is also an ideological and political rationale. The Dānetā Jatts are looked down upon by both the other *māldhārī* groups of the region, as well as the sedentary Jatts, precisely because of their ceaseless movement. In a near-universal validation of the sedentary ideal, it is often said by the Jatts who have been settled for generations that the Dānetā Jatt lifestyle of wandering is the outcome of a curse. This is one of the ways in which the separation of the two groups is explained by them:

> We were one group once upon a time, but the Dānetā Jatts were cursed by Mai [ancestral figure worshipped by the Garasia Jatts]. Mai had a cow, which was eaten up by the Dānetā Jatts. When she asked where her cow had disappeared to, none of them owned up to having eaten it. This cow was named Tītar, which means partridge, and she began calling for it. As she called her cow's name, the twittering of a partridge began to come out from the stomachs of all the Dānetā Jatts present. At this, she realised that they had eaten her cow and had lied to her, so she cursed them saying, 'you will always wander from place to place, you will never establish a rooted home and you will always beg from others. If you fail to beg, the burden on your head [their possessions that they carry from place to place] will never lessen and will remain as it is.

For those whom the Jatt *māldhārīs* come into contact with, movement represents a lack of fixity and an element of danger embodied by something that has the power to transgress categories and boundaries (Douglas 1966). Among those who migrate, however, the cultural ideal of movement that nomadic life expresses is deeply valued and this is manifested in the ways in which they talk of migration. Migration is referred to as *hijrat*, which not only refers to the seasonal ecologically driven migration associated with pastoral groups but also signifies a larger moral injunction to Muslims to migrate, following the paradigmatic migration of the Prophet (Masud 1990). The idea of *hijrat*, in the Islamic worldview, has to do with the moral duty of all Muslims to migrate from a space described as *dār ul harb* (place of injustice, apostasy, non-Islam) and into a space conforming to the Islamic ideal of *dār ul Islam* (abode of Islam, perfection, justice).

The Jatt pastoralists made a clearcut distinction between mainland Gujarat as a space of conflict, religious violence and anti-Muslim policies and Banni which was relatively calm and above all, home. Thus, a move east into Gujarat was to be

avoided at all costs, and if necessitated due to the availability of water and fodder, a move there ought to be kept as temporary as possible. *Hijrat* is not just movement for the sake of economic or material gain. As mainland Gujarat occupies an ambiguous relationship to Islamic notions of legitimate *hukumat* (governance), migration towards it is to be avoided even if materially and ecologically it is more prosperous. Even if the policies of the regional government were designed so as to drive them away from their home, by withholding water and fodder, it is by perpetually returning that they can reclaim their agency. The senior Dānetā Jatt man who talked of the governments' 'conspiracy' to drive out the Muslims added vehemently, 'this is our *āzād* [independent] *mulk* [homeland], and there is no other like it.'

In Banni's Bagadia village, I heard a story from an elderly Jatt *māldhārī* of how many generations ago, their *Pīr,* the grandfather of the current one, would come riding his camel to their village and stay for days and months on end with them:

> One time we were faced by a drought and many of the villagers had left the village and migrated into Gujarat with their animals. Some people were left behind and they were faced with the prospect of their animals dying of starvation every day, and those that did not die this way were eaten up by wild animals. They were in a very wretched state and were contemplating what to do. And at that time, the Bawa Sahib [*Pīr*] told our ancestors that we should not leave our land; those who were leaving to go to Gujarat would eventually lose their cattle, while those who stayed here through difficult times would do well and their animals would grow strong and healthy. And then because of the prayers and blessings (*du'ā*) of the *Pīr*, a fence of spiders' webs came up overnight to protect the animals from the wild predators, and the rains came back and everyone was satisfied.

This narrative reflects the attachment to space and home within the context of a mobile lifestyle. Mobility does not preclude the sense of a permanent home, and as this story shows, the Jatts' valorisation of homeland relates to the ability to bear hardships as long as one remains in an ideologically and politically justifiable space. Rather than migrate into Gujarat where they might have had better economic prospects, it was better to stay where they could live a life according to a morally justifiable path. Although the story is supposed to have occurred many generations ago at a time when Sindh was a potential destination for scarcity-driven migration away from Kachchh, my interlocutor chose to talk about Gujarat instead. The decision to stay through difficult times on one's own land thus acquires a potent ideological charge not because of the ecological statement it is making, but for its political comment. For it is only in the context of the current socio-political environment that this statement has meaning. Bad luck would descend on those who chose to leave their own land to go to a space that was ecologically better off but politically, morally and ideologically unjust and therefore untenable.

Concluding Comments

The above ethnography is offered in order to make the point that the analysis of any nomadic community must be located in the larger administrative and state structures within which these populations negotiate their movements (see Rao 2003; Agrawal 1999; Ahmed 1983) rather than focusing on ecologically successful resource management alone. In his study of the Gomal nomads of northern Pakistan, Ahmed argues that they 'live in the administrative and social interstices of the larger states not by accident but by choice, not as victims of ecological conditions but as part of a political strategy which expresses explicitly a desire to live freely' (Ahmed 1983: 124). I have argued that mobility does not in and of itself endow its adherents with power. To argue that pastoral nomads are 'naturally' predisposed to move or to value a free and unfettered existence is to essentialise and reify those very values. Instead I hope my ethnographic study has adequately demonstrated first, that movement and attachment to a place called 'home' need not be antithetical in the lives of a pastoral nomadic population and second, that their larger ideological underpinnings of movement come not from any 'inherent' desire to live freely and resist sedentarisation, but are instead directly attendant on the processes of nation-building in which they are caught up. By casting the desire to move within the wider discursive universe of Islam, these subjects are able to reinsert themselves as actors in a project that might otherwise deride them as unworthy citizens. A narrow focus on natural resources alone obscures such socio-political and historical context and the longer history of negotiation with authority that such populations are involved in.

Notes

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2. *Mulk* also translates as 'nation' or 'homeland'.

3. See Gold and Gujar (2002), where nostalgia for the ecological plenty of the past is contrasted with political hardships of the time.
4. National Archives of India: Foreign Dept 1842; Political Consultation of 14 September 1842, No. 11.
5. ibid.
6. For an evocative, albeit brief and fictional, account of crossing the Rann, see Daruwalla (1979).
7. The practice of fixing groups of people as 'tribes' has a long colonial history in India, and often was tied up with the notion that mobility threatened civilised, sedentary existence. See, for example, Radhakrishna (2001); Singha (2000).
8. Elsewhere, Habib (1990) shows that mobile populations such as the Banjara carried out a significant share of trade in pre-colonial times, as they carried goods from place to place and regularly entered into relationships of exchange with settled agrarian communities.
9. The ancient name for Aleppo, a significant trading city of the Middle East.
10. Political rhetoric within India more generally, but specifically in the case of Gujarat, as witnessed in the regional election campaigns of 2002, associates Pakistan and Muslims as isomorphic.
11. Travelling through the state of Gujarat, it is not unusual to encounter painted signs on prominent public spaces of towns and villages that proclaim, '*Hindu Rāshtra's* 'x' or 'y' town welcomes you.'
12. *Wāndhs* are small hamlets, usually consisting of easily moveable and dismantle-able huts, which constitute the traditional residence pattern of these migrant Jatt groups. Although now occasional durable cement structures have also appeared, especially following an earthquake that devastated large parts of Kachchh, a *wāndh*, as opposed to a *gām* or village, is typically non-enumerated. *Wāndhs* usually do not find their way into census records due to an absence of legal ownership of land. This shall be discussed further.
13. This situation is eloquently described by Ghosh (1992) and elaborated upon in Clifford (1997).
14. Adīvāsī literally means 'original inhabitant'. They are classified as 'scheduled tribes' in official parlance.
15. In the past the jatts used the *desī* or indigenous *bāwal*. Today they make use of the *gāndā bāwal*.
16. For a discussion of permanence and the idea of 'home' among pastoral nomads, see Rao and Casimir (2003).
17. Meeker (1979: 10) describes Islamisation among the Bedouin of North Arabia as 'a moral response to the problem which arose from the circumstances of Near Eastern Pastoral nomadism … men everywhere shared the problems of a life experience that was touched by the threat of popular political anarchy'.
18. *Saiyyeds* are Muslims of the highest caste, for they trace their descent to the Prophet through his daughter Fatima. Many *Pīrs* are from *Saiyyed* families, although all *Saiyyeds* are not *Pīrs*. Additionally Helene Basu (1998) draws attention to an important distinction between *Saiyyed* and non-*Saiyyed* holy men. The Sidīs of Gujarat studied by her reserve the term *Pīr* only for those saints who are *Saiyyeds* by birth while the others are called *Murshīd* or *Fakīr*. For a similar discussion, also see Eaton (2000) and Roy (1983).
19. *Śrāvan* is a monsoon month (August–September). It is a busy month in the Hindu ritual calendar as it signifies a period of renewal following the hot and dry summer

months. In this case it would also signify the renewal of the ecosystem in Banni during and following the rains.

20. This practice refers to the eleventh of each month according to the Islamic calendar, known as *gyarvīn* which is reserved in many South Asian Islamic cultures as a day to commemorate the death of Shaikh Abdul Qadir Gilani, considered to be the patron saint of Sufi orders in the region. See e.g. Metcalf (1982) or Sanyal (1995). In Kachchh this was often observed by setting aside for the day that which was the source of one's livelihood in the expectation that it would increase and become more bountiful. *Māldhārīs* would thus refrain from transforming milk into butter, yoghurt or buttermilk, just as women and men from the Khatri community who are traditionally producers of tie-dyed fabrics would not touch the cloth that they would tie or dye on other days. With debates on Islamic reform, this is one practice that has become more controversial in recent years.
21. See Gold and Gujar (2002) and Robbins (1998) on the compulsions and consequences of introducing this species in indigenous ecosystems.
22. This is the basic unit in which the state government assesses the various villages of the District.
23. This refers to various poverty alleviation schemes that have been implemented by both the central and State governments, such as the *Indira Awaas Yojana*, or the *Sardar Awaas Yojana* where houses are built for those who qualify as being 'below the poverty line' (BPL)'.
24. The VHP or World Hindu Council is a member of the coalition of organisations (*Sangh Parivar*) that supports the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), the ruling political party in Gujarat.
25. The most famous regional exponent of this genre of poetry was Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit in Sindh (circa 1689–1752). His compositions are still current among the *māldhārīs* even as they create their own in addition. A much favoured way of passing the time as they wandered in groups with their animals, these oral narratives are a rich source of local history.
26. See Pocock (1972) for a similar description of *rabari* nomads being 'invited' by farming families to settle temporarily on their agricultural lands.

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