



In the Time of Trees and Sorrows

NATURE, POWER, AND MEMORY IN RAJASTHAN

Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar

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ANN GRODZINS GOLD AND BHOJU RAM GUJAR

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In memory of Sukh Devji Gujar,

Dayal Gujar, Kalyan Mali, Dhapu Mina,

Madhu Nath, Rajendra Joshi,

Milton B. Singer, and Helen Singer

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NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Our fieldwork was conducted in Sawar's Rajasthani vernacular (Mazier 1992), in standard Hindi, and quite often in an ad hoc combination of the two. In general, the people we met who knew any Hindi would use it in my company, and most people understood simple Hindi, but the majority of our interviewees spoke only Rajasthani. I have attempted to translate both languages as fully as possible. When Hindi and Rajasthani words appear in the text, I have transliterated them using a standard system and italicized them. Usually, terms used repeatedly are defined on first appearance only and are listed in the glossary. Normally, if a Rajasthani term or phrase has an obvious standard Hindi equivalent, either orthographic or grammatical, I give the Hindi rather than the Rajasthani variant.

Proper nouns are reproduced in roman type without diacritics, and sometimes appear as they are conventionally written, rather than according to exact transliteration. A prime example would be Sawar, which is correctly transliterated as *Sāvar*. Caste names, which often serve as surnames, are the only proper nouns included in the glossary.

P R E F A C E

“There Are No Princes Now”

Now his father is dead, the tigers are extinct, and the birds have all gone, except one, which never sings a note and, in the absence of trees, makes its nest in a secret place that has not been revealed. . . . There are no princes now. The government abolished them decades ago. The very idea of princes has become, in our modern country, a fiction, something from the time of feudalism, of fairy tale.—Salman Rushdie, “The Firebird’s Nest”

Salman Rushdie’s vivid fictional account of a decaying kingdom evokes a landscape and polity that could belong to the region where this book is set: Rajasthan in North India. His tale’s magical realism is infused with motifs of meshed ecological and social decay that resonate with the histories offered here. For tourists, whether of Euro-American or Asian origins, Rajasthan is packaged as a feudal fairy tale. Elsewhere of the kind sensuously evoked in Rushdie’s story, a place where it is possible to enter physically into realms of past royal grandeur. For it is mere decades, not centuries, since princes were abolished (and today many run hotels). Our book is in part about the idea of princes (and kings) as related by their former subjects; an idea that unfolded when we asked these farmers, herders, laborers, and artisans the reasons for the absence of trees. To them, that time is no fiction, but a true story.¹

Bhoju Ram Gujar and I coproduced this book, but our collaboration is not a simple coauthorship. We cannot write in a collective

voice because—although we work as a unit—we do not work as one. Therefore, in much of this book's text, as in this preface, I assume the first-person singular voice and speak of Bhoju as another. Often, though, I write "we" consciously to evoke our double presence. Do not be jarred by these pronominal shifts; they are deliberate. In chapter 2, "Voice," we each describe, with separate tongues, something of our emotional and interpersonal experiences as we brought this book into being. But here, speaking as an American anthropologist, I take stock of a personal trajectory, which chronologically precedes the collaborative endeavor.

In 1979, as the final hurdle for admission to doctoral candidacy at the University of Chicago, I defended a thesis proposal for research to be based in a yet undetermined locality in rural Rajasthan. I planned to live in a village, to go on a pilgrimage with villagers, and to ask them, on and off the road, why they were going where they were going. Through long-term participant observation and unstructured qualitative interviews, I proposed to understand values and meanings in popular Hinduism and in Rajasthani culture. In 1979 this seemed a reasonable and appropriate project for an anthropologist concerned with "indigenous perceptions." Rajasthan as historical entity was incidental to my interests.

At my proposal hearing, as I recall (noting that the theme of memory's selective and creative workings will remain central to this work), someone asked a question about the region's kings, or the princely past, or some such thing. After all the name Rajasthan means "land of kings." Under the British, this region was called Rajputana after the dominant community of Rajputs, a designation meaning literally the "sons of kings." Was it not therefore a place where I would have to reckon with kingship? I know I answered facilely, displaying my awareness of appropriate historical sources in the current literature but asserting that Rajasthan's royalty was of little concern to me. In my naïveté I actually meant that not just royalty but all of history and politics were equally irrelevant. I concluded, definitively (accidentally foreshadowing Rushdie), "Of course, today there are no kings." My advisor, Ralph Nicholas, muttered an audible warning: "I wouldn't be so sure of that if I were you."

For a long while I was able to ignore his prescient rejoinder. It was not a direct assault, and I sailed forward—not just through the hear-

ing but through about a decade of research, writing, and publishing—comfortably ignoring the past’s multiple powers as I forged partial understandings of cultural realities in a no longer hypothetical Rajasthan village: Ghatiyali, in Ajmer district. In spite of various indications to the contrary (indications that did occasionally impinge on my projects), I did not much concern myself until 1993 with either history or governance. Thus I had no cause to take account of flesh-and-blood kings, their descendants, or their material and intangible legacies.

That I failed to attend to the realities of a not so remote past of royal dominion may seem especially peculiar given that the village where I did all my ethnographic work was—like so many settlements in rural Rajasthan—dominated in terms of built landscape by its *garh*. The term *garh* translates as “fort” in Indian English, but the structure looks more like a well-fortified castle on a hill. In 1979 Ghatiyali’s fort was, as it remains today, a place of residence for members of one branch of the former royal family, along with their show horses. From the roof of Bhoju’s house in 1997 I often looked up to the fort’s ramparts, and sometimes contemplated these two handsome horses gazing out, imperially it seemed to me, over the village. In the past horses were high-maintenance symbols of power for Rajput rulers. Today, most local royal families still keep one or two in spite of straightened circumstances, and at a time when they have renounced or lost most trappings of their past dominion. These horses are no longer fed through the unremunerated sweat of the low born, yet their presence is not a neutral one. Perhaps the deepest shock Bhoju experienced during our interviews was when we were told that the very poor used to search through royal horse manure to remove the undigested grain, wash it, and grind it for their bread.

During my first period of fieldwork in 1979–81, I rarely took note of the fort’s looming structure or thought much about its residents, human or animal. The *thākur*, or village master, residing there, then and now, was Gana Raj Singh. He had a jeep, which did somewhat interest me initially because transportation was often a problem. However, it turned out he rarely gave anyone rides—let alone a no-count foreign woman. In an established tradition of the Sawar Court (as I was to learn years later), he maintained a scornful distance from foreign intruders. At one point in 1979, when I was still fully dis-



Ghatiالي fort viewed from Bhoju's roof.

oriented, Gana Raj Singh did invite me and Joseph Miller, another resident American research scholar, for dinner. I recall little of that occasion, except that I found the strained politeness and the strictly enforced *purdah* to be uncomfortably stifling. At the time this atmosphere seemed to me thoroughly disconnected from the rest of Ghatiالي's warm sociability, to which I was only beginning to adjust. Let me confess here that except for a brief visit to the courtyard when I was recording a village-wide women's ritual (Gold 1988:126) I never again set foot inside the boundaries of the fort. In the course of researching this book, I have spent considerable time in other such structures, especially in Sawar's fort where Gana Raj Singh's younger brother, Mani Raj Singh, resides.

Because I paid the fort and nobility so little attention, a few early signposts stand out now in my re-collected memories. I recount them here.

Although I developed no ties with the royal family, during most of my time in the village between 1979 and 1981 I lived in a household belonging to somewhat impoverished members of the Rajput caste.² Our neighborhood, I came eventually to learn, was called the *rāvaḷo*—meaning “the place where Rajputs dwell.” The *rāvaḷo* is usually in fair proximity to the fort, as indeed we were. Many of the household's men were truckdrivers or chauffeurs—and proud of it. From my host

family I gathered definite impressions of the high esteem in which the lineages of “sons of princes” held themselves vis-à-vis others. I can distinctly recall my landlady and mentor, Shobhag Kanvar, revealing hierarchy to me with her bluntly tactless didactic style. When she described her relationship with a visiting member of the Charan, or bardic, caste, she enunciated loudly in a simplified language for my benefit: “I am a Rajput, he is a Charan; I sit on a chair, he sits on the floor.”³ The Charan, Indar Dan, whom I had invited from another village to be my research assistant, was a kind of grassroots socialist poet. Understandably, he took an immediate and strong dislike to her.

On the other hand, what I saw around me in the proud homes of the *rāvaḷo* was, from my perspective, not much different in material terms from what I saw in the homes of farming and herding peoples—many of whom lived virtually down the block, as Bhoju did from Shobhag Kanvar. Their basic diet, their topics of conversation, and their religious practices were all pretty similar, although Rajputs sometimes had more elaborate ceremonies. The most distinctive feature I could see about Rajputs in those days was women’s adherence to purdah. This was a matter of pride to both genders. In-married women of all other *jātis*, even Brahmins, might go to the wells and work in the fields, but not the Rajput ladies—the *ṭhukarānīs* (literally “queens of the *ṭhākurs*”). I also observed how freely, but discreetly, Shobhag Kanvar rewrote purdah rules to suit her own needs and advantage.

I had been living in the Rajput neighborhood for many months before I learned the word *rāvaḷo* or understood its significance. The term first entered my consciousness only when I was engaged in translating bawdy songs performed for the festival of Sitala Mother’s worship, and sung collectively by intercaste groups of women who taunted one another about each *jāti*’s sexual traits. Rajput women worship first on the day of Sitala Mother, and are safely back in their courtyards well before sunrise, whereas the middle-caste groups may be singing their bawdy songs in the streets in the full light of day.

The only mention of Rajputs in these lyrics is indirect: “In the she-buffalo’s vagina you can fit the whole *rāvaḷo*.”⁴ When my helper explained this verse to me I was amused by the song’s image with its fanciful size distortions, but nonetheless I failed to grasp its subversive nature. I had zero comprehension then of the anger the farming

community harbored toward the rulers. Years later I was told that such lines were taunts to the ruling elite, and were risky to perform, even on carnivalesque occasions such as Sitala's worship.

Until 1993, most of what I knew about the royal house of Sawar, and royalty in general, was gained through conversations and interactions with a woman who had attached herself to me—Lila Damami, an “untouchable” drummer to royalty. Lila regaled me in 1980 with a lively description of one day when the grand ladies from the Sawar fort had decided to visit Puvali ka Devji—Ghatiyali's pilgrimage magnet (Gold 1988). Their visit required sustaining their seclusion from the world's eyes—that is, keeping purdah. On that day, Lila dramatically informed me, the shrine had been closed to all other pilgrims (thereby preventing devotees from viewing or praying to the Lord). I found this startling news, especially since Puvali was a place where I was used to seeing Rajputs and Brahmins rubbing elbows with farmers and herders—Minas, Gujars, and Malis—affliction being everywhere a great leveler of persons. Moreover, in the context of devotion, I was aware that purdah could often be circumvented; some Rajput women, normally subject to purdah, did come as pilgrims to Puvali—including my landlady, Shobhag Kanvar. But evidently, purdah constraints on the ladies from the fort were of a quite different order.⁵

Lila had a primary school education and a lively mind. She was often startlingly quick to evaluate intercultural matters. Perceiving my astonishment, she said to me, with a kind of sigh, “Oh Ainn Bai [my village name] in your country there are no kings-and-great-kings (*rājā-mahārājā log*).” “No there aren't, that's right,” I thoughtfully but emphatically agreed.

This bit of conversation echoed in my head. However, it prodded me then to think not about hierarchy in Rajasthan, but rather about my own heritage. It was as if for the first time since learning about the establishment of democracy in the American colonies in second-grade social studies I finally glimpsed what kind of transformation might actually have been implied. In 1980, maybe a little homesick, thinking about the way the great kings could co-opt a whole shrine plunged me into a moment of appreciation for the ideology, if not the actuality, of society in the United States. But also lingering in a corner of my brain was the nagging suspicion that something important

remained uninvestigated, at Puvali and elsewhere. Later, when I began to take a serious interest in power plays, and when the great kings' reign had become my research focus, I had reason to recall this neglected epiphany.

The poetics of kingship often caught my attention in minor ways, because it pervades Rajasthani culture and language. I was struck, for example, by the semantic merging of names and terms of address for "god," "ruler," "patron," and sometimes "husband." Most especially, viewing kings as householders par excellence, I found a compelling commentary on worldly religion in the oral epic tales of kings turned yogis (Gold 1989, 1994). Retrospectively, these tales reveal more than I once imagined about the time of kings.

Years after that conversation with Lila, while translating the story of King Bharthari that I recorded in Ghatiyali in 1987, I had particular trouble with a scene where a king confronts his people who have deserted his kingdom en masse, leaving it desolate. He pursues them to the border and demands to know their reasons for leaving. The dialogue of spokesman and ruler goes like this:

"Grain-giver, we have quit this city, and we ask your forgiveness."

"Why are you asking forgiveness? What is your trouble? Are my land taxes (*hāsil*) too big? . . . Are my guards or my messenger (*syāṇā bāmī*) afflicting you?"

"Grain-giver, you're a very good king. We're troubled neither by taxes, nor by your guards and messenger." (Gold 1992:86)

In 1987, after seven years of research in, and writing on, Rajasthan, I had never taken note of the several terms that made this passage opaque to me: terms for taxes, king's guards, and king's messenger. They were not recorded in my vocabulary cards, nor had they entered my understanding of village life.

Bhoju Ram then explained to me about the practice of placing exorbitant taxes on crop production and helped me to translate the terms for the pair of kings' agents: *syāṇā* as "guards" and *bāmī* as "messenger." This duo of royal agents was used synecdotally by the epic bard to evoke the panoply of the kings' men. I looked up both terms in several dictionaries, found the spelling variants, and wrote appropriate footnotes.⁶ When the floodgates of the past opened to us

in 1993 and 1997, the overwhelming burden of the old revenue assessment and collection system and the obnoxious behavior of the kings' agents echoed and resounded as key themes, as they will in later chapters of this book.

It was an episode concerning Lila's taking refuge in the fort to escape her angry estranged husband's attempt to drag her back to his parents' house that prodded me to write, in the introduction to my first book on Ghatiyali, "After I had been in Ghatiyali for some time I began to perceive that the stone Fort (*gaṛh*) on the central hill where the *thākur* and his family lived was neither so remote nor so powerless as I had at first thought it to be." But, I continue, "It is perhaps a two-minute descent from Ganaraj's stone ramparts to Ghatiyali's dusty lanes" (Gold 1988:28–29). In these lanes my attention remained and remains—among the ruled not the rulers. Even in 1997, I was not nearly as happy seated awkwardly on a chair in the prim parlor of the former chief minister's son, or in the current *tahsildār*'s office, as I was squatting by farmers' wells or cooking hearths, or rambling over scrubland with goatherds. This book too has its heart in the lower reaches. What has changed is that I am now acutely conscious of the looming stone fort.

Bhoju Ram, born in a small *kachchā* (adobe) house not far from the fort, experienced his own discoveries and realizations as we did research for this book. Whatever due respect he renders to the former rulers, whatever residual disdain he nurses for the former untouchables, his identity is firmly planted among the pressed-down people, whose sorrows and pleasures—largely through his ministrations—unfolded in our ears.

It was in 1979 through Bhoju's verbal skills that I first began to understand the meaning of village devotional songs (Gold 1988:xiv). With our focus on the political world we sometimes forgot to think about religion. During my last days in winter 1997, Bhoju and I decided to host a *jāgaraṇ*, or all-night hymn singing session of thanks and praise. I was very glad to be going home and my work had gone well, yet I was sad to leave the family whose love had so enveloped me. I sat blissfully listening to hymns to an indescribable lord, hymns I had struggled for months to translate in 1980 when I cared not a whit for history. Now I was newly moved by the fervor of the singers and, during interludes that punctuated the singing, the deep interest they

had in conversing about the soul and its possible destinies. How could I have forgotten this? I felt a jolt, a tectonic shift in my brain. My diary entry on the following day, my last in the village that winter, reads: “21 February 1997: Bhoju says I’m like a bird that wants to leave its eggs. . . . Raji wants to know if we have quilts in America. Typing all day with a dogged despair, wondering if any of this was worth it. . . . Flies swarming around my eyes nevertheless I type on. . . . *Jāgaraṇ* was uplifting truly for me. If I could only fuse what I understand of this deep sweet profound and real devotion with the cruelty of history then maybe I could write something whole and true.”

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From Bhoju

We are indebted to all the elders and youths, women and men, with whom we have talked, who gave us their priceless time and made us emotional partners in their joys and despairs. We have sympathy toward all who, even today when recollecting their past, feel sorrows and frustrations. Today our chief effort ought to be to ensure that every person become happy, free, and fearless, and our country unified and progressive.

I once again offer respectful salutations to all, and I wish that everyone's happiness increase.

From Ann

The fieldwork that enabled this project was supported in 1993 by a senior research Fulbright fellowship and in 1997 by a senior short-term fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies, which was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent government organization. I am doubly indebted to the endowment because I was fortunate to receive a University Teachers fellowship from the NEH in order to write this book. In 1997–98 Bhoju and I shared a major research grant from the Spencer Foundation for separate but related research that contributed significantly to the understandings put forward here. I thank the College of Arts and Sciences of Syracuse University for supporting a one-semester research

leave (and granting two additional semesters of leave from teaching duties). At Syracuse, my department chair James Wiggins and Richard Pilgrim, then associate dean, gave me various kinds of assistance in negotiating my leave, for which I am most grateful. More recently, as chair of the Religion Department, Dick arranged much-needed funding to support production of the maps and photographs in this volume.

My advisors in India in 1993 and 1997, respectively, were Professor T. N. Madan of the Institute for Economic Growth at Delhi University, and Dr. Rajendra Joshi of the Institute of Rajasthan Studies in Jaipur. In both situations I was greatly blessed by the interest and acumen of these senior scholars, whose lively minds and accumulated knowledge enriched my thought and work. Periodic conversations in New Delhi with Bina Agarwal and Ramachandra Guha were also extremely important to this project as it developed, as was friendship and intellectual exchange with Shail Mayaram of the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur. Thanks to these colleagues, Bhoju and I twice had the opportunity to give joint presentations of our work in progress to seminars—at IEG in Delhi in 1993 and at IDS in Jaipur in 1997—from which we gained invaluable critical feedback. My friendship with Aditi and Ajay Mehta grew along with this project and contributed to it. Aditi was district collector in Ajmer in 1993 and district magistrate in 1997; her hospitality included hot baths, toast served on the lawn, and far-ranging conversations concerning every aspect of our work. We also benefited greatly from Ajay’s insightful comments, pragmatic questions, and service perspective.

In Ghatiyali, honor and gratitude beyond words first go to Bhoju Ram’s immediate family, for whom I provided huge amounts of trouble. I must mention each of them by name: Sukh Devji and Raji, Bali, Kamalesh, Madhu, Chinu, Ghumar, Monu, and Sandip, who was born during my last visit to Rajasthan in July 1997. I also thank Ugma Nathji Natisar Nath and Shambhu Natisar Nath for invaluable assistance; Shivji Gujar for doing “the work of Eli”; and Lila and both Bhabhasas (Shobhag Kanvar and Motiya Kanvar), as ever.

Many persons have listened to, read, and commented on various parts of this volume, and it has been the substance of numerous lectures. I collectively and inadequately thank these patient and receptive audiences for so much helpful and critical oral commentary.

Graduate students in Susan Wadley's spring 2000 seminar on Anthropology of South Asia read the entire manuscript and their lively responses were helpful and heartening. Discussions with Shubhra Gururani, Smitu Kothari, Michael Lambek, and Pramod Parajuli contributed at various times to my thinking and writing.

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Saurabh Dube and Ishita Banerjee Dube each read in a preliminary draft what are now chapters 2 through 6 and gave me a wealth of advice, some of which I may have squandered but much of which significantly guided the penultimate round of revisions. Wonderfully helpful comments from Saurabh and Gloria, again, as well as Ramachandra Guha, Kirin Narayan, and an astute and demanding anonymous reviewer motivated further revisions, as have consultations with Ken Wissoker. Mark Hauser patiently, carefully, and cheerfully produced the two maps. Jonah Gold helped me to create a database of interviewees.

I thank my colleagues in the Department of Religion at Syracuse for sheltering me as a disciplinary “other” in their midst and giving me a congenial professional home. Phil Arnold's shared concern for religion and environment has particularly helped me to feel I belong. For another form of shelter in Syracuse, plus seven years of comfortable and valuable cross-disciplinary collegiality and limitless pots of coffee, I thank Kristen Schaffer deeply.

Betsy Clarke, Deborah Pratt, and Carol Williams have assisted me in innumerable ways since I arrived at the Hall of Languages in 1993. I owe them profound thanks for seven years, during which my requests were never once greeted with anything but good cheer and effi-

ciency—astonishing but utterly true! During my three semesters on leave, which were supported by multiple funding sources, Betsy managed the accounting complexities—a burden of which I was blissfully unaware until she presented me on my return with the grossly bulging paperwork files.

I must also thank the South Asia Consortium, a national resource center uniting Syracuse and Cornell, for support at both institutions. Center directors (including Susan Wadley at Syracuse and Mary Katzenstein, Shelley Feldman, and Chris Minkowski at Cornell) along with staff (including Jishnu Shankar at Syracuse and Anne Stengle and Durga Bor at Cornell) have assisted me over the years in countless small and large ways. Precious boons granted to me by our consortium include my cool basement space in the Einaudi Center for International Studies as well as Cornell library privileges; these have significantly sustained both my scholarship and sanity in a frazzled commuter's life. Norma Grant's hard work on the home front for over a decade has also meant the world to me.

Once again I praise my mother, Ruth Grodzins, for ongoing assistance of many kinds; now in her eighties she has lost neither her skilled editorial touch nor her legendary generosity of spirit. I am ever grateful to Bert and Sylvia Gold, my husband's parents, who always cheered me in both senses, and gave our family much-needed holiday escapes; Sylvia passed away between this work's two field stages, and we miss her. Kelly and Diana Grodzins, my *kākā* and *kāki*, continue to offer moral and financial succor where it is most desperately needed, and I affectionately thank them. I thank my big sister Mitchell Mariam (Helly) Grodzins, who has shared jokes, empathized with worries, and exemplified attitude at appropriate moments. For over twenty years now, my children Adam Rose, Jonah Gold, and Eli Gold at various ages suffered abandonment when I traveled in India without them, and numerous discomforts when I took them along. I am grateful for their forbearance and forgiveness, and I trust that they may have gained from anthropological parenting something more than a lifelong taste for mangos and *jalebis*.

Periodically in the hot and rainy seasons of 1993 I would hysterically declare my intention to cease this pointless research and return home. Each time, my infuriatingly calm husband, Daniel, was able to dissuade me from making rash moves; I would resign myself

and get back to work, promising with more cynicism than faith to thank him in “the book” for thus detaining me. So I do, as well as for much other sound advice and true support throughout our lengthening years.

To the many people of Savar Sattaisa who gave us their time and words I offer my profound gratitude and respect.

None of the institutions and persons named are responsible for the content of this book.

Together, Bhoju and Ann dedicate this volume to departed teachers in India and the United States, with appreciation for their enduring words and lives. First among these is Sukh Devji Gujar, Bhoju Ram’s father. Others whose words we were fortunate to record before they became peaceful include Dayal Gujar, Kalyan Mali, Dhapu Mina, and Madhu Nath. In academia we honor the memories of Rajendra Joshi, former head of the Institute of Rajasthan Studies, and of Milton B. Singer and Helen Singer, from whom Ann as a small child caught her first sense of a place called India, and years later received generous and wise mentoring.

1. THE PAST OF NATURE AND THE NATURE OF THE PAST

These are small voices which are drowned in the noise of statist commands. That is why we don't hear them. That is also why it is up to us to make that extra effort, develop the special skills and above all cultivate the disposition to hear these voices and interact with them. For they have many stories to tell—stories which for their complexity are unequaled by statist discourse and indeed opposed to its abstract and oversimplifying modes.—Ranjit Guha, “The Small Voice of History”

There is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful.—Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*

This book relates some complex stories of a small place: the twenty-seven-village former kingdom of Sawar (Savar Sattaissa) in the modern state of Rajasthan in India. Differing from most accounts of the past in Rajasthan, our book describes conditions and events from the viewpoints of subjects, not rulers. We attempt to portray a critical and pivotal era—the 1930s through the 1950s—in the translated words of largely nonliterate farmers, herders, leatherworkers, and others who recollect the “time of great kings” (*rājā-mahārājā kā jamānā*).¹ Although occasionally we consulted persons who once held power, and also visited archives, the bulk and heart of our book is conversations with those who formerly endured a double oppression under colonial and regional rulers. Through these conversations we present not only

appraisals of past autocracy but experiences of the sudden and radical transformation to democracy and modernity as these have been incorporated and interpreted “below” the realms of power.

Early in 2000, Bhoju Ram Gujar proposed seven possible titles for our coalescing manuscript. One possessed rhyme, rhythm, and economy in the original Hindī, but translates rather awkwardly as “The Rulers’ Story, the People’s Testimony” (*rāj kahānī prajā kī jābānī*). Although we ultimately chose a different phrase, I would like to stress here the importance of Bhoju’s deliberate equation in this formulation of “story” (*kahānī*) with “oral testimony” (*jābānī*).² We offer these stories, and they were offered to us, as a kind of testimony. By “story” we mean something that has been told, and that is worth retelling, with feeling. By “testimony” we mean something witnessed, stated, and affirmed to be true; another meaning given for *jābānī* is “affidavit.”³

Urvashi Butalia evokes a similar conjunction of subjective experience with witnessed truth when she argues for the worth of her own work with memories in her book of oral narratives about India’s partition. She considers any preconceived contrast between memory and historical fact as a misapprehension: “But to me, the way people choose to remember an event, a history, is at least as important as what one might call the ‘facts’ of that history, for after all, these latter are not self-evident givens; instead, they too are interpretations, as remembered or recorded by one individual or another” (2000:8). Each person’s story has intrinsic value—not just as a crude source to be refined into data, but in the telling. Like Butalia, we do not weigh speakers’ interpretations against supposed actuality. Rather, we layer multiple versions to achieve a textured, contoured narrative density.⁴

In the epigraph to this chapter, Ranajit Guha exhorts his fellow historians not just to exert “extra effort” in attending to small voices, but to realize the need to cultivate a “disposition” for such attentiveness. Anthropologists—however maligned they find themselves at present—might be permitted a fleeting satisfaction in this regard. Has not such attention been their bottom-line *métier* from the beginning?⁵

For me and Bhoju, listening has been a basic mode of operation, although our respective motivations and trajectories are disparate. For Bhoju these voices are after all from his own community; for me, as an ethnographer and a foreign guest, these voices are of people who

have not only taken pains to educate me more or less from scratch, but have made me feel at home among them. Certainly, Bhoju and I differ from Guha's presumed audience of Indian historians educated in a predominantly European disciplinary tradition. For better or worse, our capacity to hear small voices has been unimpaired by grand visions.⁶ By this I do not mean to imply that either of us came to this work without plenty of preconceptions, but rather that by virtue of stumbling unaware and unprepared into history we had no sense of what the stories we gathered should reveal by way of the larger narratives in which they are, of course, embedded and by which they are to a degree controlled.

Our book is a product not only of our isolated and unique collaboration (a Jewish female cultural anthropologist born in Chicago in 1946, and a Gujar Hindu male schoolteacher, now headmaster, born in Ghatiyali in 1956), but of twenty years of sea changes in anthropology and social science that have filtered into our aims, methods, and styles. Three such changes are perhaps most relevant to this work. First is the shift from univocal to dialogic or polyvocal narration; from monologic claims for ethnographic authority to practices of coproduction, whatever the (considerable) risks entailed.⁷ Our collaboratively engendered book gives pride of place to the words of elderly Sawar villagers who, as they sometimes put it, filled our tapes for us. These persons have lived through multiple, radical changes. Their memories include transformations from simultaneous subjection to both a well-known local despot and a remote colonial power, to participation as citizens of a modern, bureaucratic, and postcolonial democracy. Concurrently the Sawar elders have seen their landscape transformed from one rich in biodiversity of trees and wildlife to one where hillsides have been stripped of indigenous growth and are now dominated by a single alien species. Sawar residents experience and evaluate these and many other changes in varied, nuanced, and critical ways.

The second massive trend that influenced our work is the departure from assertions that each culture yields a coherent, systematic, elegantly chartable universe of ordered meanings and values. Some ethnographers now deny any such monolithic constructs, and replace them with sheer revelry in fraught negotiations, contested realities, and displays of cacophonous discourse.⁸ We have accordingly at-

tempted to record individual Sawar voices with particular care, to situate persons as social actors speaking from unique life histories, and in general to avoid dissolving disparate identities and positions and to present multiple and sometimes conflicting versions of the same tales.

Finally, and most directly connected with the content of this work, are several strands rebinding anthropology with history and reworking ethnohistory, oral history, and environmental history or landscape memory into the mainstreams of ethnographic knowledge.⁹ Originating separately from but eventually converging with and cross-fertilizing these efforts is the influential and vastly important work of the subaltern historians in the subcontinent.¹⁰ From their inspiration, accomplishments, and impact we gather confidence in the worth of our endeavors, while remaining well aware that our project is genealogically different from theirs.

I would argue that all the changes I have evoked here are healthy ones; they keep anthropology worth doing. I sometimes hear colleagues of my generation (trained in the 1970s) express nostalgic yearning for the era of certainties—whether the crisp visions of E. E. Evans-Pritchard or the calm detachment of Louis Dumont. For myself, I am grateful to be a seriously rattled, insecure ethnographer at the millennium rather than a complacent authority of fifty years past. Moreover, it is a pleasure to observe a slightly newer generation flourishing, many of whom themselves belong from birth to more than one world. Their theoretical edges are well-honed and multiple, and they are more at home camping on shifting sands.¹¹

Bhoju and I are in the middle. We are differently in the same middle—millennial anthropology; and we are similarly in middles that differ. That is, he in Ghatiyali and I in American academia are both between two generations, our seniors more sure of the terms on which life should be led; our juniors bred to swim in floods of change. Bhoju, too, sometimes sighs after consistency and laments the untamed multiforms of every story we hear. Yet ultimately he lives comfortably enough, as I too try to do, with double doses of multiple realities.

There might be a parallel here with the people of Sawar, who resoundingly prefer their unbalanced, slippery existence under the rule of votes (*voṭ kā rāj*)—despite its dismaying disorders and massive

disillusions—to the rule of great kings (*rājā-mahārājā kā rāj*) with its firm hand. They maintain their conviction that the present is happier in spite of the genuinely tragic losses of wooded terrain sheltering biodiversity and of community solidarity (losses far greater than any that social science may have suffered in losing its cherished paradigms). This preference for the present counters nostalgia with something quite other than contentment; it is an important theme in much that follows. In the village, too, a new generation is maturing. This book will not tell you much about them, but the future is theirs.¹²

Our framing question is straightforwardly descriptive: What was it like for poor farmers and herders and laborers during the time of kings (and empire)? All that we learned in this regard emerged from a prior inquiry: What happened to the trees? Our original impetus, then, was to learn the story of deforestation; in the process we found out a great deal about everything else, yet our expanded vision remains ecological in spirit. We seek to substantiate the answers to both questions through accounts of lived experiences located in space and time, often presented dialogically. Some of the qualities of these experiences—rendered as the exploitation and suffering of peasants in early-twentieth-century Rajputana—have been presumed to be generalized conditions for this region in many works of history. But actual recorded recollections are scarce, thin, and too often decontextualized.¹³

Our conviction is that the stories or testimonies gathered here have their most powerful impact as human expressions. To theorize them is not to enhance their worth, but only to locate them in fields of knowledge in order to aid readers in situating and understanding their meaning. Our book's value, then, lies not in making new arguments about human relationships with nature or the course of environmental history; about power witnessed from below; or about the realities of a remembered past. Our claims are considerably more modest: to contribute a few thoughts and a greater measure of grounded substance to three currents of academic discourse—nature, power, and memory. I would characterize these more expansively as scholarship concerned with envisioning nature and tracking environmental transformations, with subaltern consciousness and struggles, and with the relationship between individual recollections and historical truths.

Floating in the confluence of these streams, our work—to pun rather badly but meaningfully—remains an ethnographic craft. It is

fieldwork based, at heart an anthropological endeavor with all the baggage those terms have come to hold.¹⁴ In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will briefly position our voices and labors as we navigate these fluid thought worlds.

Why Say "Nature"?

What is now an oral ethnographic history, made up of fragmented chronicles of dramatic change, began as a timeless study of value. Its impetus reflected my 1970s training at the University of Chicago permeated with romanticized visions of divine conservation (Gold and Gujar 1995), cross-fertilized over five-odd years by Cornell University's more pragmatic agendas in development sociology, natural resources, and environmental engineering.¹⁵ I set out for Rajasthan in December 1992 to research, what I called "cultural constructions of the natural environment." However, my original conception had been to look at "religious constructions of nature." I ran an early version of a research proposal past an advanced graduate student of my acquaintance, and received from him many supportive comments, along with some polite but pointed advice: the project was great, but it would be preferable not to say "religion," and not to say "nature."¹⁶ Fine, I thought; there is always virtue in less-loaded language.

I leave unexamined here the facility with which I was able to substitute "culture" for "religion" and never look back. But I shall have to tangle with the terminological dilemma surrounding "nature" because, having once docilely replaced it with "environment," I eventually returned to it. When in our interviews old people sketched past landscapes before our minds' eyes, we were stunned by the contrast with a denuded present. To understand what happened to the trees in Sawar we had to understand a whole passage in history. For this reason my research proposal for 1997 was titled, as is this chapter, "The Past of Nature and the Nature of the Past." And nature—with all its attendant perplexities—remains central to this book. From semantic issues I shall then turn to the intersections of our work with recent rethinkings of South Asian environmental history; that is, to the past of nature in the subcontinent.

In two often-cited meditations on the meaning of the English word "nature," Raymond Williams has argued both that it is "perhaps the

most complex word in the language” (1976:184) and that as an idea it contains “an extraordinary amount of human history” (1980:67). Many other authors have explored the meanings of nature in Euro-American culture in far greater detail than did Williams, but none, to my mind, with greater economy or eloquence.¹⁷ To oversimplify radically the poetics, politics, and evolving historical meanings presented in multiple accounts, we may highlight two constructions that have dominated English speakers’ understandings of this noun.

In one construction, nature is and by definition must remain “out there.” It is separate from all that humans create and affect; it is, as Williams puts it, “all that was not man: all that was not touched by man, spoilt by man” (1980:77). The second view of nature, elaborated extensively in marxist thought but widely acknowledged, realizes that any pristine nature is only imaginary. Continuing to follow Williams’s capsule imagery: “We have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out” (1980:83). In other words, any nature that is possible for humans to know they have also produced, even as it has produced them. These two opposing but complementary views have generated many debates in environmentalist thought, and they hold serious consequences for environmental policy and the conflicted politics that often surround it. Both areas are, fortunately, well beyond our present scope.¹⁸

As Bell’s (1994) study of nature in rural England beautifully reveals, both of the views that Williams highlights coexist in commonsense, vernacular understandings—sometimes comfortably, sometimes uneasily. Every other year on the first day of my Syracuse University undergraduate course “Religions and the Natural Environment” I ask students to free-associate on the word “nature.” After five or six responses, I invariably have written on the blackboard that nature is other than and beyond humanity, pristine and unspoiled; and that nature is a resource for people, but is endangered by their folly. Now and then the occasional Wiccan, or Buddhist, or, memorably, a Californian “raised by hippies” will help me to turn a corner by suggesting that spiritual life is inherent in nature, rather than garnered from it.

For anthropologists and historians of religions seeking to understand (and teach) cosmologies other than those posed in the three familiar monotheisms, both Euro-American paradigms are prob-

lematic. Whether pristine or imbricated in human labor and art, nature as an English term has—at least since the seventeenth century—been largely devoid of consciousness and agency.¹⁹ Both of these concepts are regularly located either in humanity or in a nonimmanent creator. But there flourish many other religious worlds where elements of nature are more often animate—spirited, emotional, and willful.²⁰

A second problem for cross-cultural meanings follows closely on any view of nature as devoid of conscious agency. Deeply embedded in the English semantics of nature is a presumed dichotomy with culture, a dichotomy of skewed value, often gendered.²¹ Marilyn Strathern, among others, has argued that one of the many assumptions implicit in the nature/culture dichotomy is “the notion that the one domain is open to control or colonization by the other” (1980:181). And it is culture that western humans have traditionally viewed as the proper and inevitable colonizer.²² That is, nature is to be disciplined, productive, and ornamental. In spite of many critiques lodged against any notion that such dichotomous and hierarchical ideas about nature and culture have universal validity, these ideas inexplicably continue to haunt social science.²³

The Sanskrit term *prakṛiti*, often used as a translation of, and translated as, the English word “nature,” suggests some rather different formulations. *Prakṛiti* can refer to an active, infinitely multiple, female cosmic principle, and a manifestation of divine female power.²⁴ Thus, as ecofeminist pioneer Vandana Shiva proclaimed in the first of her many books, third-world women “have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakṛiti, the living force that supports life” (1988:xvii). Such a definition might immediately throw into question the dichotomous devaluation of nature, as opposed to culture, and open to colonization by it.

Shiva’s rhetoric has been roundly and repeatedly critiqued—perhaps most devastatingly by feminists rightly suspicious of the way ecofeminism essentializes “women” by equating them with nature, even when their intention is to valorize female power.²⁵ Nonetheless, Shiva calls attention to some very good reasons to beware (as my friend advised me) of loosely employing the term “nature” when talking about Rajasthani interactions with the earth, its atmosphere,

creatures, and products. Why then—when it is clearly inappropriate in multiple ways—would Bhoju and I evoke the idea of nature in our accounts of geophysical and social transformations in Rajasthan? I answer this in two explanatory steps dealing with alternatives and translations, followed by a sweeping statement.

Possible alternatives to the term “nature” might include “landscape,” “environment,” and “ecology.” Each word carries a semantic weight that is contextually helpful, and in fact I freely deploy all three throughout this work to convey particular messages. “Landscape” might be the safest word, because it has everything to do with viewpoint and representation, with “traditions of perception and perspective” (Appadurai 1991b:191).²⁶ Often enough (but not always), I can use “landscape” to talk about transformations in the environment as envisioned and interpreted by Sawar residents, without wishing to imply anything more far-reaching.

In earlier work I used “environment” specifically in order to avoid the cultural baggage of “nature”—it seemed to be a more neutral and prosaic way of saying almost the same thing. Several authors have argued convincingly, however, that “environment” holds specific meanings that “nature” does not. These meanings derive from its etymology as “surroundings.” What is surrounded? People. And “environment” is conceived as that which affords them uses (Ingold 1992).²⁷ In the chapters that follow, those instrumental meanings are often arguably just the sense we require: we are concerned with trees as fuel and fodder, with rain as making crops grow, with wild animals either as edible objects of desire or as agents of economic ruin. This is something flatter and more instrumental than the view of nature as inevitably mixed with human labor. Missing from “environment” and its implications is any larger understanding beyond the anthropocentric and the functionalist/materialist.

The term “ecology,” in direct contrast to “environment,” effectively decenters our understandings from human needs. More important, ecology suggests whole systems, fragile and multiply interdependent. For me the term implies a highly sensitized causal web. Sawar villagers gave me this weblike vision, although they had no single word for it. They also taught me its moral dimensions, and I have roughly translated my derivative understanding with the abstraction “moral ecology.”²⁸

In Sawar residents' interpretations, biophysical well-being or ill-being depends on soil, livestock, grain, and weather, but it is also in mutual formation with human temperaments and behaviors—whether generous or selfish. Interviews portray the tree-covered hills of the past as completely intermeshed with the bygone rule of kings. To evoke only a few of the factors at play: the past was a time of less dense population, less intensive land use, more cattle and milk, organic fertilizer, coarser but more nourishing and tasty grains, stronger digestions, greater compassion, more leisure to tell stories, and many fewer consumer goods to crave and to arouse envy.

Among other things, such a complex vision helps us to understand why ecological recovery may seem a remote prospect in Sawar villagers' views. The visible ruin of nature is tied not only to the equally visible and highly appreciated freedom from despotic government, but also to the invisible and highly deplored corrosion of ordinary human goodness. Some Indian scholars and activists argue persuasively that South Asian environmentalism differs from American movements in making social justice an absolute requirement in any plan for conservation or regeneration. Their positions take a stance that reveals in urban political terms some of the same moral discourse I heard in Sawar—insisting that the fate of the earth and the character of human society are inextricably interlocked.²⁹

Turning to issues of translation, we immediately acknowledge that in the interview texts that are this book's chief substance, readers will find scant talk of nature, landscape, environment, or ecology. Not one of these terms has a precise equivalent in the everyday local language of Sawar. Rather, they are all part of the academic prose with which we elaborate meanings.

While Shiva's vision of *prakṛiti* as a divine force manifest in nature may well convey something akin to Rajasthani understandings, in Sawar villages we encountered the word *prakṛiti* only in the Sanskritized language of the learned. Most others spoke of trees, or animals, or grass, or weather, but rarely required a concept embracing them all. If they wished to refer to all of "creation" or "nature writ large," Hindus as well as Muslims were more likely to use the Urdu/Perso-Arabic word *kudarat*.³⁰ Like *prakṛiti*, *kudarat* implies creative power. In Islam that power would be associated with male divinity understood as

singular, while *prakṛiti*, by contrast, would imply activity, proliferation, and plenitude—all expressions of the goddess who is herself multiform. In common, however, *kudarat* and *prakṛiti* imbue the natural world with value and meaning beyond human purpose or calculation—the main import with which they were charged. All told, with the exception of schoolteachers, neither term was spontaneously produced in more than half a dozen interviews.

Another word derived from Sanskrit, *paryāvaraṇ*, has begun to move into common speech largely due to government efforts to introduce “environment” as a subject in primary school curriculums. *Paryāvaraṇ*, like the English word “environment,” literally means “surroundings” and conveniently lacks the religious or philosophical implications of *prakṛiti* or *kudarat*. I found that by 1997 this word—traveling via teachers and schoolchildren—had gained some currency, but not among the elderly, who were our chief sources.

I retain the term “nature” in my interpretive writing not for accuracy but for ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty. I use it willfully, at the metalevel, to evoke something more richly meaningful and potentially confusing than landscape or environment or ecology in the minds of academic readers. With “nature” I call on that culturally posed, nonexistent abstraction of something out there that is beautiful, fearsome, and untouched by humans yet intrinsic to their beings and of great worth to them. I want to remind us of ongoing, accelerated histories of use, exploitation, degradation, and extinction that are transnational and transcultural. Above all I use “nature” as a word that will allow readers to connect the barren hills of Sawar with all other places on the earth where trees once grew.

If one significant aspect of Euro-America “nature” is its utterly separate existence, the work of environmental history, according to one of its better-known American practitioners, deals exclusively with the other vision—that is, “the role and place of nature in human life.” According to Donald Worster, the main task of environmental historians is to analyze “the various ways people have tried to make nature over into a system that produces resources for their consumption” (1990:1090). Most significantly for us, Worster goes on to observe that in the process of transforming the earth, “people have also restructured themselves and their social relations” (1090). Large and some-

times heated debates have swirled around how to interpret such environmental transformations and social restructurings in the South Asian subcontinent, focused on the impact of colonialism.

Indeed, Ramachandra Guha in his cogent update on these debates speaks of “The Great ‘Ecology and Colonialism’ Debate” (2000:215–20).³¹ At issue is whether or not colonial environmental interventions were a “watershed,” unleashing destruction unprecedented in India’s environmental saga, as Guha believes to be the case. Others, notably Richard Grove, have doubted this narrative’s total vision, without seeking to whitewash imperial impacts. Guha calls attention to a recent spate of monographs on India’s environmental history that have massively documented not only colonial policy but also how attempts to implement it met with varied local responses.³² These works provide strong evidence for what Ajay Skaria has called “the violence of colonial environmentalism” (1999:192).³³

Our own intentions and capacities are not to judge whether or not colonial legacies were purely exploitative and uniquely devastating. Chapter 3, which in part draws on archival investigations, discusses some of the policies established by the colonial power in Ajmer that would have had significant impact on Sawar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. And we shall sometimes point to some of the ways that some British ideas about environment, especially about forests, affected this single, small locality with its idiosyncratic history. However, in our interviews within Sawar’s villages, we heard little about the forestry agenda of the British Raj. This was in part doubtless a result of the Sawar Court’s largely successful strategy of keeping the English well beyond arm’s length. The marks of colonialism on Sawar’s environmental circumstances and policies will be readily apparent, but we treat them largely as context rather than subject.

We have learned much from some of those meticulously documented histories of environmental change that, as Guha points out, are the fruits of at least a decade of extraordinary interest in these issues. Political energies have infused scholarly labors in this field, under the merged pressures of increased awareness of environmental deterioration and dramatic conflicts over environmental management.³⁴ Although comparative analysis is not our aim, we draw occasionally from these works to contextualize Sawar’s stories more broadly. One important observation to emerge is that the ways that

elements of nature have been viewed and treated in different eras and regions are highly variable according to local political and ecological specificities.

Taken together, for example, monographs by Skaria and by Sumit Guha complicate previous understandings of South Asian environmental history. Drawing on oral narrative traditions of Dangis in western India, Skaria is able to track transformations in configured relationships among power, identity, gender, and what he calls “wildness” in the Dangis’ own historical understandings. Juxtaposing these to outsiders’ views, he achieves a multifaceted portrait of politicized environmental history. Skaria shows how Dangis identified wildness with power, although that power was ambivalently construed. He observes that their relationship with wildness as power changed with changing circumstances in surrounding political and social structures that in turn impacted the internal political dynamics of the Dangis. Thus Skaria offers us the “complexities of wildness, and the many sites at which it was produced” (1999:43).

Sumit Guha’s historical study of environment and ethnicity is based in western India as is Skaria’s, but it ranges more widely, both geographically and historically. Like Skaria, Guha is interested in, among other things, the relationship between kingship and ideas about forests and their inhabitants. In legendary accounts of regional history, he finds a clear message: “Pushing back the jungle and subduing jangli [indigenous forest peoples] were central elements in the kingly role” (1999:154). Forest-dwelling Dangis in Skaria’s study once thought their power continuous with untamed wildness; Guha shows us kings who located their royal identity in part in their capacity to tame a dangerously wild landscape and its inhabitants (which would include Dangis). Guha also notes an affinity between “dominant forest communities” and warrior/rulers that intersects with and corroborates those ideas of power and wildness that Skaria portrays.

From these two important studies we may gather that configurations of power, forest, and wildlife, and relations between forest and farming peoples, may vary widely within a single region according to internal situations and external pressures. Still greater are variations ensuing from varying climates and politics. Elsewhere on the subcontinent, royal identity has evidently involved fostering and protecting endangered wildness, rather than overcoming the double threat of

wild spaces and their human and animal inhabitants. In semiarid Rajasthan, this has often been the case. In several kingdoms, not all as small as Sawar, rulers may have hunted dangerous beasts, but they also guarded woods and wildlife with vigilance, as did Sawar's own fabled Vansh Pradip Singh, who reigned from 1914 to 1947.³⁵

When I began to write this book, I felt at first uneasy that a tension or confusion lay between our initial focus on deforestation and the broader historical processes we eventually took as our task to comprehend. But increasingly I have come to see the tale of Sawar's dwindling jungle as a tale of conjoined natural and social transformations.³⁶ Moreover, I am convinced this merging is less an accident of Bhoju's and my stumbling research path than a global actuality we inevitably came to realize (Gold 2001a). In Sawar, the time of nature's abundance was also the time of abundant sorrows endured under the rule of kings who protected the trees.

We hope to portray the ways that nature—as trees and grasses, as berries, wild pigs or rain—was experienced, produced, and internalized in the twenty-seven villages, not only as sustenance but as meaning, not only as goods but as identities and tales. Elements of the environment become emblems of satisfaction and deprivation, submission and confrontation. One person recalls blistering his feet in the dry riverbed on a frivolous errand for the king; another remembers the exquisite thrill and dire risk of poaching and consuming savory wild boar. Experiences of power impinged upon experiences of nature; the king's passion for trees made it harder to get firewood, but never impossible.

Voices from Under a Stone

As a schoolteacher and research assistant, Bhoju was fully aware that books on the Rajasthani past are filled with the deeds, words, and affairs of kings and armies. In 1993, as our history work first unfolded, he began to formulate a concept of largely unscribed pasts, of submerged voices and lives such as those of his neighbors, his relatives, and his own mother and father. He called these “voices from under a stone” (Gold with Gujar 1997). Although Bhoju had not encountered the writings of the subaltern school of historiography, his understanding expressed in this phrase is something close to subalternity. It

was not only that the words and views we taped were rarely heard beyond village courtyards or caste meeting spots, but that during the past era not just these elders' voices but their very beings had been suppressed. At the same time their capacity to speak was indisputable, and their lively tongues articulated not only what they had endured but how their spirits had not been crushed by it.³⁷ It was with an increasing sense of urgency that Bhoju worked with me to elicit and record these memories. Both of us were gripped not only by accounts of past suffering, but by lucid appraisals of power's insidious workings.

The subaltern studies editorial collective began publishing anthologies of historical essays in the early 1980s. Rapidly overflowing the outdated boundaries of area studies in unprecedented fashion, their contributions have had a profound impact on the disciplines of history and anthropology, and have cross-fertilized the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies, striking chords with recent foci of theoretical interest including resistance and creative cultural hybridity. Subaltern scholarship set out to locate and listen to the nonelite voices of history—voices that countered hegemonies both of colonialism and of the indigenous elite. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty put it in one much-cited essay, in that “ruling class documents” have constituted the major sources for the historian's craft, often it was not speech but “silences” that had to be interpreted (1988:179). Much of the subaltern collective's work has been to highlight and interpret elusive traces of recalcitrant subaltern consciousness, in vivid descriptive and incisive analytic strokes. Expanding their scope well beyond rulers' records to other textual sources such as regional literatures, they have called attention to multiple resources for new understandings of historical processes.³⁸

When scholars associated with the subaltern studies project have included oral testimonies in seeking to understand the more recent past that is also the remembered past, tropes of silence give way to vibrant voices and contesting narratives. Authors such as Shahid Amin (1995); Saurabh Dube (1998); Shail Mayaram (1997); Gyan Prakash (1990); and Ajay Skaria (1999) brilliantly interweave oral historical material with archival work to portray nuanced complexities of consciousness in full-bodied ways that could not easily be imagined if their research had been confined to written sources. In these works,

multiple versions and visions are portrayed, and the quest for a single plot or a truer truth is relinquished. Amin, for example, writes: “Incongruence with known facts has not been construed as a lapse of memory, but rather as a necessary element in the stitching together of the story” (1995:197).

Our work, as we have already shown, has its separate hybrid genealogy. We only stumbled inadvertently into history; thus our project was not originally framed either in historical perspectives or methods. However, over the past seven years, subaltern histories have increasingly influenced us so that we might, after the fact, claim some affinity to them while acknowledging our deficiency in their two highest achievements: broad theoretical visions and meticulous archival craft.³⁹ The strongest evidence of this affinity emerges when we encounter the experiences of radically disempowered persons. In Dube’s study of religious transformations within an untouchable community in Chhattisgarh, for example, critical voices from the bottom of the social hierarchy speak of landlords in a fashion very similar to the way Sawar people speak of the king’s men. That is, we hear appraisals from below of power’s workings, framed sometimes in terms of helplessness but incorporating astute understandings of the structural conditions under which that helplessness is perpetuated.⁴⁰

In the era before Independence, most of what is now Rajasthan was composed of princely states and existed under that particular configuration of royal and colonial power that the British called paramountcy. However, the administrative district of Ajmer-Merwara, where Sawar is located, was under direct rule, with consequences we shall briefly address in chapter 3. European historians’ fascination with India’s princes has resulted in much scholarly attention to the pinnacles of power in Rajasthan. This may be one reason that, until recently, there has for this region been less writing focused on subaltern perspectives.⁴¹

Mayaram’s richly textured study of community memory in Rajasthan, however, provides a source of particularly insightful interpretation. She shows the ways that different forms of power—colonial, princely, and nationalist—have impinged on Meos, her central research focus, and have been interpreted by them. Mayaram writes that she examines “the construction of sovereignty in terms of the perceptual understanding of the reflexive subject” (1997:13). In recording

and presenting memories from the kingdom of Sawar we do not focus on sovereignty, but our interests have been in just such perceptual understandings. Power relations at local, state, national, and transnational levels all condition what has most captivated our attentions: the ways that everyday lives, including pressures from above, are experienced and interpreted. It is this experiential level that we feel equipped to portray and convey: textures of a life-world in which power's subtleties are rendered vivid in memories.

In chapter 9, for example, Kalyan Mali as an old man recalls the slight provocation that pushed him from complaint to action and mobilized a brave and successful act of protest. This was no more than the king's chief minister familiarly clapping him on the shoulder while he was expressing his outrage over the wild pigs that were damaging his crops. Relived fifty years later that patronizing gesture provokes him to rage, and one of his listeners responds by commenting on the brutality of the man who made that insolent gesture: "He had no pity."

Just as our portrait of environmental history has not centered on colonial policy, our general portrait of Sawar subjects, unlike much writing within the field of subaltern studies, has not highlighted colonial circumstances. Subalternity in Sawar was always multiply mediated. Sawar residents were fully aware of the machinations of the English in Ajmer, but the majority did not foreground imperial pressures when describing the "time of kings." I had to comb through scores of recorded interviews to locate a few mentions of the "double administration" and its impact on farmers and herders. Interestingly, when the English were discussed the assessments were not consistent; some saw them as potentially more benign than the kings, while others portrayed the kings as squeezed from above and squeezing below in turn.

Rup Lal Khati, a carpenter with an astute understanding of history, put it this way: "It was their time, the great kings' time, and that's why we were afraid. We were not afraid of the English. At that time there was a double administration [*doharā śāsan*]. If the Rajputs did something bad you could complain to the English and they would do something about it, but no one would [complain], because of fear of the Rajputs—because we had to live here, and complaining outside would only get them more angry."