

# Of Gods, Trees and Boundaries : Divine Conservation in Rajasthan

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## PREFACE

The original inspiration for this paper was essentially a visual one. In June of 1980 I toured the deities' places (*devasthān*) of Ajmer, Bhilwara, and Bundi districts in Rajasthan, North India, to collect stories about their origins and miracles, and to learn the reasons that pilgrims visited them.<sup>1</sup> It was the end of a long hot season. The monsoon was just about to break, and most of the land we traveled through had a parched and barren look. But a number of shrines were virtual oases.

Within these deities' bounded territories greenery was at times quite dense, and there were pleasant shady spots and clear running water. My fellow travelers—three young men from Ghaṭiyāli, the village where I had settled for anthropological field work in the fall of 1979—took this as a matter of course. Places of the gods were by definition places of natural beauty which, to meet pilgrims' needs, should include pleasant spots for bathing and picnicking.<sup>2</sup>

A few casual inquiries clarified some of the causality behind noticeable differences between deities' domains with their lush flora and the desiccated, stubby shrubbery prevailing in the surrounding countryside. The gods, I learned, objected to having their trees cut, and often even forbade the removal of dead wood from their land. Some were benevolent enough to allow their pilgrims this dead wood's use for cooking; a few required devotees to haul fuel from outside the shrine's boundaries. The gods were known, moreover, to shelter small animals and to delight in the presence of many birds, who would feed on pilgrims' grain offerings. As for water, because prayer should be preceded by cleansing, it was rare that a shrine would be established where no

good source of year-round water existed. Like other natural resources belonging to deities, this water's use was restricted; bathing was acceptable, but usually soap was not.

In short, deities' domains—the lands called *banī*, the boundaries *sīmā*—were areas where human beings felt constrained to refrain from exploiting the environment, and moreover where they expected that environment to be pleasant. Environmental deterioration within any divinity's boundaries would surely be displeasing to that deity, and therefore, if it occurred, would be taken as a sign of waning powers. For any persons who violated a potent deity's proscriptions, by accident or deliberately, were likely to receive *parcyā* or "proofs." This term may refer to any god's tangible manifestations, whether as grace or chastisement, but is used in shrine-violation accounts specifically for punishments. Perpetrators of infringements on the inviolability of deities' domains might bring a variety of unpleasant experiences upon themselves. For example, at Ghāṇṭā Rāṇī, a goddess shrine that we visited in 1980, the honey bees protected by the goddess in turn protect her shrine by stinging anyone who soils it in any way. Sickness, blindness, maimed limbs, acute pain, and occasionally death were cited among proofs given by shrine deities to careless and heedless trespassers.

In the course of my travels I also visited a number of spots including major temples such as Śrī Kalyāṇjī's at Diggi in Tonk District, where the main deity, I was told, objected to having a permanent or *pakkā* structure over its head, preferring that only loose roof tiles come between itself and the sky. At other sites the god or goddess, always consulted through possession or techniques of divination, forbade any and all construction, so that icon or icons remained in the open air with neither platform below nor dome above them. In these cases, deities appeared to be motivated by some particular affinity for nature, or antipathy toward man-made works.

I mentally filed these bits of haphazardly acquired information together with a few stories I'd heard in my own village. One of these was about workmen who, while installing a pump in a hallowed old well, were stricken by a long dormant well-deity. This divinity, known only as "*Paṭhān*," not only afflicted several of them with sickness, but publicly humiliated one workman by miraculously causing his pants to fall to the ground as he ascended into view from the well one day. The spirit, it was ascertained, did not ultimately object to having an engine-driven pump situated in its home; it just wanted its due in prayers and incense. Another tale I heard concerned a series of disasters befalling a sect-leader (*mahant*) who had gone against a certain deity's express wishes—transmitted through his possessed priest—by advising that a

*nīm*-tree branch dear to that god be lopped off for cosmetic reasons during the construction of a domed shrine (GOLD 1988, 163n. 29). The well-spirit was willing to accept a change in its environment as long as its continued dominion there was worshipfully recognized. In the second case, however, the god remained adamant in its opposition to tree-mutilation, despite appropriate supplications by humans concerned only for the shrine's improvement.

Approximately six years after my summer pilgrimage these various fragments swirled together in my mind—stimulated by a proposed conference on the linked themes of cultural and environmental conservation in Rajasthan<sup>3</sup>—to form the germ of a paper on divine conservation. However, I wanted a richer base of data to substantiate my ideas, and wrote to my former research assistant, Bhoju Ram Gujar, to ask if he thought he could gather materials on why and how Rajasthani deities protect the trees. Bhoju responded with an enthusiastic gush of observations on the interrelation between divinities, human beings, and various aspects of nature—observations with implications reaching well beyond my original limited and speculative proposal. He told me, for example, that many castes had particular associations with species of trees which they would never cut, and that the reason for this was often that certain trees were incarnations of certain gods.<sup>4</sup>

Bhoju's initial response convinced me that the phenomenon of deities who protected their shrines' natural environments in various ways was embedded in a deeper and broader set of meanings and values, and that I might hope to understand and interpret this phenomenon within some general cultural patterns. After I had formulated a few directions for our investigation, Bhoju spent several months in the summer of 1986 interviewing at shrines and in villages on the relations between gods, humans and nature.

That fall Bhoju sent me twelve legal-size pages of closely written Hindi—a distillation of his fieldwork, later to be supplemented by several clarifications and updates via aerograms. His research supplies the substance of our paper. My own contribution has been one of grouping and interpreting Bhoju's findings, and locating published evidence relevant to ours.<sup>5</sup> The paper falls into three parts. We begin with a general discussion of divine affinity to nature and natural beauty in Hinduism, and a consideration of the closely linked issue of divine territoriality.

We then present eight stories, selected and translated by Ann from among those collected by Bhoju. These tales assume that affinity for beauty and that defensive territoriality of shrine deities, and convey how these are effectively implemented through "proofs" (*parcyā*) and

“miracles” (*camatkār*). Legendary history, local mythology, and living folklore mingle and merge in these narratives of indeterminate genre. One dates back to Mughul times; but most are set within the memory span of living persons, and a few deal with events that are very recent indeed.<sup>6</sup> I attempt to highlight and analyze some important themes in these tales, to point out their commonalties and suggest explanations for a few incongruities.

In concluding, I wonder whether and how such lessons from living oral traditions might be meaningful in the context of modern ecological planning in India with its pressing concerns for a desperately overtaxed environment. Such stories of divine conservation are by no means limited to Rajasthan, and several Indian ecologists have noted their importance. Moreover, Western ecologists frequently lament that Judaeo-Christian attitudes involve a radical separation of man, not to mention God, from nature—a separation having highly destructive consequences. Some contrast such attitudes with South and East Asian principles of unity and continuity of all beings.<sup>7</sup> Can the Rajasthanian folklore treated here, with its strong indications of a “divine ecology,” shed any light—ideological or practical—on these considerations?

#### BLISS, PROTECTION, AUTHORITY, AND SHELTER

The following statement, which I translate and slightly condense from Bhoju’s Hindi, is his own synthesis of dozens of responses from rural Rajasthanis to questions about the relation between gods and nature:

Whenever any living being, whether god or human, is in a place where there are trees and plants and many kinds of warbling birds; and a lake, river or stream of murmuring water, then in such a place of natural beauty, a god or a person—any soul—if it is alone it doesn’t feel the feeling of loneliness.

Just from thinking of natural beauty the mind receives bliss; so from dwelling there, what happiness!

Necessarily, gods and goddesses love nature, and that which we love we wholeheartedly protect.

When guests, friends or those seeking shelter come to our home we give full attention to their needs and protection, and if someone attempts some unauthorized action or commits some crime in our home of fields we punish them.

Similarly, gods also give protection and hospitality to those who come within their boundaries, and those who commit crimes within their boundaries they punish either physically or economi-

cally.

Every god loves nature and loves natural things within his own boundaries. He protects them, maintaining his responsible authority. He wants to be surrounded by green trees and plants and water; he wants animals and birds to receive shelter.

Several major themes to be explored in this paper are introduced in these lines. The key terms are bliss (*ānand*), protection (*surakṣā*), responsible authority (*zimedārī*) and shelter (*śaraṇ*).

The concept of bliss is framed in an idyllic setting of natural beauty and crystallized in the sentiment that, surrounded by such beauty, one does not feel loneliness. Rural Rajasthanis dread loneliness and fear out-of-the-way places. But, although many shrines—particularly those endowed with green trees and clean running water—are located far from human habitation, they are places not of fear but bliss. This bliss is enjoyed perpetually by the deities who reside in these pleasant surroundings, and briefly partaken of by the pilgrims who visit them.

The attitudes ascribed to gods and human beings are closely homologized here. In fact, analogies between divine and human beings form the basis of explanation. The implications of such analogies are twofold. First, we can understand the gods' attitudes because they are not unlike peoples'. But, on the other hand, it is the difference between land belonging to gods and ordinary peoples' land that inspired this paper. If, then, the sources of bliss for humans and gods are fundamentally the same, how shall we explain why sustained bliss in unflawed natural beauty exists for deities but not for mortals?

The answer lies in the two linked ideas of protection and responsible authority. Successful protection is a manifestation of genuine authority, and behind both stands the notion of effective power. Deities protect their domains and the life within their boundaries, and it behoves them to do so. Just as humans lose prestige if their houses fall into disrepair and they are no longer able to offer hospitality to guests, so would a deity's fame diminish should its place suffer environmental deterioration. Therefore, deities are understood to manifest their power in the righteous protection of their *banīs*' beauty and purity.

While it is a truism that in Hinduism guests are gods, in the case of shrines we have a different equation: gods are hosts, and pilgrims are their guests. Not only human pilgrims, but any living being that sojourns in the deities' territory should find shelter (*śaraṇ*) there. Shelter is more comprehensive and enduring than protection. It may imply a long-term and mutual relationship between devotee and deity (WADLEY 1975, 110–111). This relationship, of shelter-giver to shelter-

taker, is of course a hierarchical one.

In a classic article on the cultural construction of land (1969), Walter Neale points out some differences between "land-to-own" and "land-to-rule," and posits the priority of the latter. He suggests that for Indians the power inherent in "land-to-rule" was more important than any wealth to be accumulated through "land-to-own." That male deities may be closely equated with rulers is easily established. They are frequently called by titles such as *annadātā*, *ṭhākūrjī*, *mahārāj*—all terms used to address human lords and overlords. Deities are supplied with "thrones" (*gaddī*) and offered umbrellas (*chatarī*)—two prime symbols of kingship. By protecting their shrines' boundaries and maintaining their environments, deities manifest a social power similar to a great landlord's or king's. And they thereby attract more seekers after shelter (and bringers of offerings).<sup>8</sup>

The royal model is not the only one within which to interpret the phenomenon of divine conservation. Although none of the stories discussed below concern goddess shrines, others have observed that many, perhaps the majority, of protected, wooded shrines belong not to male *devatā* but to female *devīs*.<sup>9</sup> The latter are rarely addressed as queens, but far more frequently as "Mothers" (*Mātājī*). Their protection and the shelter they offer—as well as the authority their "proofs" demonstrate—may reflect kinship rather than political patterns. However, the published reports of folklore surrounding groves sacred to goddesses elsewhere in India reveals many similarities with our Rajasthani stories that concern the environmental interests of male deities.

Thus far I have considered deities, like humans, finding bliss in nature. Like kings, gods may establish and sustain their power by protecting the environment within which it extends. Like mothers, goddesses may offer shelter and nourishment, but uphold their authority with swift, sure punishments. However, the interrelationship between deities and nature, as well as corresponding connections between human beings and their environments, are far from simple, unidirectional affairs in the Hindu world-view.<sup>10</sup> Animate deities may protect inanimate nature, but nature itself grows miraculously animate in expressing devotion to deities.

One of the women's songs in Bhoju's collection describes some scenes in the life-history of the regional *avatār* of Vishnu, Dev Nārāyaṇjī.

When Dev Nārāyaṇ took birth on Mālāserī hill, that place became Mathura city. From happiness a dry tree became com-

pletely green, and the peacocks' voices began to cry.

When Dev Nārāyaṇ came to Dehamālī village then the stones, out of happiness, bowed . . . and the trees made a joyful celebration.

Trees and stones may experience devotional emotions so strongly that the landscape thus touched by divinity is permanently altered.<sup>11</sup> Keeping in mind the implications of such manifestations of nature's reverence for deities, we continue to investigate the ways that deities teach, or coerce, humans to revere nature. Let us turn to some exemplary tales.

#### DIVINE CONSERVATION AT WORK: EIGHT STORIES OF PROOFS AND MIRACLES

The stories we present here reveal strong thematic continuities between past and present, despite evident contextual changes over time. Most particularly, this collection reenforces the concepts of authority and protection already introduced. Connections with bliss and beauty are more submerged, but nonetheless pervasive. When I first excitedly perused Bhoju's collection I was slightly disappointed, for I had thought that the stories would all be recent, and that anti-technological motifs might predominate. I understood that gods opposed pumps, pipelines, roads, canals and so forth. However, the range of tales clearly shows that it is not technological intrusion per se that offends deities. Precedents for the most recent stories were set long ago.

It appears that gods and goddesses defend their domains, and their authority within those domains, against all kinds of intrusions and depredations: their wrath may fall on a Mughul emperor and his elephant, a solitary woodcutter with a simple hand-ax, or the driver of a Bombay bulldozer. While it is clear that the innovations of modernity are one of the most common causes of shrine-boundary violations in recent years, the stories involving machinery and construction are (with one possible exception) not qualitatively different from those that predate them. Mortal hubris and greed, rather than machinery, seem to be the chief cues for these incidents. I have arranged them in more or less chronological order.

##### 1. *Aurangzeb learns his lesson*

This tale of icon-protection does not directly treat environmental themes. I include it because it offers a paradigmatic test-case for divine sovereignty within a limited space. Not even Aurangzeb, the brutal Mughul iconoclast, can command destruction within the boundaries

of Savāi Bhoj, a Rajasthani hero-god. Indeed, Aurangzeb must submit to the offended deity's authority and "perform Hindu worship" (Aurangzeb is a frequent target in Hīndū lore for this type of miracle story). Note, moreover, that the ultimate result of the contest is an expansion of the deity's territory.

On the border of Bhilwara is Āsind village. Here is a monument (*deval*) to the famous Bhagaṛāvāt hero Savāi Bhoj, and his brothers. The Mughul ruler Aurangzeb, at the time of his victory over Mewar, was destroying all the Hindu temples and deities-places. He arrived here. Aurangzeb gave the order that this Savāi Bhoj icon be dislodged and broken.

When his soldiers were unable to dislodge it, Aurangzeb ordered his elephant-driver to break this shrine (*devalī*). But the elephant, just as it was attempting to smash the shrine, dropped dead on the spot. At just this moment Aurangzeb received the news that his wife and daughter were unconscious.

Hearing this, Aurangzeb got upset, and the people of Āsind told him to perform Hindu worship.

Aurangzeb then asked Savāi Bhoj's pardon and forbade the destruction of *devasthān*. As soon as he did this, the elephant came back to life and his wife and daughter regained consciousness.

Aurangzeb wrote a copper plate giving 700 *bighās* of land to Savāi Bhoj, and forgiving the tax on this land.

## 2. *A tree is worth a human life*

Bhoju comments on this story: "Evidently a deep connection exists between humans and nature if, in order to save a part of nature, a person thinks: 'It is not an expensive price to pay if I give my head in place of a tree and thus am able to save the tree.' These people thought to themselves: 'Our favorite deity Parvati is incarnated in this tree because of a curse, and to protect it is our first dharma.'" Here, humans bodily defend trees, understanding them as an incarnation of the goddess.<sup>12</sup> While divine protectors always triumph, the human defenders of nature are martyred. The ensuing carnage has the form of culturally approved self-sacrifice, however, for tales of devotees who make offerings of their own heads and are rewarded in various ways are common to goddess lore.<sup>13</sup>

On the 9th of September, 1930, the Maharaja of Jodhpur sent his agents into the jungle to cut wood in the village of Khejarlī, twenty-four miles from Jodhpur. When the Maharaja's laborers began to cut the *khejāri* trees, then the Viśnoī woman Amrita Devi



forbade it, because the Viśnoī caste does not cut green trees and the tree named *khejāri* is their specially worshipped tree.

But the workers did not accept the goddess's interdiction, and began to cut the trees anyway, telling the villagers: "If you want to save the trees, then pay a tax; if not we will cut the trees."

Amrita Devi responded: "To set a price is sinful, not one bit shall we give. It's cheap to trade a human head, so that a tree may live!" [This is my attempt to capture the message of her rhymed couplet: *Dām diyā dāg lāge, tukṛo na devā dān | Śir sāṅte rūnkh rahe to bhī sasto jāṅ.*]

When she said this the villagers wrapped themselves around the trunks of the trees, and the laborers with their axes chopped them down. In this way, one by one, 363 people were martyred in order to save these trees.

### 3. *Dev Nārāyaṇ and the Muslim woodcutter*

This is a simple and far less tragic tale of tree-protection involving a solitary woodcutter and a single tree under a potent deity's protection. Like tale 1, it involves a Muslim learning to participate in Hindu worship, and, as in tale 1, this act of submission is followed by a happy ending.

About forty-five years ago in Bundi district, in the *banī* of Basolī Dev Nārāyaṇ, a Muslim began to cut a tree. But he hit himself in the foot with his axe, and fell unconscious. When his family prayed to Dev Nārāyaṇ and offered up a silver tree, of the same species that he had cut, he fully recovered.

### 4. *Dev Nārāyaṇ and the Kota-Chittor Bus Road*

In this tale a deity not only exercises but in fact acquires power through protecting his trees and boundaries.

About twenty years ago when the Kota-Chittor road was being built, the path ran right through the *banī* of a Dev Nārāyaṇji in Lāḍpūrā. When the PWD (Public Works Department) overseer gave the order to cut down trees within Dev Nārāyaṇ's *banī*, then all the village people told the laborers that it was forbidden to do this. They said: "If you cut the trees in this *banī*, then Dev Nārāyaṇ will get angry, and sin (*doṣ*) will result.

But the overseer didn't accept their advice. He and his companions challenged the strength of this god. The roller-machine was standing on a slope, and all of a sudden it started to go, and three men were knocked down and they died. After that, they

all asked forgiveness, and they held an offering-feast (*savāmaṇī*) right there. As many trees as they had cut, they feasted that many Brahmans.

Up until then there was only a platform-shrine in this place. But after the news of this event spread, the ruler of Nayāgāv [a nearby village], who had no beard and mustache, came here. He tied on leaves [from the protected trees] and went to sleep.

In the morning, he woke to find he had a big beard and mustache. In this way miracles were obtained, and afterwards a temple was built.

##### 5. *Bhairūjī and the Bombay pipeline*

In this simple tale the deity's power prevails absolutely: nothing is changed but the plans of the would-be intruders.

In Jaipur district is a place of Kurāḍ Bhairūjī. About ten or twelve years ago this Bhairū forced the famous Bombay contractor, Dodasel Company, to change the route of their pipeline. Whatever machine reached the border of this place, it went bad. Whatever driver attempted to bring the pipe became sick; but when he turned back he recovered. In the end they changed the route for the pipeline.

##### 6. *Sagasjī's field*

This undated tale concerns the origins and acts of a very localized deity. The Sagasjī in question chooses to display his limited sovereignty by forbidding the farmer of the field where he lives to take what are the usual measures to protect his crops. If the farmer tries to protect his crops as his neighbors do, then his harvest fails. But if he leaves it all to Sagasjī, he has no problems. A personal surrender to the deity seems to be what is demanded here. The tale's implications include this god's control over plant and animal life.

Near Bhilwara, in Dhāngarās village, a Rajput's wedding party and some Dakoits began to quarrel. The groom died in the fighting, and that very groom has now appeared in the form of Sagasjī.

A peasant who owned a field near this Sagasjī's place conversed with him, Sagasjī having taken the form of a black snake, approximately fifteen feet long, with a huge mouth and spreading hood.

In this field [where Sagasjī is] no *macān* (platform from which farmers defend their ripening crops against marauding animals) may be built to keep away the animals and birds. Whenever a *macān* is built, the crops stop growing of their own accord, but if

the protection of the fields is left to Sagasjī, then the crops are always good. Although in the neighboring fields animals—parrots and little birds—damage those crops lacking protection, in this field of Sagasjī's no damage ever occurs.

7. *A dead-wood thief is punished*

Given the shortage of firewood for much-needed cooking fuel in village Rajasthan, the temptations to take it wherever you find it must be strong indeed. Tales such as this one proclaim that a deity has absolute authority over all wood, dead or alive, within his *banī*. The offended god demands a costly offering, refusing to accept the purloined wood's return as adequate compensation. Potential future offenders may think twice after hearing this.

In the place of Banjārī Dev Nārāyaṇ a tree was knocked down by a windstorm. Kishan Lal Gujar took some wood from this tree. The priest and villagers prayed to Dev Nārāyaṇ to find the thief. Kishan Lal got a terrible stomach ache. No remedies could cure it. They took him to Dev Nārāyaṇ and the god told him about the wood. He then brought the wood back, but Devjī wouldn't take it, and took a silver cane from him instead.

8. *Dev Nārāyaṇjī insists on purity*

This final entry in our collection has a very recent date—three years back. Except for tale 2, it is the only one which involves the deaths of innocent humans—for the offenders themselves perished in tale 3, after being duly warned. While the deaths in tale 2 were voluntary self-sacrifices, here they are divinely imposed. While in other stories severe punishments inflicted by deities are ultimately reversed, in this one the children's deaths are all too final. These divergent elements in the most recent tale might be taken as signs of the latest developments. Thus this tale of divine wrath could be interpreted as indicating an escalation of the stakes involved in conflicts between strict tradition and lax modernity: the disrespect shown to a vegetarian deity is quite deliberate; the "proof" correspondingly severe. Only further research could confirm such a speculation. Another possible explanation for this tale's peculiarities would be that a tragic accident gains some cosmic significance through being thus framed within a miracle testifying to supreme divine potency.

There is a famous miracle (*camatkār*) of Dekanyā Dev Nārāyaṇ who insisted on purity (*pavitratā*) within his *simā*. The chief officer of the Rajasthan Mining Company was returning from

Bundi to Udaipur with his staff. On the way they decided to camp in Dekanyā Dev Nārāyaṇ's *banī*, which was very green and pleasant with shade and water. Around two in the afternoon, when they wanted to eat, they began to cook chicken. The villagers forbade it, saying, "You can't do such a thing inside Dev Nārāyaṇ's boundary. Within this boundary neither meat-eating nor liquor-drinking is possible."

The officer and his staff didn't accept this. Having eaten and drunk, they sat outside their tent. Then a sudden light rain began to fall, and their small children ran into the tent. Suddenly the whole tent burst into flame and four children were burned in this fire and died. The villagers tried to save them, and they themselves were not harmed by the fire. This happened three years ago.

These stories are representative of many similar ones in currency all over Rajasthan and beyond. Taken together they express a cultural conviction that deities can and will protect the purity and integrity of their domains, either reinforcing the efforts of devotees or independently of human efforts. Tales 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7 seem of a single type. All five demonstrate a god's swift response to boundary-violation in the form of "proofs." These displays of power are followed by immediate human submission to divine authority; restitution for the offence; and either restoration of the previous status quo within the shrine, or a notable gain of wealth, land, and prestige for the deity concerned.

Tale 2 has the theme of tree-protection in common with 3, 4, 5, and 7, but is otherwise unlike them. It is a tale of divinely inspired human heroics, of awesome but not mythologically unprecedented self-sacrifice. While other protection stories show gods defending nature, here humans defend nature because it embodies divinity.

Tale 6 reveals a very localized deity's special intimacy with, and control over, nature—here uniquely in an agricultural rather than forest setting. In common with all but tale 2, tale 6 shows a god demanding supreme authority over his bounded territory. Tale 8 also strongly reinforces this pervasive theme, but stands apart from the rest in portraying an irreversible punishment whose harshness is incommensurate with the offence.

Divine affinity for an intact natural environment is understood and appreciated by devotees who pass on these stories, and who for the most part—out of fear and respect—refrain from violating divine interdictions on exploiting the land within shrine boundaries. Could such circumspection extend to other aspects of nature, aspects not explicitly

under the authority of an empowered deity? In concluding I shall briefly consider possible implications of our findings in the wider scope of ecological concerns in and beyond Rajasthan.

#### CONSERVATION, DIVINE AND MORTAL

In the village where I lived from 1979–1981 (which is Bhoju's home), I did not fail to notice that the forestry agent assigned by the government was not highly successful at protecting what little was left of the local trees. When he caught them in the act, he would impose a few rupees penalty on illegal woodcutters, the vast majority of whom were women gathering cooking fuel. The women viewed him as an irrational agent of minor financial disaster, whose presence added one more difficulty to their already difficult lives. He had *no* moral authority whatsoever, whereas the necessity to prepare food for their husbands and children was an important element in what they understood to be their *dharma* as wives and mothers.

While an encounter with the forestry agent might be narrated with annoyance and disgust, tales of divine conservation such as we have collected and presented here, are told with pride and reverence. These stories do not exist in a cultural vacuum. India's environmental advocates often cite classical texts—Upanishads, epics, and puranas—referring to idealized sylvan abodes of ancient holy men, and generally stressing the interdependency of humans and nature apparent in many aspects of classical Indian tradition.

For example, the centennial volume of the Indian Forestry department cites the Vedas, Kautilya's *Arthasāstra* the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Padma Purāṇa* for indications of ancient reverence for and protection of plant and animal life, and even a verse on the blessings reaped in heaven by planting trees on earth (*One Hundred Years of Indian Forestry* 1961, 102; 147).<sup>14</sup>

Madhav Gadgil and V. D. Vartak have published extensively on the ways that traditional culture as expressed in local folklore and ritual observances supports sound ecological practice in many regions of India. Their writings include statistical and geographic surveys of the existence and distribution of "sacred groves," as well as case studies. The case studies contain phenomena of a very similar nature to those Bhoju and I have found in Rajasthan. Just one example will suffice here. This concerns a sacred grove in Maharashtra that was purchased by a coal merchant from Pune. After a series of disputes, the merchant died suddenly, vomiting blood. Local villagers decided that his death was a swift punishment sent by the angry goddess, reacting to the violation of her sacred grove. They prevented further tree-

falling, saving the rest of this extensive grove from exploitation. Today, VARTAK and GADGIL report, the goddess's wooded domain stands as a last refuge of the magnificent vegetation that once covered the entire region (1981, 277).

Vartak and Gadgil note that sacred groves often contain species of plants that no longer exist in the surrounding areas, and reveal interrelationships among various species of plants and animals no longer observable anywhere beyond the deity's boundaries. They express their respect for the religious traditions that have saved these remarkable ecological niches from human exploitation (GADGIL 1983, 115).

Indian ecologists' strong appreciation for their cultural heritage as directly reenforcing environmentalist aims contrasts sharply with the cultural critiques often expressed by Westerners regarding Western interactions with nature. Arthur SACKS, participating in an Indian symposium on environmental issues, states: "Humanity in the western world has tended to define itself as outside of nature, alienated and divorced from it" (1982, 263). He sees this alienation of humans from nature as the direct result of the removal of divinities from the earth: ". . . when the gods departed the world nature became useable, expendable. When you no longer pray to a lake you are free to foul it" (1982, 263).

Those theories placing the roots of Western environmental problems squarely within Western religious heritage consider the central Christian position as one which "views everything that exists in creation as being created for the sake of humankind, and that no moral constraints on the dealings of humankind with nonhuman nature exist" (1983, 201). These dealings are strikingly constrained, by contrast, in the basic Hindu view. Constraints are couched, moreover, not just in terms of moral authority but in terms of absolute, tangible power.

GADGIL and VARTAK, despite their appreciation of traditional conservation's remarkable successes, suggest that now it is imperative ". . . that we bring together all the sacred groves of India under a single ownership of the forest departments of the various states, and then constitute them into a system of countrywide nature preserves" (1981, 281). The good intentions of their proposition are unquestionable, but I wonder what the results would actually be. At least at the village level, deities' authority has to the present day been visibly more effective in preserving nature than governmental efforts. If divine sanctions have so effectively held back woodcutters, hunters and polluters of all sorts in the past, why should they not continue to do so? Stripped of divine authority, deities' places might soon be stripped of

their trees as well. For the government, at least in its local manifestations, does not command the moral force—to say nothing of the miraculous powers—of deities.

Our research would suggest that a fruitful direction for environmentalists to explore would be how to extend the powerful moral authority and refined aesthetic values underlying divine conservation beyond the *śīmā* of the gods and goddesses. Discussions of environmental problems and potential solutions in India often focus on the obvious but crucial point that people won't participate in conservational efforts unless they understand the benefits of these efforts for their own lives and in their own terms (FERNANDES 1983; FERNANDES, ed. 1983; HADDEN 1986, 210). The major question, then, would be how to instigate and cultivate such understandings. The successes of deities in defending their boundaries would seem to offer some clues.<sup>15</sup>

Earlier in this paper we highlighted the concepts of bliss deriving from natural beauty, of responsible authority which protected that beauty, and of shelter offered within these protected areas to all resident creatures and transient guests. All of these principles were readily articulated by many Rajasthani villagers when Bhoju asked them why the gods maintained an intact natural environment within their boundaries. No textual authorities were cited by his respondents, but many local songs and sayings were offered; these are living, popular oral traditions. The existence of such traditions, as well as the abundance of everproliferating legends about shrine-protection, suggest—to the impractical anthropologist—that a reservoir of environmental wisdom may be waiting to be tapped or channeled by perceptive and more practical policy-makers. Obviously the forestry agent cannot afflict offenders with stomach pains, make their wives unconscious, or destroy their children. But Western ecologists' envy of Eastern attitudes toward nature is not unfounded. In Rajasthan, the gods have not departed; the landscape is alive with spirits and powers. Although their dominion seems circumscribed at present, the values on which that dominion is based are basic and limitless in their implications.

#### NOTES

1. I was engaged at the time in research on Hindu pilgrimage (GOLD 1988).
2. Cookouts in Rajasthan are often religiously inspired events as well as much-relished pleasures. The food cooked at a deity's place will be offered first at the shrine and then consumed as power-imbued deities' leftovers (*prasād*).
3. This conference eventually took place in December, 1987, and an earlier draft of this paper was presented there.
4. One major source in popular mythology for the embodiment of deities in trees

and rivers is the *Kārtik Mahātm* a text read aloud in many village temples throughout the Hindu month of Kārtik (October-November). A consideration of these well-known stories is beyond our present scope, but they are undoubtedly an important part of the cultural background for divine conservation. For an extensive compendium of tree lore in and beyond India see also SEN GUPTA 1980.

5. This is therefore a complexly coauthored paper. Rather than smoothly dissolving the coauthorship into a neutral "we" throughout, I use the collective when our work and thought are closely merged. At other times I may speak with my own voice, or explicitly cite Bhoju's words.

6. See BRUNVAND 1981 for the development and transmission of modern legends in urban America. The Rajasthani materials under consideration here strike me as being of a similar nature.

7. For illuminating discussions of the ecological benefits of divine conservation in various other regions of India see CHAUDHURI and PAL 1981; GADGIL 1983, 1985; GADGIL and VARTAK 1975, 1976, 1981; VARTAK and GADGIL 1981. For the reflections of Western ecologists on the religious sources of environmental problems and solutions see ATTFIELD 1983; SACKS 1982; SMITH 1972; WHITE 1973.

8. NEALE goes on to note that those who acquire power through land-to-rule also tend to accumulate wealth of which land is, of course, the main source (1969, 9). Deities of recognized authority may similarly grow rich if many pilgrims come to enjoy their hospitality and blessings, returning these favors with major thank-offerings (GOLD 1989).

9. GADGIL and VARTAK in their survey of the "sacred groves of Western Ghats" report that "most of the cults around which the sacred groves exist are mother goddess cults" (1976, 156). KOSAMBI suggests some particular historical and mythological associations between mother goddesses and sacred groves in and beyond India (1962, 91-95). BHOJU attempted no comprehensive survey of the Rajasthani shrines; but most of the stories he gathered featured regional hero-gods, foremost among them Dev Nārāyaṅjī. I suspect that this is the result of a combination of factors, including the preeminence of regional deities in Rajasthan's popular religion and Bhoju's own affiliations with the community of Devjī worshippers.

10. For a detailed and complex description of various interdependencies between gods, seasons, and pilgrims in South India see MORENO 1984. For the importance of ecological concerns in Ayurvedic healing see ZIMMERMAN 1980. And for some delightful insights into the relations between humans, houses, land, and region see DANIEL 1984.

11. I have seen for myself the strangely slanting stones near Dehamālī, whose appearance readily inspires belief in some extraordinary origin.

12. See KISHVAR and VANITA 1984, 129-133 on the "Chipko movement" in which women of Uttarkhand have united to protect the trees of their land against exploitive woodcutting. One form their protests take is to wrap themselves bodily around the threatened trees. Chipko is also discussed in GADGIL 1983, 130-131.

13. Although the practice is gradually changing, powerful Rajasthani goddesses are still often worshipped by beheading goats as sacrificial offerings.

14. See also CHAUDHURI and PAL 1981; SANKHALA 1973, 52; VYAS and GOLLEY 1975, 2, 115; YUKTANANDA 1982.

15. After completing this paper we heard of one innovative reforestation program currently underway in several districts of Rajasthan. Called "Tree Friends" (*Rūnkh Bhāyalā*)—this plan employs the very popular concept of "tying protection" (*rakṣā bandhan*) onto brothers or onto previously unrelated persons who then become



“brothers.” A corps of several hundred persons appointed as “Tree Friends” participate in a ceremony held on the major festival day of Rakṣā Bandhan in which they tie strings (*rākhi*) onto trees. These persons will tend nurseries and distribute seedlings among villagers, receiving a monthly stipend for their work. Twelve hundred-thousand new plants are involved in one program according to Bhoju’s sources. Although it is too soon to judge this program’s effectiveness, it certainly offers one creative example of uniting traditional values with economic incentives in the service of environmentalism.

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