Some Aporias of History
Time, Truth and Play in Dangs, Gujarat

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Historians and social scientists confronted with pasts imagined differently from history have resorted to one of two strategies: converting oral traditions into the equivalent of archival sources and then writing histories that adhere to the norms of western professional history writing; or by denying any significant traffic between history and other froms of conceiving pasts, subsuming the latter under the rubrics of myth or more recently, memory. This article argues that the Dangi's 'vadilcha goth' or tales about ancestors are an engagement with modernity and its paradigmatic trope, history. The subaltern practice of anomalous and hybrid histories, in the Dangs, produces a multiplicity of pasts quite different from those multiple histories which historians conceive of and increasingly call for.

WITHIN days of commencing fieldwork in Dangs in Gujarat, I realised that Dangis had a rich fund of 'vadilcha goth', or stories about ancestors. These 'goth' often reached back into the 17th and 18th century; they involved detailed accounts of the activities that the narrators' ancestors were involved in. The question is: how is one to think of these stories about the past?

The issues this question raises are more complex than might appear at first sight. The problem is posed by the emergence since the 18th century of an understanding of history which basically shapes the ways in which we think about pasts. Previously, as Reinhart Koselleck remarks, 'histories had existed in the plural'. With the Enlightenment, history emerged as "a general concept which became the condition of possible experience and possible expectation". It "gained an enhanced degree of abstraction, allowing it to indicate a greater complexity, which capability has since made it necessary for reality to be generally elaborated in a historical manner"[1]

"Reality to be generally elaborated in a historical manner": few remarks could be more appropriate. Consider simply how the oppressed and marginal – whether nations, women, lower castes, or other subaltern groups – have sought to give themselves a history, how often the call has resounded: "We must have a history".[2] To claim a history, and to claim that this history is not simply something that can be added on to an already existing history but transforms the idea of history itself – this is a strategy that not only historians but subaltern groups have repeatedly resorted to. Note that what is being claimed here is not simply pasts (this would be unexceptionable, for everybody has pasts)

but history. The other pasts are subsumed variously under the rubrics of memory, myth or chronicle; they are what history may grow out of but is fundamentally different from; they are at best the prehistory of history.[3] With modernity, as so many have said or implied, history emerges as a privileged form of being. Thus it is that one of the more serious charges that scholars can levy against each other is often that they are 'ahistorical' (it is surely significant that there are no widespread parallel conceptions of being without sociology or anthropology, and that there are some sorts of parallels in politics and economics).

I do not wish to go into the questions of why history should thus become a paradigmatic trope of modernity, or how the distinction between history and other pasts is maintained. Suffice to say for now that these matters have to do with a variety of aspects of modernity: with the significance accorded to agency, and how having history (making history) is one way to claim such agency; with the significance accorded to reason, and how history is always necessarily from the point of view of the rational subject; with the significance accorded to time as not merely a static backdrop but a dynamic element which itself a principle of transformation, and how history is precisely this kind of narrative about time. The point I am making is much more modest: it is that those of us dealing with the pasts of marginal or subaltern groups have necessarily had to engage with history in this modern sense. We can never be innocent of the modernist trope of history, any more than the subaltern groups we write about can be.

So the question could now be formulated more sharply: how do we, and the subaltern

groups we write about, engage with history? When as historians and social scientists, we have been confronted with pasts imagined differently from history (as, say, with many oral traditions) we have usually resorted to one of two strategies. Such scholars as Jan Vansina (who in many senses put the study of oral traditions on a disciplinary footing) and his many brilliant students have proceeded by converting oral traditions into the equivalent of archival sources, and then writing histories that adhere to the norms of western professional history writing. In the process, they have produced novel and exciting histories of regions and subjects, histories that would have remained impossible if we had stuck to written records. Politically too, oral history has been a way of contesting the colonial refusal to acknowledge that the *colonised had any history. Yet this* strategy, though not only valuable but absolutely required in many contexts, does almost self-confessedly ride roughshod over the alternative historicities – the different ways of conceiving pasts, presents and futures – that might be involved in oral traditions. For much oral history in this genre, rather, oral traditions become a form of history, and the differences between the two are minimised.[4]

A second, intimately linked strategy, resorted to by many oral historians, and almost an organising principle of the ethnographic method, involves denying any significant traffic between history and other forms of conceiving pasts, subsuming the latter under the rubrics of myth or, more recently, memory. It is salutary to recall that when Levi-Strauss made the distinction between hot societies that have history and cold societies that

have myth, he sought implicitly to affirm myth over history. But so hegemonic was the notion that history was the desirable way of thinking of pasts that to describe any society as possessing simply a mythic consciousness, as lacking history, seemed not merely inappropriate or wrong but even politically conservative.

I do not wish to adopt the historicist tacks that were taken to criticise Levi-Strauss, or that, in a related vein, have been taken in recent times to criticise anthropology's practices of othering; I do not wish to claim that I espy history everywhere. What worries me is something else. It is that in this strategy both myth and memory are usually cast as that which is spatially or chronologically apart from history. Thus, scholars conventionally assume that oral traditions survive most vigorously in non-literate and 'traditional' societies. With the emergence of a literate culture, oral traditions about the past are expected to be slowly forgotten, to be replaced by a literate historical culture. It was in this spirit that Ashis Nandy once remarked that the majority of Indians still have a mode of thinking which is distinct from history.[5] Such remarks often seem to presume an innocence from history. And even if it could have been claimed in earlier centuries, alternative historicities today are not simply innocent of history but emerge through an engagement with it.

In this context, I would like to argue that vadilcha goth are not local traditions still preserved because of some Dangi isolation from the larger world. Rather, they are an engagement with modernity and its paradigmatic trope, history. By this, I do not mean that they are anti-modern (as Partha Chatterjee has remarked acerbically, one can hardly choose to be modern or anti-modern, one can only talk of strategies for coping with modernity;[6] rather, I refer to an engagement that exceeds the modernities which the colonial and post-colonial state and elites have espoused. I would like to focus here on two crucial dimensions of this Dangi engagement: the ways in which it refigures and exceeds modernist time and truth. In the process, I hope to foreground the subaltern practice of anomalous and hybrid histories, which in Dangs produces a multiplicity of pasts quite different from those multiple histories which we, as historians, conceive of and increasingly call for.

THE TIME OF GOTH

Dangs is an approximately 66G sq mile area that now forms a district in south-eastern Gujarat. It is inhabited largely by bhils, koknis, and varlis – communities that the modern Indian government would classify as scheduled tribes, and that the British described as the wild tribes. In the 18th and 19th century, Dangs was ruled by several bhil chiefs. Though it never formally became part of British territory, its chiefs were subordinated to British power in the early 19th century. In the 1840s, British power in the region was further consolidated when colonial officials secured a lease of Dangi forests. Since forests covered most of Dangs, this effectively meant that the whole region came under British authority. As part of their efforts to produce more timber from Dangi forests, colonial officials prevented Dangis from using forests for subsistence, causing widespread and persistent local resentment.

As used in Dangs, the word goth can be broadly translated as story, narrative or account, and is ubiquitous in everyday life, being deployed to describe a range of narratives. People tell their goth to visiting officials, which is to say that they make a representation. They tell the goth of what they did during the day. And of course they tell goth of divine figures, of hunting, of ancestors, of former times. So goth in that sense can be the story or account of virtually anything.

Nevertheless, there are broad genres of goth. Stories of Dangi pasts are often referred to interchangeably as 'juni' goth, 'mohorni' goth or 'puduncha' goth – all phrases meaning 'stories of former times' or 'old stories'. Within these juni goth there are at least two broad genres – the 'devdevina' goth, or stories of gods and goddesses, and the vadilcha goth, or stories of ancestors. The bulk of the devdevina goth, literally 'stories of the gods and goddesses' tell of dealings between deities and spirits such as Vaadudev, Bhutdev, Simariodev, Vaghdev, Sitalamata, Kanasarimata or the many malevolent female spirits known as joganis. There are also goth of the two major popular epics of the subcontinent, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat*. These epics, radically different from the textual versions of the plains, are situated within Dangs. There is the village of Pandva, where the Pandav brothers visited; the village of Subir, where Shabiri Bhilin stayed when she met Rama; and several other such places.[7] Devdevina goth are set in a very distinct time – that before the time of the humans. The goth are often about the making of the physical and geographical features of Dangs by gods, goddesses and spirits.

In contrast, vadilcha goth is often used as a shorthand to refer to all stories involving humans. The word 'vadil' can mean both lineage ancestor and, more broadly, elders, whether living or dead. The time of humans does often involve divine beings, and such stories are both vadilcha goth or devdevina goth. Some of these tell of ancestors' encounters or dealings with spirits, gods or goddesses; they are about how Dangs and other regions were made suitable for humans. They tell, for example, of how humans were given corn to cultivate with, how the 'mahua' liquor that Dangis drink was discovered first by Vaadudev and then passed on to humans, how kingship was given to some Dangi chiefs, and so on. However, most vadilcha goth have an entirely human cast. Some are about the loss of forests to the forest department, or the coming of the British. Others are about the everyday lives of ancestors: of their migrations from village to village, their harassment by the British and the forest department, their modes of livelihood, their alarm at the first motorised vehicles, the prices they paid for goods, and of the disputes amongst bhil chiefs.

Running through vadilcha goth is a very distinctive understanding of time. What I mean by this can be illustrated by contrasting it with the acknowledgement of coevalness, the preferred strategy in that classic, Time and the other. Fabian argues that imperialism and anthropology were both fundamentally based on the denial of coevalness, that anthropologists placed the societies they studied in a time different from and before their own. In opposition to this, Fabian called for the acknowledgement of coevalness, or a recognition of the shared historical time of anthropologists and the societies they studied.[8]

I do not wish to imply that Fabian was wrong in calling for such a strategy; it is certainly often required for strategic and political reasons. But let us step back from that issue for a moment, and ask: what is the vision (broadly shared by a substantial section of the most radical and exciting social theorists of the eighties and early nineties) from within which the denial of coevalness seems such an imperialist act, and acknowledgement of coevalness the most appropriate strategy against it? A deeply modernist one, in the very direct sense that modernity is about a particular kind of relationship with time. As Vattimo reminds us, "modernity is that era in which being modern ... becomes the fundamental value to which all other values refer". Modernity defines itself by claiming to be at the cutting edge of time, to be always contemporary, and to always be

overcoming itself (this after all is the paradoxical sense in which one way to be modern now is to be post-modern).[9] The acknowledgement of coevalness seized on this index, time, to claim modernity for the anthropologist's subject, and to attack the old imperialising strategy of denying modernity by denying coevalness.

Time in vadilcha goth is subtly different from this. The two major epochs (this word is not entirely appropriate, as will become clearer below) within which most Dangis frame their pasts are 'moglai' and 'mandini'. Roughly speaking, moglai is a time when Dangis moved in the forests without restrictions, when they raided the plains to collect a due called 'giras', when they had a distinctive pattern of political authority. Moglai, in this sense, informs radical politics in the Dangs today. Mandini is both an epoch, and an event that marks the end of moglai. With mandini, often associated with the British subordination of the region, Dangi political authority was undermined and they could no longer move about as formerly, or raid surrounding plains.

Now, moglai could easily be glossed as the Dangi version of a romanticised golden age of freedom. But this would be an extremely reductive reading: the epochs of moglai and mandini involve rather a forceful acknowledgement of coevalness. The notion of mandini seizes on colonial and post-colonial state power and accords to it a revolutionary role in the shaping of contemporary Dangs. It creates a shared historical time with imperialism and colonialism, and points to the particular forms of domination involved in that time. Furthermore, the epochs mime the distinction between the pre-modern and the modern. In the truisms of western thought, for example, the modern is cast as a radical departure from history, as a revolutionary epoch – this is why all that preceded it can be lumped together as pre-modern, and before history. So too with mandini which is similarly a revolutionary epoch, above all constituted by colonial and post-colonial state intervention.

And moglai, even if its etymological roots may be a reference to Mughal rule, in everyday usage often refers to that which precedes mandini. Subsumed within moglai are several other epochs which had been important formerly. For example, there was the time of 'gavali raj', which may be a reference to the reign of the yadav kings of Devgiri (later Daulatabad, near Aurangabad) who reigned from A D 1216-1312.[10] Similarly, there is the epoch of 'Aurung-badshah', the term Dangis use to refer to what may be

the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. There is also the period of what is known as the 'kuplin-bahadurin', which may be a reference to the Company Bahadur, as the British East India Company was sometimes called. But these epochs are not associated with any major events; they are invoked by narrators principally as part of a narration of epochs that demonstrates knowledge of vadilcha goth. In other words, the veracity of goth is not dependent on their being from these epochs; for this, it is sufficient for goth to be from moglai.

Even more to the point, moglai and mandini do not stop with an acknowledgement of coevalness. These Dangi epochs are subtly different from epochs or periods in the sense that professional historians use such terms. For the latter, an epoch or a period is marked by chronological contiguity and continuity: despite some overlap, it could be broadly said that one epoch succeeds another. When Fabian insists on the acknowledgement of coevalness, what he means is that it should be recognised that the colonised share the same position in the linear time of modernity as the colonisers, a time after the pre-modern. Sometimes, Dangi narrators too talk similarly: thus, moglai often is identified with the precolonial and early colonial period, and mandini is associated with 'gora raj' or British rule. But this is not the only way many Dangis talk. Quite as often, Dangi epochs traverse diverse chronological times, almost running parallel to each other. It is not unusual for events that occurred as recently as 20 years back – such as say incidents during hunts – to be part of moglai, and those that occurred 200 years back to be part of mandini. That is to say, mandini is not only after moglai but also along it, parallel to it. Indeed, in some very suggestive ways, moglai is about what is extra-colonial. By extra-colonial, I obviously do not only mean pre-colonial – it is precisely that kind of chronological separation that I am trying to avoid. What I mean is something that often includes the pre-colonial, but is in more important ways defined in opposition to the colonial and postcolonial, in opposition to the relations of domination over Dangs that surrounding plains areas have established. Thus, rather than being about an unsullied Dangi space, or an autonomous world or hidden transcript of subaltern groups, moglai is about spaces and times created by traversing and exceeding colonialism and the relations of domination that it is associated with.

Ranajit Guha has pointed to how much history writing is statist, which is to

say that it "authorises the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic". Even stories of resistance to this narrative are comprehensible within its terms:

This is a level quite accessible to statist discourse: it is never happier than when its globalising and unifying tendency is allowed to deal with the question in gross terms. It is a level of abstraction where all the many stories ... are assimilated to the story of the Raj. The effect of such lumping is to oversimplify the contradictions of power by reducing them to an arbitrary singularity – the so-called principal contradiction, that between the coloniser and the colonised.[11]

Goth of mandini and moglai can be thought of as sustained engagements with this statist narrative. Goth of mandini tell of the interventions of the British and the post-colonial state – mandini, above all, is about the workings of the 'sarkar'. But they extensively displace that statist discourse, and focus instead on Dangi refigurings of it. Goth of moglai move further beyond the 'arbitrary singularity' of that discourse: they traverse mandini (rather than being always before it) and create a multiplicity of local and regional narratives that have little do with the concerns of statist power. Through their refiguring of time by the initiatives of the sarkar, through their exceeding of statist narratives, goth underscore the domination that has marked their colonial and post-colonial modernity, they render its intimacy into an exteriority.

THE CONSTITUTIVE OUTSIDE OF TRUTH

A similar engagement with modernity is very much foregrounded in Dangi concerns with establishing whether vadilcha goth are 'khari', a word which can for the present be glossed as 'true'. Maybe we can begin understanding khari goth or true stories through what is beyond them, such as the many tall tales in Dangs. Often very whimsical, with a sting in the tail, they are about a range of themes – about the sexual peccadilloes of men and women and gods and goddesses, about heroic figures who successfully undertake daunting tasks, or about tricksters who get out of the most difficult situations. While there is no specific word designating these stories, they are recognised as a distinct genre. Most of all, they are considered as imaginary, in the sense of bearing very tangential relations to figures of the past or present.

These stories could be called false, but that is not a word many Dangis would voluntarily use to describe them. Instead,

t may be helpful to think of these goth is above all about play. One way to think of the playfulness of these goth is to consider their ludic element. Imaginary goth are often narrated at occasions known as 'tamashas', usually held in the slack agricultural period before the monsoons. Large events where alcohol flows freely, amashas, enacted increasingly by semi-professional performers and troupes from the neighbouring area of Khandesh, are sometimes spread across two or three evenings, and are attended by hundreds of men and women, many of whom walk over a day or two from distant villages to participate in it. Imaginary goth are also narrated at casual or spur-of-the-moment gatherings, when men and women are relaxing in the evenings. Such occasions are overwhelmingly preponderant in relation to the tamasha: they occur almost every second or third evening in some corner of every village. On such occasions, some person with a particularly good reputation as a 'gothiya' or teller of tales may, under pressure from others, start off on a goth; slowly, others from surrounding huts may join in. And if there is mahua liquor to lubricate the telling and listening, the occasion gains in gusto and vigour.[12]

The understanding of imaginary goth as playful is also evident in the way the figure of the gothiya or storyteller is constructed for these goth. In all genre of goth, of course, the gothiya is so central as to render meaningless those conventional oppositions which assign such oral traditions to a pre-authorial folk world, and contrast it to the culture of print and the emergence of the author. But the reasons for and manner in which the gothiya is accorded centrality vary. In imaginary goth especially, it is the narrative skill and style – the pauses, interjections, glosses, gestures, and sudden flurries of detail that narration involves–of the gothiya (usually though not necessarily, a man) which is valued: he makes the goth anew with each telling.

Of course, several of the goth told on such occasions are extremely contentious, and lead on to heated arguments. But nevertheless, the playfulness of these occasions allows goth a certain extricability from partisan, political or other considerations, and contentiousness rarely prevents goth from being told or performed.

Such playfulness may tempt us to read these goth as marginal or inessential. That is to say, imaginary goth could seem as a relatively inessential form of leisure, a break from the more serious work of everyday life which khari goth are about;

it could seem that it is the very inessentiality of imaginary goth that defines the more important khari goth. Even some Dangi readings may seem to support such an interpretation: on some occasions, imaginary goth have been described to me as 'emaj', a word which could be translated as 'just like that' or 'inconsequential'.

Now, it would be easy enough to undermine such an interpretation. Imaginary goth form part of everyday Dangi language, with casual references to characters from them abounding in casual conversation; and highly contentious arguments often take the form of contenders narrating to each other goth supporting the kind of values they valorise. As such, it could be argued that these goth posit, sustain, challenge, contest and perhaps even create values central to many Dangis. Yet, there is something dissatisfying about undermining, in this manner, the interpretation of imaginary goth as marginal. To show that imaginary goth also involve relations of power – surely this is no more than a predictable preliminary gesture in a context where we increasingly realise the ubiquity of relations of power? And here, preliminary to what? To the point that imaginary goth are as central to Dangis, if in different ways, as khari goth? Here, centrality comes to signify an anodyne sameness (ironically, this is also the dominant way in which historicism today conceives difference), and any ascription of marginality to imaginary goth can only be understood as false consciousness or ideology.

Perhaps it would be more satisfying to work within the ascription of marginality but against the grain of the way in which our habits tempt us to read marginality. Maybe we should consider another sense in which imaginary goth are playful: their play in relation to the truth of khari goth. That is to say, because of their independence from time and place, they are considered to be beyond the claims to truth and falsity which khari goth involve. While khari goth are those that successfully sustain a claim to refer to a particular time and space, these stories do not even advance that claim, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. In this sense, they are not the negation of khari goth but its constitutive outside: they define what is outside the field of khari goth, cannot be judged by its criteria, and yet makes possible the very imagining of khari goth. It is precisely in this that their peculiar marginality resides: they are marginal not because they are inessential but rather because they come into visibility only at

the margins of khari goth. Nor even is it adequate to think that when questions of truth become important, then khari goth predominate and playful or imaginary goth become impossible: forms of playfulness provide also the language in which vadilcha goth exceed the truth of history. To pursue these points, consider the enactment of khari goth.

TRUTH OF VADILCHA GOTH

In contrast to imaginary goth, vadilcha goth posit an intimate connection with time and space; every narration of them constitutes a claim to tell what actually happened at some specific place in some specific time. They involve the claim to be khari goth, or true stories.[13] But establishing most vadilcha goth as khari is a difficult task. This is not merely because they are highly fragmented and diverse, with virtually every locality, lineage or even individual having their own different goth. It is also because of their inextricability, in the eyes of most Dangis, from practical, partisan, political, emotive, calculative or other considerations. Consider goth around the lineage of male descent. The lineage has since the early 20th century been one of the crucial arenas within which Dangi politics is conducted. There are currently 14 chiefs who are officially recognised by the Indian government as the descendants of the former rajas or kings of Dangs. Myriad others are recognised as their close kin, while yet others are recognised as descendants of those who held land-grants or village headships under these rajas. Such recognition as descendants is not only an honour (turbans and shawls are publicly bestowed on the rajas and their associates at a darbar held annually), but is often accompanied by a substantial political pension.

In this context, to know and tell goth of the power wielded by one's ancestors is to make an implicit claim to some sort of power. Also, people often narrate goth designed to impugn claims of other lineages, claiming for example that a person widely recognised as the male descendant of some vadil is not the true descendant, or that the true raja or patil was not the specified vadil but someone else. Even lack of knowledge of goth takes on different implications depending on its relationship with claims to power. Officially or popularly recognised chiefs are not particularly disconcerted when they do not know goth: their authority is by now too secure in usual contexts for it to matter, and lack of knowledge is easily ascribed to vagaries of transmission. But those

who are neither officially nor larly recognised feel deeply worried they do not know their vadilcha Such is the case with one lineage asurna. The father of the present ge head did not listen much to stories n he was young, and as a result the does not know the stories. Since the ge now claims a share of Vasurna, s expended considerable effort in ing persons of related lineages who t know goth of his ancestors, plying n with them liquor and trying to prise s about his lineage out from them – r with little success. Had he known goth, and were they persuasive, he t at least have secured some popular eptance of his claims (though of rse this would not have secured him ial recognition). For well told goth ctually create power. Haipat Lasu, stant descendant of the Ghadvi chief ut raja, has through his inventive lling of vadilcha goth secured ilar authority as a chief far beyond t either descent, alliances or official ognition would allow him to claim. ven where not so directly connected ersonal claims to power, vadilcha goth still deeply political. Goth of how the ish took over the forests, of how estors rebelled against colonial power, raids on plains by ancestors, of ressive state practices, or even of the nitude of modes of subsistence during lai question the legitimacy of the state. h of how koknis and bhils behaved n each other in former times, of how nis brought agriculture to Dangs, of a particular witch was dealt with – of these are involved in complex ryday politics. ecause of this inextricability of vadilcha th from practical, partisan, political or er considerations, they are (unlike ally contentious imaginary goth) rarely erformed on occasions like the tamasha the 'thaali'. As events in which almost ybody can participate, these are scarcely sirable occasions for discussing such ters. More appropriate is everyday nversation. Old men and women, duced to immobility by age, might often ll children and others the stories of their youth, and the stories they learned from heir vadils. In evenings when friends get together and drink liquor, or during long ternoons when there are no pressing ricultural tasks, or while working with ends in the field, conversation may turn vadilcha goth. What makes such sions particularly appropriate is that, ke the tamasha or thaali, they are not n to virtually anyone who might stray

in. As with other everyday conversation, they involve spaces of intimacy with highly flexible and contextual boundaries. When goth that are relatively uncontentious are being told, such as those of how the British took over the forests, these spaces of intimacy have boundaries inclusive enough to take in virtually every Dangi (though not necessarily persons like me). But when the truth of goth narrated is a more contentious matter, the spaces are quite restrictive: it is not unusual for narrators to segue out of one goth into another relatively inoffensive one when a new person joins the group. And when goth involve challenges to the authority of very powerful persons or lineages, they are narrated almost secretively – often after nightfall, when only members of the narrators' huts and those they have specifically invited are around. Such spaces of intimacy are themselves deeply political: they are not based simply on friendships or blood-ties, but are also part of the effort to build alliances and persuade listeners that the narrator's goth is the most khari or true.

PERSUASIONS OF TRUTH

Yet, persuading listeners about what is or is not a khari goth is as a task scarcely innocent of colonial and post-colonial power. There is the importance of 'jod', which can be translated as conjoining. The confluence of different accounts, especially accounts by narrators whose interests are believed to diverge, is the most self-evident form of jod. Amongst the most persuasive forms of jod is the claim to affirmation of the goth by the written documents of the sarkar or state. Because the sarkar constitutes Dangi realities in profoundly inescapable ways, it is thought of as enormously powerful, often even omniscient in its knowledge of Dangs – its records will contain a true account. Bhil lineages who consider themselves dispossessed often assert that proof of their having held the gadi or seat of power in former times will be found in the district records. The members of a dispossessed lineage of Ghadvi (one of the principal chieftancies in Dangs) went further in 1988. Seeking to assert a claim to the gadi of Ghadvi, they searched British records at the district headquarters at Ahuwa to find proof of their having formerly held the gadi. Meeting with little success, they ventured as far as Sakri in the old Khandesh district to find the records, again with no success. Now too, the insist that a photograph of their ancestor, the early 19th century Ghadvi chief Silput raja, can be found at Delhi.

Equally significant, in this context, is the association of writing and truth. As I have argued at length elsewhere, in the course of the 19th and early 20th century, the centrality of writing to the exercise of colonial power was accompanied by a fetishisation of writing, especially that associated with the sarkar – hence, of course, the emphasis on the written records of the sarkar in establishing the khari nature of a goth. But the aura of writing, with its connotations of power, extends further. Thus, some families in Dangs have written versions of their goth; this is thought to testify to their khari nature. In these senses, truth is thought of through tropes that are fundamentally colonial.[14]

This is scarcely to suggest, of course, that the records of the sarkar are always treated as khari. When these records contradict claims of goth, they are likely to be disregarded; they are significant only to the degree that they are invoked by Dangi narrators, whether to affirm or contest the khari nature of any goth. Besides, other kinds of jod are very important too, and sustained efforts are made to secure them. For example, in 1994, a discussion was held between various descendants of a 19th century Kokni, Dadaji Patil, where different versions of the 'same' goth (about how their ancestors moved from one village to another to eventually reach Dangs) were put together over two evenings to produce a khari account of their migrations.

Also, narrative strategies other than jod are important too in making a goth seem khari. Narrators are sometimes believed to be telling khari goth when they demonstrate a command of detail. Detail in a goth is evocative, linking it up in as many directions as possible with other goth. By alluding to details from other goth already considered khari, the khari nature of the narrator's goth is established by association. Indeed, there is almost a superfluity of detail, an extensive elaboration of details that do not really matter. By introducing abundant detail in this way, narrators demonstrate their knowledge, showing that what they tell is likely to be true. Goth thus abound in references to now-vanished villages, to trees that stood at the time and place of the goth, to the clothes the protagonists wore, or how they looked.

Depth of recall is a another narrative strategy likely to make a goth seem more khari. The further back that a narrator can take her or his account, or the longer the number of ancestors through whom a person can trace descent, the greater the

goth's legitimacy. Thus, ancestors' names are often recited backwards till the oldest one remembered, though no goth are known about most of the figures whose names are taken. Similarly, the invocation of former epochs such as gavli raj or 'kuplin bahadurin raj' (of which as I remarked there are few substantive memories) is part of the demonstration of depth of recall.

Furthermore, the identity of the narrator, partially created through his narrations, may make his goth seem more or less khari. What makes identities so important is their connection with the spaces of intimacy in which vadilcha goth are told. These spaces are of course recognised as profoundly arbitrary – many narrators who know goth may not, because of suspicion or plain disinterestedness, pass these on: disinterested persons may not even learn goth told within spaces of intimacy that they have considerable access to; interested persons may participate in several spaces of intimacy and learn a wide range of goth. Nevertheless, some identities are believed to facilitate participation in these spaces. Men, for example, are thought more likely to know and tell khari goth than women. Vadilcha goth are principally about the activities appropriate to and carried out by men. This bias towards men as subject is almost inscribed in the word vadil itself, for the ancestors that it refers to are traced almost exclusively through men. Women figure very rarely in vadilcha goth, save as witches or the occasional ruling queen. Because goth are concerned so largely with activities viewed as male spheres, it is presumed that male narrators would have better knowledge of these activities, and that the goth would be the concern of men. Still, an acknowledgement of the crucial and constitutive role of women in Dangi pasts lurks at the margins of many goth, and emerges in sustained discussions. Furthermore, women do often know these goth as well as men – they participate as audience in spaces of intimacy, sometimes correct male narrators when they go wrong, and narrate vadilcha goth themselves.

Similarly, goth are more likely to be treated as khari if their protagonists and the narrators are from the same locality or male lineage. Many goth, lacking in depth of recall or detail, are still treated as khari because their narrators are thought to be descendants of the figures whom the goth are about. Indeed, depth of recall and detail are often drawn on precisely by those whose claims are tenuous in other ways – whether because of lack of popular recognition of their versions, or because of their marginality as narrators.

Still, no amount of detail, depth of recall, jod or identity can ensure that a goth is treated as khari, and privileged over competing versions. When the politics involved diverges drastically, different versions of vadilcha goth simply cannot be reconciled with each other. Usually, such disagreement leads to no bitterness. Narrators may insist that their version is khari, and may even be dismissive of rivals and their credentials, but things go no further than that. But sometimes, especially where goth are intimately connected to claims to power and authority in the present, there is a more concerted effort to establish a singular truth, to have only one goth considered khari. The claims involved in these goth may be so contentious that to tell them is itself a direct challenge to the authority of other persons or lineages, that their narration in inopportune contexts can lead to vehement quarrels and disputes. So these goth tend to be told within spaces of intimacy to which access is highly restricted and select, within which their khari nature is less likely to be challenged. That is to say, there is a multiplicity of rival goth claiming to be the singular truth of the same event, all of which are told in spaces of intimacy that are largely exclusive of each other.

PLAY OF TRUTH

In all the discussions of truth above, we may be tempted to discern affinities with the familiar discussions of the nature of historical truth. Perhaps we can read parallels with an epistemological philosophy of history, with its attempts to determine "the criteria for the truth and validity of historical descriptions and explanations; ...to answer the epitemological question as to the conditions under which we are justified in believing the historian's statements about the past (either singular or general) to be true".[15] Perhaps we can read parallels with a narrativist philosophy of history, with its focus on the linguistic instruments and rhetorical strategies that historians use in their constructions of the past, even in their efforts to create a 'reality-effect'. But it would surely be naive and fruitless to set out on such a comparative project, detailing the contrasts and convergences between a Dangi historical sensibility and a western historical sensibility. For when we discern such parallels or echoes, we are acting quite in keeping with that often evoked anthropological truism about rendering the familar strange, and the strange familiar. It is not only that the conceits of that truism, with its refusal to recognise radical difference, whether encountered in the familiar or the strange, should worry us; it is also that Dangi understandings are not comparable, because they traverse historical truth or narrative and go on to diverge dramatically from it.

Thus, there is not always this obsessive focus on establishing a single goth as khari. There is also, paradoxically enough, the converse phenomenon. Goth that are at variance with one another – usually either in the sense of being different accounts of the 'same' event, or in the sense of contradicting each other as units in a larger sequential narrative of which they are supposed to be part – coexist with one another. Sometimes the same narrators may provide radically divergent versions on different occasions; in any case, they would never tell the same goth two times round with precisely the same details. Dangi listeners and narrators are aware of these contradictions, but often continue to consider all of them khari goth.

This multiplicity of truth is in stark contrast to the social sciences, which are marked primarily by the will to singularise truth. Here, within each narrative, differences have to be resolved and contradictions ironed out for it to make a persuasive claim to truth. Of course, the social sciences do allow for multiple truths (by now it is after all quite commonplace to call for multiple histories), but they allow for multiple truths that are exclusive of each other, that are within themselves singular. Multiple truths always betoken multiple perspectives and narrations. For the same narration to simultaneously embrace (as opposed to narrating from an omniscient perspective) stories that not only supplement but contradict each other – this is not easy within the social sciences. When we as social scientists abandon omniscience, we are left defending or affirming the fragment or anecdote, insisting on the impossibility of going beyond them.

How then do we understand the Dangi multiplicity of truth, where the same narrators and audience simultaneously and comfortably hold to several contradictory truths? One kind of explanation could resort to an opposition between the episodic form of pre-modern or non-western cultures and the will to comprehensiveness of western modernity. The will to comprehensiveness requires a totalising rrative where contradictions cannot be lerated, while an episodic form allows r fragmentary narratives which do not ave be reconciled within the same rspective or vision, making it possible o sustain multiple truths without manding resolution.

Such an explanation, often implicitly sorted to by radical scholars, is however eeped in modernity's representation of elf. In this representation, while there ere multiple times in the past, modernity reated a unified time – manifested in oth a unified historical time and a uniform ock time better suited to the requirements f capital and industry. By creating such time, it made possible comprehensive nd singularising narratives.[16] That is to ay, it is part of western modernity's self-mage that the will to comprehensiveness s impossible outside itself.

Yet this self-perception may make for misleading and inadequate explanation. As I argued above, the Dangi telling of oth is also characterised by a will to comprehensiveness: narrators are often ngaged in discussions to establish a khari version, or to deny other versions. What s fascinating is that this is a very distinctive will to comprehensiveness: it allows in some cases at least for multiple khari goth. It is precisely this will to compre-hensiveness that also renders untenable any assumption about the relativism of truth for Dangis – any suggestion that Dangis have a relativist understanding of truth, that they accept the point that different people perceive truth diffe-ently, and therefore accept multiple khari goth.

Within what kind of understanding then do many Dangis both share a will to comprehensiveness and simultaneously do the opposite – narrate several divergent khari goth about the same event, and allow these goth to coexist? Perhaps we need to understand this as part of the play of truth. As I have already suggested, play is the constitutive outside of truth in the sense that it is playful goth which make possible the very imagining of khari goth: the latter are precisely that which, unlike playful goth, refer to a particular time and place. But paradoxically, khari goth are outside play in their claim to refer to a particular time and space, they are often playful and very much like imaginary goth in their narration and performance. That is to say, vadilcha goth are often enacted not only in the ways which would persuade listeners that these are khari; they are also simultaneously performed as imaginary oth would be. In stories of how the ish took over the forests, of various rebels against the British, of ancestral migrations, the emphasis is often on the gothiyas, how well they tell the story, and on how inventive they are. Most vadilcha goth, even when they involve a more exclusive claim to be khari, even when they are told within highly circumscribed spaces of intimacy, draw on these tropes of playfulness. Persuasion thus does not take only the form of convincing listeners of an exclusive truth that renders other goth false; it can also almost simultaneously take the form of extricating khari goth from partisan or political considerations, and locating them within a different kind of contentiousness, a playful contenti-ousness. In this sense, play is not only the constitutive outside of truth. There is also the play of truth, a play which pervades the latter's will to comprehensiveness, which suffuses it with a profound, inescapable fragmentariness, and yet is itself bound up with rather than disruptive of the will to comprehensiveness.

Set aside the ensuing and relatively trivial point that when a goth is widely considered khari, this leads not to the construction of a monolithic singular khari goth, but to the proliferation of khari goth that coexist; that, therefore, whether because everybody agrees that a goth is khari or because everybody disagrees, there is always a proliferation of goth. What is more interesting is that this playfulness is quite distinct from conventional post-modern critiques of history and metanarratives, from valorisations of the fragment, or even from recent narrativist philosophies of history. For all of these usually involve a suspension of claims to truth, or at least a claim to such suspension; here, truth can figure at best as a 'reality effect'.[17] Yet for Dangi narrators, playful goth are not about such a suspension. For there is after all a politics to the suspension of truth: too many truths are produced not only within relations of domination and subordination, but by the dominant. To disengage from these truths, to claim to suspend them – perhaps (and I say this hesitantly) this is a gesture that is easier for the dominant. Subalterns, dare one say, remain haunted by truth; for them it is only too often a nightmare that will not go away.

Perhaps we can take our cues from this, and read multiple khari goth not only as the play of truth but as also, in a very distinctive sense, the truth of play. For consider where khari goth are likely to be playful. It is striking that there are so many more playful khari goth around mandini than around moglai, clustering most densely around the coming of the British, around rebellions against the colonial or post-colonial government, around stories of forest restrictions, around accounts of confrontations with liquor merchants from the plains. Thus, there are riotously different goth of how the British leased the forests, but there is virtually never any attempt to establish one of them as more true than the others. Similarly, goth of the 'same' rebellions against the state are radically different versions, all revelling in detail, and all equally khari. In all these cases, what makes playful goth possible is the overwhelming truth of mandini, a truth which exceeds the practical, partisan, political, emotive, calculative or other considerations which otherwise divide narrators or listeners. This excess makes it possible for goth about mandini to take on a playful dimension. Sometimes, of course, such overwhelming truths are sustained in relation to moglai (how could it not be, for moglai is also after all the other side of mandini). Thus, there are playful goth clustered around some themes of moglai: hunting, raids on plains, the coming of koknis to Dangs, and so on. Still, in imagining an extra-colonial space of moglai, it is precisely the practical, partisan, and other considerations which are foregrounded, making playful goth around moglai more difficult to sustain. This is why the multiplicity of khari goth is not reducible to that familar scenario of a different culture understanding truth differently; it is at least partially a consequence of a Dangi engagement with a modernity created largely by colonial and post-colonial powers.

HYBRID HISTORIES

Thinking vadilcha goth in this way – as an engagement with history which simultaneously exceeds history – opens up, it seems to me, the possibility of writing anomalous or hybrid histories. In a sense, of course, pasts such as those those narrated in goth are already hybrid histories, both being and exceeding history. I refer now, however, to the possibilities of attempting hybrid, contrapuntal narrratives that bring together, necessarily inconstantly and incompletely, the concerns of professional historians and narrators such as Dangi gothiyas.

There is nothing necessarily new about hybrid histories. To the extent that modernity's emphasis on history has never been hegemonic, such histories are coeval with it. The very enactment of subalternity – whether female, working class, colonised or other – involves some

creation of such histories. Also, while they may be radical in terms of their challenges to the canons of history, there is nothing necessarily radical about them in terms of their commitment to a related *politics of subaltern empowerment*. In some cases, the surplus of hybrid histories springs from their fetishisation of history, as for example in Hindu fundamentalist constructions of the Babri masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute.[18] It is important to recognise this, for else we slip into claiming an (infra)structural site for hybrid histories; we assume that they are always already empowering for subaltern groups. It is not because hybrid histories are new or are always empowering to subaltern groups that they are fascinating; it is rather because subaltern struggles against domination will be about accentuating the hybridity of their histories; they will be about engaging with (challenging, affirming, ridiculing) that paradigmatic trope of modernity – history.

Notes

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1 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe, MIT Press, Boston, 1985, pp 200, 202.

2 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragment*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993.

3 I explore the relationship between history and other pasts in my *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, forthcoming. The oral traditions discussed in this paper are narrated in the book.

4 See especially Jan Vansina's pioneering monograph, *Oral Tradition as History*, London, 1985, 2nd revised edition. For some thoughtful reflections on the forms of oral history, see Renato Rosaldo, 'Doing Oral History', *Social Analysis*, No 4, September, 1980 and David William Cohen, 'The Undefining of Oral Tradition' *Ethnohistory*, Vol 36, No 1, 1989, and especially David Newbury, 'Contradictions at the heart of the canon: oral historiography in Africa, 1960-1980', unpublished paper.

5 Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', *History and Theory*, vol 34, no 2, 1995.

6 Partha Chatterjee, 'Our Modernity' Sephis-Codesria Lecture No 1, Sephis-Codesria Press, Dakar, 1997.

7 For Dangi narratives of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*, as well as a list of villages with names associated with the two epics, see D P Khanapurkar, 'The aborigines of south

Gujarat', Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Bombay, 1944, Vol II. See also K S Singh (ed) *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, and Anthropological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1993; and K S Singh, *Rama-Katha in Tribal and Folk Traditions of India: Proceedings of a Seminar*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993 for accounts of other such traditions.

8 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.

9 For suggestive discussions of this point, and of the relationship between time and modernity, see Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London, 1995; Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, Trans Jon R Snyder, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1988, p 99. Especially useful for thinking about colonialism and time is Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Marx after marxism: history, subalternity and difference', in Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E Karl (eds), *Marxism beyond Marxism*, Routledge, New York, 1996.

10 David Hardiman, 'Small Dam Systems of the Sahyadris', in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, *Nature, Culture and Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994, p 196.

11 Ranajit Guha, 'The Small Voice of History' in Dipesh Chakrabarty and Shahid Amin (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, pp 1, 6

12 For some of these goth, see D P Khanapurka 'The Aborigines of South Gujarat', un published PhD dissertation, University o Bombay, 1944, Vol II.

13 Not all Dangi uses of the word khari posit a intimate relationship with actual happening in a specific time and place – the remark th women are more vulnerable to evil spirits, that all bhils are rajas, would be regarded khari by most Dangis without reference to an actual happening.

14 See my 'Writing, Orality and Power in the Dangs' in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakr. abarty (eds), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol IX, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996,

15 F R Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, p 44.

16 On the emergence of singularising time, see David Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983; Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Place, 1880-1918*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1983. On singularising time in a colonial context, see Frederick Cooper, 'Colonising time: work rhythms and labour conflict in colonial Mombasa' in Nicholas Dirks (ed), *Colonialism and Culture*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1992.

17 For a thoughtful critique of such constructivist positions, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.

18 For a fascinating analysis of Hindu fundamentalist constructions, see Gyanendra Pandey, 'Modes of history writing: new Hindu history of Ayodhya', *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 15, 1994, Vol 29, No 25.