

ANN GRODZINS GOLD
Syracuse University

The Long-Tailed Rat

Abstract

In the North Indian village of Ghatiyali, Rajasthan, persons of all ages narrate a short and humorous folktale about a rat who makes a series of improbable trades. Each transaction begins as a gift offered freely but becomes a kind of extortion. Variants on this tale-type—"The Clever Animal and the Fortunate Exchanges" (170A)—are widespread in South Asia. They generally portray either a rodent or a monkey who gains—either to keep happily or ultimately to lose painfully—either a bride or a drum. The moral, economic, and social problems encapsulated in the tale's stable core of "deceptive bargains" are differently elaborated in its varying outcomes and evaluations of the trading protagonist's character. These evoke contrasting moralities of gifts and bargains, the ambiguities surrounding them, and the consequent fuzziness or gray zone that separates the two.

Keywords: India—animal tales—gifts—exchange—morality

Nothing is lost, only transformed (RAMANUJAN 1989, 250)*

IFIRST heard the story of the long-tailed rat over twenty years ago in Ghatiyali, a village in Rajasthan, North India, where I have lived and worked on and off since 1979. As it is told in Ghatiyali, this brief narrative begins with a rat losing his tail and ends with him either gaining a bride, or giving one away. In between these framing moments lies the constituting substance of all variants with which I am concerned in this article: a series of “fortunate exchanges” (AARNE and THOMPSON 1981, 63; JASON 1989, 24) or still more specifically “deceptive bargains” (THOMPSON 1934, 287–88). The narrative sequence for this tale-type varies enormously.

In one common pattern the protagonist—whether rat or other animal—initially demands compensation for a personal and irrevocable loss. Following that loss, in each subsequent episode, this loser-victim takes his or her extorted compensation and volunteers to donate it to another being who evidently stands in dire need. The offer is always made with a pretense of spontaneous generosity: no strings attached. But, as soon as this seemingly charitable gift has been consumed or otherwise destroyed, the main character insists on taking in exchange from the recipient something of far greater value. In some parts of the world this tale-type involves a well-deserved rags-to-riches transformation and, in some common North Indian versions, the tricky trader is—from the beginning—a social outcast seeking acceptance. However, sometimes the bargainer is purely and simply a “rascal.”

In order to introduce some persistent themes that permeate most of this story’s variations, and that will occupy us in the sections to follow, let me briefly exemplify the tale’s capacity for permutation. In Ghatiyali’s most common iteration, the sequence begins with a tail lost and concludes with a woman won. Another popular North Indian version—which seems prevalent in Punjab – also allows the rat to gain a bride, but only temporarily in the center of the story. Later, at the end, he loses both wife and tail most painfully. Other versions, which include sequences of exchanged substances

and goods very similar to those appearing in Ghatiyali's tale, have the trader or bargainer – usually a monkey not a rat—end up the overjoyed possessor of a drum, not a bride. In the course of bargaining, he gains a woman but does not presume to keep her. Nor does he selflessly give her away. Rather, he trades her on, and there lies his success and this particular version's twist. Drummers are traditionally low in South Asian social hierarchies, but they possess acknowledged ritual powers.¹

In another Indian variant, one of the few where the mouse is female, she is slain by the “Girl” she acquires. Thus a gender shift for the protagonist seems to produce one of the most punishing outcomes. And in just one version that I located (although I do not claim to have searched exhaustively), the ending comes full circle: the lost tail is restored, and the rat's situation vastly improved in terms of community respect. Even this cursory glance shows that, in its many variants, the rat's story seems readily to turn upside down and inside out, while remaining inherently the same.

I propose that the whole mass of fortunate exchange tales possess a shared core. To use a frequently-cited analogy for oral traditions from A. K. Ramanujan's writing: the handle may be changed a few times and the blade changed a few times “but it is the same knife” (RAMANUJAN 1991, xx). The sequences may alter or reverse; the moral evaluation of the central figure and his or her bargaining may be as a clever, charming rascal, a despicable scoundrel, or even a fine and lucky fellow. But the essential content, a chain of schismogenic deals, is stable.² In other words, the enduring “knife” here consists of gifts that are not really gifts; or of the slippage among gifts, bargains, trades, and extortion.

Two recent publications both offer collections and interpretations of South Indian, Tamil folktales, and respectively stress moral vision (BLACKBURN 2001) and “mazes of fantasy” (FERRO-LUZZI 2002) as these narratives' most compelling aspects.³ Neither collection happens to contain a “fortunate exchange” variant, although several other earlier South Indian folktale anthologies do. Nonetheless, Ferro-Luzzi's and especially Blackburn's insights are relevant to my investigation of the long-tailed rat.

Regarding fantasy or imaginative exuberance, it is clear that storytellers take sheer delight in dreaming up improbable, deceitful, and profitable trades, and imagining how to perpetrate them on the gullible. I suspect this to be a universal human predilection; I am fairly sure that my big sister pulled these off on me when I was three and she was eight. More recently, I tried this tale-type out on a room full of middle-schoolers in Ithaca New York and found them to have highly fertile imaginations for outrageous pseudo-bargains.⁴

Blackburn is rightly critical of the celebration of fantasy in folklore scholarship, particularly when it excludes other approaches. Following Blackburn,

I suspect Ghatiyali's light-hearted tale—loopy and humorous and fanciful as it is—of possessing a serious if unresolved moral core to which it may owe at least some of its persistence and widespread appeal across generations.⁵

In the sections that follow, I first look at the tale in the context I know best, which is also the only place where I can offer any helpful performative setting, or speak first hand about a broader folklore community and world view. This is Ghatiyali village. I then move outward from Ghatiyali, both geographically and thematically, to consider similar stories from other Indian regions and look at the ways they may broaden or rearrange the moral and economic and social problems encapsulated in this tiny story's core situation and its several possible resolutions. I also note, although only in passing, some shapes this tale-type takes in settings other than South Asia.

A third and concluding segment treats contrasting moralities of gifts and bargains, the ambiguities that surround these, and the consequent fuzziness or gray zone that separates them. I believe the rat story's serious mischief pivots around just this fuzzy space, where before our blinking eyes a gift is precipitously transformed into a demand.⁶ I briefly consider here another moral economy—one where a divine giver may be trusted not to renege. To epitomize this I return briefly to Rajasthan in order to relate a different kind of story and to speak of reciprocity, love, and grace.

RATS AT PLAY IN GHATIYALI

The most striking characteristic of these didactic fables is their persistent political nature. The nature of power, the qualities of leadership, mother wit and cunning as the weapons of the weak, subversion, betrayal, and con games are regular themes (RAMANUJAN 1991, xxix on the subject of animal tales).

I first heard the story about a rat with a long tail from a little girl named Kusum in 1980. Kusum was all of three—a Brahmin schoolteacher's only child, adored and coddled. I was at the time living in a back room of the small home she shared with her mother and father. She loved to visit my room and her indulgent mother followed her—leading to a fast friendship between us grown-ups.⁷ One day we decided to amuse ourselves by recording Kusum telling a story, and the story she prettily but haltingly narrated was that of the long-tailed rat, with her mother prompting in a stage whisper quite audible on the tape.⁸ I had no ethnographic interest at the time in children or in animal tales. Later that same day when I played this to one of my research assistants, Nathu Nath, I was surprised that he—an adult—insisted on himself recording what he considered to be a more properly told

version. Nathu added rhythmic verbal formulas that carried the narrative along in a snappy, humorous, engaging fashion, without altering its substance.⁹

Years later, I became interested in the cultural construction of the natural environment, and in children's perceptions of the environment. I planned fieldwork for 1993 during which I intended to record many animal stories. Based on my encounter with the long-tailed rat I assumed such tales would exist, and expected they might hold some keys or clues to understandings of human relationships with nature. Unfortunately, once back in Ghatiyali, I soon discovered that most people's repertoires included very few animal stories indeed.¹⁰ Regularly, I asked adults and children for animal stories, and regularly most of them would smile and say, "Well, there's one about a rat with a long tail." So it happened that I recorded the rat story several times more in 1993 from children including Madhu Gujar, and adults including Gauri Nath (Nathu's mother by adoption).

Here is a complete version of the story as recited for me by my research assistant's daughter Madhu Gujar in 1993. Madhu was six and still in preschool. Knowing I was a collector of tales, she volunteered to record the long-tailed rat story, and she told it with verve and no help from the grown-ups:

There were some rats and they were playing inside the grain sifter. One rat with a long tail came and said, "O friends, let me play with you." They said, "Your tail is hurting us so why don't you go to the carpenter and get it shortened." So the rat went to the carpenter; and the carpenter cut off his tail and threw it up on the roof tiles, and a crow flew away with it. So the rat came back and said "O rat friends, now let me play!" But they said, "No, your tail-blood is getting on us, so go and get it back." So he went to the carpenter and said, "Give me back my tail," and the carpenter said "The crow flew away with it." "If you don't give it back I'll take your wood shavings."¹¹ So, he took the wood shavings and ran away. And he came to an old lady who was cooking bread and burning her knees. So he said, "Why are you burning your knees? Take my shavings." But after she burned the wood shavings, he said, "O old lady give me back my shavings or I will take your bread." So he took her bread. Then he met a potter who was making pots and eating clay. "Why are you eating clay? Have some bread." So the potter ate the bread and then the rat said, "Give it back or else I'll take your pot." So he took the pot, and then he met a camel herder who was milking a

camel into his shoes and drinking milk. So he said “Why milk in your shoes? Take my pot.”

But the camel gave a kick and broke the pot and then the rat said, “Give me back my pot or I’ll take your camel.”

Then he met a groom and bride who were walking.

“Why don’t you take my camel?”

So they both sat on the camel, and the camel fell down and died.

“Give me back my camel or I’ll take your bride!”

So he took the bride and ran away. [as told by Madhu Gujar, 1993]

In Madhu’s story, the rat is a victim of social exclusion and the kind of cruel or arbitrary injustices we might readily associate with school children and their cliques. But this rejected outcast takes his fate in his own hands. Through a gift-giving praxis that involves an unsettling mix of ingenuous generosity with duplicitous bartering and bullying, he emerges very well in the end. The tale struck me as one in which irrevocable loss is juxtaposed with infinitely fruitful possibilities.

However, the underdog’s victorious redemption is by no means the point of all existent variants of this tale. Even within the same folklore community, one additional episode thoroughly shifts the story’s moral import. If the rat relinquishes the bride, his tale changes from one of triumphant recoup by initially damaged transactor, to one of meritorious self-denial—as he willingly passes on the prime fruit of his successful bargains to a recipient more appropriate than himself.¹² Thus did Gauri Nath, a wrinkled old woman with great grandchildren, transform the tale for me, not long after I recorded it from Madhu.¹³

In Gauri’s version, having obtained a buffalo, rather than a camel, the rat meets a bride and groom who do not travel on foot but ride in a cart. However, their cart is not pulled by a draft animal, but by their “mother and father.” (How I wish I had asked if it were the groom’s or the bride’s mother and father, a fine point doubtless obvious to the teller. I suspect it would be the groom’s because that would increase the inappropriateness of the situation). The rat asks, “Don’t you have any bullocks?” The answer is “No.” So the rat yokes his he-buffalo to the cart. After the buffalo collapses and dies, he of course demands the bride. He then meets a man who is grinding flour:

The rat asked the man, “Why are you grinding? Where is your wife?”

“I have no woman.”

“I will give you a bride.”

So he gave the bride to the man who was grinding, and that’s the end!

[as told by Gauri Nath, 1993]

Rather than allowing the prize to remain with the victorious bargainer, Gauri Nath's telling leaves him alone with nothing but his good deed, another kind of happy ending. Moreover, she uses a formulaic closing, to emphasize, "that's all folks."¹⁴

The old woman's version reflects joint family unity and burdens (the parents pulling the couple) and employs an outdated sign (the grinding of flour) for women's services as they are required by men. Chronological speculations are always risky. All we know for a fact is that this is a coexisting, alternative telling. Still, over an age gap of at least sixty-five years between Gauri and Madhu, both recorded in the same year, we might find intimations of a shift. The implications are a move from generosity to selfishness that—I will suggest—might be located among many other signs of the times.

I have very little exegesis on the long-tailed rat story in spite of so many people knowing it and happily telling it. It is told, people say, for fun (*mazā*), and for entertainment (*manoranjan*). It was clearly taught to children much as we teach ours "The Three Little Pigs" or Mother Goose rhymes: in order to see their cute performances.¹⁵ But it differs from such passed-down children's lore in the U.S. in several ways. Pre-literate American children are often shown picture books to accompany the oral tradition; yet many urban American children doubtless recite Jack and Jill without the faintest conception of why anyone would need to fetch a pail of water.

By contrast, in Ghatiyali there are no books containing the long-tailed rat story, and no pictures are necessary because everything in this story is utterly familiar to everyone who lives in the village: firewood, wheat bread, clay pots, dairy animals, new brides, and of course the rat itself. Rats and mice indeed are all too familiar household companions. In Madhu's house, for example, mice were regularly found in the storeroom and beaten to death with a broom by a brave teenage male cousin. That a rodent should be portrayed engaging in devious, unfair negotiations with people is hardly surprising.

When we turn now to explore the wealth of South Asian variants, we find the trading hero animal is as often a monkey as a rat or mouse. Like rats, monkeys are well known to take what does not belong to them. I have also found one version featuring a rabbit, and one a human being.

DECEPTIVE BARGAINS, FORTUNATE EXCHANGES, AND FORMULAIC CHAINS

Even the "deepest" structures have to be interpreted culturally or individually, depending on our point of view (RAMANUJAN 1982, 269).

The much-maligned but quicksilver variant is our true focus (RAMANUJAN 1989, 255).

The rat story's deep structure is perfectly simple, but its surface variations are subtly complicated. As Ramanujan suggests, multiple surfaces, as they well up from the depths, can vividly intrigue, commanding our interpretive attentions. LÉVI-STRAUSS's dictum that the order of events is less significant for the mythographer than the relationships configured in them also helps partially to cope with the twists and turns of our tail tale (1963, 206–31). For the events may come in almost any order, and the crux is the bargainer's morality as expressed in his or her serial, fleeting relationships with others. Disconcerting is the unfixed nature of this morality as it is evaluated by different tellers.

In pursuit of the long-tailed rat, I tracked published variants groping my way via tale-type and motif indices. As I wandered these orderly labyrinths of the human imagination, I became both fascinated and disoriented. The tale-type where Ghatiyali's story most evidently belongs is 170A, "The Clever Animal and the Fortunate Exchanges." This is a subtype of 170, "The Fox Eats his Fellow Lodger," but while 170 is worldwide, 170A is found only in South Asia.¹⁶ As described in "The Types of the Folktale," 170A involves a sequence of bargains very similar to those we have just heard narrated in Madhu's story from Ghatiyali (AARNE and THOMPSON 1981, 63). From 170 we are also referred to 1655 "The Profitable Exchange"—a type with worldwide provenance that is also closely aligned with other Indian stories. Eventually I discovered that 2029C, "Series of Things Acquired by Mouse," and 2034, "The Mouse Regains its Tail," also yield recognizable multiforms of the Ghatiyali favorite. These are both part of a broader category called "Formula Tales." In motif indices, the events in most of these stories may be classified under K100–299 and are called "Deceptive Bargains;" K251 "Deceptive Damage Claims" is most evidently relevant, and has numerous variants all over the world (THOMPSON 1934, 287; THOMPSON and BALYS 1958, 293–97).

What fascinates index makers, as you can see from the labels, is the series of trades per se, and not the circumstances and evaluations that surround it. It is this chain that allows us so freely to move from one telling to another for comparative purposes. These are indeed the narrative and performative heart of the "long-tailed rat" and its variants. But what most fascinates me is not just the neatly repetitive existence of serried exchanges in all their humorous improbability, but what they might express about cultural visions of trading and the moral judgments attached to duplicitous gifting, or "deceptive bargains," as these tales portray them. Here again, I find support in Stuart Blackburn's argument regarding Tamil tales—that "their moral perspective is paramount." BLACKBURN also argues significantly that this morality is "shaped by the teller's own point of view" (2001, 274)—in other words it is context-dependent and performatively emergent.¹⁷ To acknowledge the key

role of the teller is to acknowledge the limits of my comparative venture here. I lack access to all tellers except those in Ghatiyali, and even they were not very forthcoming on the topic of this amusing little story.¹⁸

In spite of these glaring lacks, we are not left without resources. For when we examine multiple variants of India's "fortunate exchange" or "deceptive bargain" stories we encounter a striking range of different evaluations of the bargainer's behavior, and a variety of ultimate outcomes. These are internal to the tales and thus do not require elusive or inaccessible exegesis. Madhu's "He took the bride and ran away" is as simple and unjudgmental as these stories get. Some published versions reveal something of the nuanced ambivalences with which these ambiguously construed gifting-trading negotiations are viewed. On the one hand, the crafty trader's wild success delights an audience normally constrained by carefully assessed exchange values. On the other hand, no one wants to be on the raw end of such a rat's deals. Moreover, the disadvantaged hero operates in a culture that does not easily allow success to the weak and lowborn, however clever they may be.

Briefly, using published collections of decontextualized English translations of Indian variants, quicksilver indeed, we may tour this political world.¹⁹ In "The Monkey's Bargains," a monkey offers to gather fuel for an old woman and she answers "That's like your kind heart. Do get me some fuel and receive an old Woman's blessing." But later he dances around the cakes she has made until she asks him why he is dancing. He replies "I gave you fuel, and won't you give me a cake?" The narrator interjects, "It seems to me that she might have thought of that without being asked" (CROOKE and ROUSE 1899, 133). Here it appears, at least initially, that the monkey is only reminding the old lady of her good manners, rather than extorting from her.

An almost identical moment occurs in South India's "The Monkey with the Tom-Tom." Here, however, the storyteller sees the monkey's negotiations as pure treachery. The monkey offers fuelwood to an old woman with these kinds words, "Grandmother, grandmother, you are making puddings and your fuel is already exhausted. Use mine also and make some more cakes." But after the last stick burns, the monkey says point-blank (and here both his attitude and his phrasing sound just like the Ghatiyali rat's): "Grandmother, grandmother, return me my fuel or give me all your puddings" (KINGSCOTE and SASTRI 1984, 188–89). I might speculate that a subtle difference, which alters the morality, appears between the polite request for a single cake and the threatening demand for "all your puddings." However, this difference could well have been produced by the translators' arts rather than the storytellers' intentions.

"The Rat's Wedding" from Punjab begins, like "The Monkey's Bargains," with good natured exchanges: the rat offers fuel to a man who needs it, and

the man gives him some dough freely in return, without his asking. But the rat's expectations escalate; by the time he loans his pot to a man milking a buffalo and the man offers him a drink of milk in friendly return, the rat refuses, claiming, "I always make good bargains, and you must just give me the buffalo" (STEEL and TEMPLE 1882, 227). It is as if he has become intoxicated, his desires dangerously inflated by the magic power of trade.

What happens to deceptive bargainers in the end and how are their actions evaluated? The monkey trickster hero is of particular interest, suggesting some of the cultural worry that underlies exchange tales throughout their spectrum of variations. These fortunate exchange stories hint that the monkey might be a sorcerer. And even if he is nothing but a posturing fool, his effectiveness as a wheeler-dealer is based on others' fear of his possible magic arts. In "The Monkey's Bargains," we hear, for example, that "[the bumpkin] was afraid of the Monkey's spells, and so he gave him a cow" (CROOKE and ROUSE 1899, 136). The very use of the term "spells" suggests that even the tale teller, not necessarily a bumpkin, is not sure whether the monkey is merely "cutting capers" or "doing spells." At the end of a similar tale, "The Monkey with the Tom-Tom," the monkey walks off stage at the end, boasting of his accomplishments, retaining his pride and the prize of his final trade, a drum (KINGSCOTE and SASTRI 1984, 188–89).

But when we return to the fate of the rat who—inflated by his bargaining skill—tries to keep the bride, we find a far less benign outcome. In "The Rat's Wedding," early in the story the rat like the monkey glories in his own cleverness at tricky bargains: "What a clever fellow I am," thought the rat, "what bargains I make! Fancy getting food that will last me for five days for an old stick! Wah!" (STEEL and TEMPLE 1882, 226). But unlike the monkey who may keep his drum, the rat who attempts to marry a princess is brought low and forced to renounce bargaining.

It is considered improper, or "against the hair," in much of Hindu caste society for a male to unite with a female of higher status.²⁰ Yet the presumptuous Punjabi rat—until his royal, human and highly indignant mother-in-law literally sits him in a hot seat, perpetually gloats: "Dear me! how clever I am! What bargains I make!... Here I am the son-in-law of a real live Queen! What will the neighbours say?" (STEEL and TEMPLE 1882, 229). In the end, having received his comeuppance by getting his offending rear end burned, "he left all his hair and the best part of his skin behind him, before he managed to escape, howling and vowing that he never, never, never would make a bargain any more" (STEEL and TEMPLE 1882, 229). Mrs. Steel tells us that this was told at Muzaffargarh by a boy of Purvia origin named Namdar," but we do not know his age.²¹

Ghatiyali's children's tale does allow the rat to run away with a purloined

human bride, although adult Gauri Nath's does not. No published version I have read allows this. It may be that the passage of the story into the domain of tales taught to children has simply truncated it, so that the rat escapes scot-free with the woman to live, we presume, happily ever after. This contrasts strongly with versions that teach upstarts who attempt inappropriate social climbing their place; or, in the case of Gauri Nath's telling, give the rat a moral but not a marital victory.

Most often, it seems, the trader may keep the drum, but not the woman. I have found just one South Asian "fortunate exchange" variant where the trader is human, a youth. Like the monkeys, he gains a drum; but no woman ever enters the picture. In this sweeter story, simply titled "A Drum," a boy trades wood for bread, bread for a clay pot, the clay pot for a coat, the coat for a horse, and the horse for a drum. Nobody is punished and nobody is hurt. "The boy now rushed home to his mother, beating his new drum, and told her how he got it, beginning with a piece of wood from the roadside" (RAMANUJAN 1991, 227). Another wholly sweet variant, "The Benevolent Mouse," curiously eliminates the deceptive nature of "deceptive bargains." Most unusually, each trade is fortunate for both parties involved. But here too, the final and cherished prize for the mouse, who has just donated a horse to a needy bridegroom, is a drum (BAHADUR 1972, 55–58).

Among the multiple South Asian variants I have seen, there is but one instance of a long-tailed rat story where the damaged hero becomes whole again. He not only regains a tail (better than the original), but gains that which was first truly missing, respect from his companions. This is Vijay Dan Detha's literary retelling—titled in Rajasthani, "Ūndarau pūñch gamāi paṇ bhārau lāyau," translating roughly as "The Rat got his tail lost but brought a whole bundle" (DETHA 1964). It is retold in English under the title "A Clever Bargain" (DINESH 1979). This Rajasthani version is predictably quite close to the Ghatiyali tale, except for its highly elaborated happy ending. Significantly, we do not find this indexed under the "Fortunate Exchange" heading; rather it is considered to belong within type 2034, "The Mouse Regains its Tail." Circularity is emphasized—rather than bargaining up, or being cut down a notch or two. Yet Detha's retelling involves more than a return to the initial condition; he provides a total redressing of everything bad, a perfect resolution for the mouse, and even a promise that others similarly afflicted may share in this mouse's good fortune.

Here is a synopsis: The mouse is rejected by his companions—in this case his teammates in the popular village game *ḡabaḡḡī*—because his overly long tail gets caught and causes them to lose points.²² He gets the carpenter to remove his tail, just as in Ghatiyali's tellings and other similar versions. He makes the various deceptive bargains, but at the end of the trading series, this

rat is left neither with bride nor with drum. Rather he trades a buffalo calf to a butcher for a whole bundle of rats' tails.

[The mouse takes these to the carpenter who initially removed his tail and asks him to find] "a good tail—one neither too long, nor too short and stick it on me." The carpenter selected one and fixed it for the mouse. Then flicking his tail, the mouse airily said, "Keep the rest of the tails carefully. Don't throw them with the rubbish or the crow will carry them away. Now, whenever a mouse comes to you for a tail you can select a beautiful matching one for him."

Then he said good bye to the carpenter and joined his companions who were still at the game of kabbadi. Now he was not going to get caught and lose points. So both the teams wanted him to play for them.

(DINESH 1979, 30)

Folklore does not usually present us with such a soothing ending as this one. We might suspect Vijay Dan Detha, a masterful author of fictions as well as a folklore collector, of tampering with folk perceptions, taking liberties with our story in order to make it more satisfying. It seems to me that this appealing resolution takes away the tale's ambiguities and its edge. Whether it is Detha's creation, or a genuine alternative folk telling, I have no way to determine. But in any case, Detha's version seems to teach that generosity is neither totally outdated nor always hypocritical, even in the flawed, political, animal world.

In a few rat tale variants the rodent meets a fate worse than disappointment or injury, always it would seem when he, or she, tries to keep the bride. While most of the monkeys and rats involved in these tales are male, one worst case scenario for the trader occurs when there is a gender switch, and a female tries to engage in these profitable scams. "Little Miss Mouse" is a case in point. Her profitable exchanges follow a familiar pattern, and she acquires penultimately a drum, but the drum is destroyed by some women, who offer her a girl instead.

This brought smiles to Miss Mousie's sad face, and she dried her tears. The women gave her a nice Girl, and Mousie took the Girl home. They set up house together, and planted a crop of corn. The corn ripened, and they went out to cut it. Miss Mouse was a wee mousie, and was quite hidden among the stalks of the corn. While the Girl was cutting the corn with a sickle, she did not see poor little Mousie, so she cut her in two, and that was the end of her (CROOKE and ROUSE 1899, 104).

While Miss Mousie seems no less adept than are her male counterparts at bargaining, notice how she is quite a bit more emotional in her methods.

Most significantly, she not only loses her prize but is executed, thoughtlessly, by the very acquisition her clever bargains won her. We could see this as poetic justice for an overreaching female trader in a patriarchal society. But the narrative offers a more straightforward and equally gendered causality: Miss Mouse was invisible!

Another deadly outcome for the rat offers quite a different spin on gender and power. In “The Clever Rat,” as told to Edward Hower by an old woman in a Rajasthan village not far from the urban center of Jaipur, the story progresses as usual until the animal acquires his bride. Then the plot takes a new twist: the bride does not remain a passive object but rather takes matters into her own hands. When the impudent rat asks her to prepare a hot bath for him, she brings a pot of water to the boil and drops the rat into it, delivering a parting taunt that summarily disrupts the chain of deceptive bargains: “I don’t need my water back” (HOWER 1991, 58).²³ The bride then returns to her husband.

I might almost successfully generalize that variants with a monkey hero normally have happy endings because the trickster-outsider has no desire to join human society. The rat variants, by contrast, feature an actor who above all wants to be accepted, not excluded, and therefore strives too hard to rise in rank, property, and marriage alliance. Normally—with the exception in Detha’s version noted earlier—he cannot succeed. Given the ways rats and monkeys live vis-à-vis humans, these outcomes make sense. In rural Rajasthan, as elsewhere in India, monkeys now and then swoop in and out of human lives acting unpredictably: they are amusing if occasionally destructive; a live-and-let-live philosophy is applied to them. Rats, however, move right in, and never learn how to behave acceptably. A search-and-destroy attitude is more often directed at them.

What about the trading rabbit, who loses his ear to a careless barber and makes off with the barber’s razor? Well, he does get a bride, briefly, but she is also a feisty type. She punches him in the head, knocks him unconscious, and runs back to her husband abandoning the one-eared rabbit to his sad fate (DRACOTT 1906, 59–60). Rabbits do not try to move in with people, but they do like to feed off human labors. Zoological causality only partially helps us to interpret the variations, however. As we have just seen, in at least one version with a happy drumming end to it, the hero is a “benevolent” mouse; and in another a human.

Beyond South Asia, “Profitable Exchange” tale types also yield a range of outcomes and moral evaluations.²⁴ Various cultural contexts seem to employ a “Profitable Exchange” series to conjure up visions of wild success or inevitable disaster for traders, just as is the case in India. In Africa, for example, this appears to be a popular and widespread motif, with the human protagonist,

who starts out with little or nothing, becoming extremely successful as a trader.

Take this example, in synopsis form:

A boy gives his grandmother honey and receives in exchange grain. The chickens eat the grain and give him an egg. For the egg shepherds give some sticks. The elephants use the sticks and give him a knife. For the knife the people give him an oxtail. Through trickery the ox tail brings him a hundred head of oxen and a chieftainship (KLIPPLE 1992, 310).

Here we have a full vision of infinite possibilities that may be achieved through advantageous bargains. Unlike the South Asian cases, this bargainer is never cut down for having high aspirations.

While no bride appears in this particular African pattern, other cultural contexts may add women to their happy endings. And, as in India, when women are acquired, things may also become more problematic and dangerous. A Cuban tale-type index, for example, summarizes the “profitable exchange” story in this fashion: “The Profitable Exchange: Princess eats hen, and rascal gets princess as settlement”; *or* “Daughter kills ox and he gets daughter”; *or* “He puts girl in sack and tells king he has ‘singing bag.’ Girl is freed from sack and filth is substituted. King kills him” (HANSEN 1957, 145).

The bargaining “rascal” may thus get the girl, or be killed for his presumption—a range of outcomes we have seen in India’s many variants as well.

Sharp or unscrupulous traders, con artists as these rats, monkeys, or rascals are often—though not always—portrayed, exist all over the world. However, the context-dependent complexities, the localized moral evaluations of successful traders as bold achievers or despicable cheats, may only be explored from case to case. One broad, valid if simplistic observation would be that almost anywhere in the world, trading is an uncertain venture in which you may win or lose big. Traders may be guileless, innocent and purely lucky; or they may be ambivalent tricksters with possible magical powers. They may be admired as underdogs rising on their buoyant ingenuity; or they may be condemned as nasty “rascals” well deserving the punishments they get. In short, an entire gamut of characters can play the fortunate exchange game. How they are evaluated depends in part, but only in part, on how they treat others, and whether they share or horde the goods.

WHEN IS A GIFT NOT A GIFT?

What we separate as art, economics and religion is moulded and expressed here (RAMANUJAN 1999, 533 on the subject of folklore).

Louis Hyde has written of “the increase that comes to the gift when it is used up, eaten, and consumed.” He makes a distinction between the ethics of a gift society where “this usance is neither reckoned nor charged” and of a society where loans and interest have developed (HYDE 1979, 110–11). It seems to me that “fortunate exchange” stories may be problematically located at such a juncture, or rupture, between gifts and usury, between generosity and sharp business, between altruism and blackmail. The stories highlight the ironic paradox of such a shift, playing upon the deep and tragicomic confusion engendered when “I have what you need, so take it, its yours” is suddenly replaced by: “Give it back! Or else!” To make such a shift without warning is not right, and yet it is one, if only one, of the ways of the world.²⁵

In Hindu devotion, divine love is contrasted with everyday exchange, as an economy of infinite surplus and total giving.²⁶ Another story, recorded from a child in Ghatiyali in 1993, suggests that other moral economy. During our quest for folklore about nature, my friend and frequent co-author Bhoju Ram Gujar evoked this tale from a student of his in village Palasiya’s Middle School. I give only the beginning.

There was a boy whose mother died. So his father brought another wife and she had a baby girl and his stepmother sent him out to graze the cows. She was making corn bread for him, but she put cow dung in the middle and bread only around the edges.

So he went and there was a pond, and he washed and ate at the pond. One day he said to God, “Just as you took my mother why don’t you take me?”

So God appeared. “O child what do you want? Whatever you want you will get.”

He was hungry; so he said, “I want cakes and candy.” So he got a lapful of cakes and candy.

When his stepsister brought him the cow dung cornbread, he didn’t eat it because he was full. He gave one cake to his sister and she took it back home and showed it to her mother and said “Look, maybe he stole some money to buy it.”

So the stepmother said, “Let the father-eater come and I’ll beat him.” So when he came she beat him; so he was crying after coming in the gateway.

God came and asked “Why are you crying?”

“My stepmother beat me.”

“Don’t worry. Go in your cattle pen and call ‘*chalar, mogar, tan tan tan,*’ and all the cows will follow you.”

So he went twenty-four miles, this way and that way, away from the

village and sat down under a banyan tree. God said “Whenever you feel hungry say ‘*chalar, mogar, tan tan tan.*’”

And the cows came and he drank as much milk as he wanted and poured the extra milk on the roots of the banyan tree.²⁷

[told by Mahavir Prasad Dhakat from Palasiya, 1993]²⁸

What follows, in synopsis, is that the young boy is befriended by (and vaguely seems to merge in identity with) the snake spirit who lives at the root of the tree where he has poured out his extra milk. His subsequent good fortune includes marrying a princess, who—although loath at first to enter a hole with her snakelike husband—finds eventual bliss in her marital home, and especially good things to eat. Unlike the family of the Princess in “The Rat’s Wedding,” her family accepts this union.

Fairytales of oppressed stepchildren obtaining their heart’s desires via magical or divine help are probably more familiar to the Euro-American world than the profitable exchange tale-type. Like the long-tailed rat, this abused protagonist is a taunted outcast who aspires to better things. But, rather than cleverly conniving his way out of a bad situation, he weeps helplessly. And in the end—unlike the rat in most “fortunate exchanges”—he is able to keep his high-born wife, and even please her relatives. Of course, the fairytale was told us by a young boy, poor in material terms but full of hope for the future. As discussed earlier, the storyteller’s voice and viewpoint are keys, or windows, to any tale’s motivation and moral (BLACKBURN 2001, 274). Aged Gauri Nath had the rat give the bride away to a proper mate, but children’s tellings allow the impudent animal to run away with her.

Two important themes in Ghatiyalians’ ideas about giving and receiving surface in the stepchild tale. First, the boy sacrificed nothing—he drank his fill and then gave away what was left; second he had no expectations of return. The blessings he gains come from the snake’s grace, as it was awakened, but not coerced, by the milk shower. The abused boy is innocent of motive; unlike those who perform asceticism to get rewards, he acts naturally, or thoughtlessly, and yet receives abundant blessings. Such un-plotted giving and spontaneous grace are the valued opposite of deals. They are praised in religious and interpersonal contexts, yet understood to be rare and out of character for ordinary humans.

Stuart Blackburn, summarizing some of the moral teachings in Tamil tales, writes that, “Like generosity, reciprocity is giving, but not just any gift; and, like gratitude, it involves repayment, but not necessarily to the person who first gave you something. Rather, to reciprocate is to achieve a delicate balance between what you have and what you share” (BLACKBURN 2001, 299–300). This nicely captures some subtleties in pervasive Rajasthani ideas

about giving and receiving. But in the shift, or surrender, to a devotional mentality, reciprocity becomes less of a balancing act and more closely aligned with notions of grace. In the fairytale of the boy and the banyan tree, God feeds the protagonist at the moment when he fully acknowledges his own sorrowful helplessness. You may get far more than you give in this other moral economy.

The bargain tale-type portrays a political world that may leave the trader up or down depending on his or her wit and luck, on society's willingness to accept an upstart of dubious virtue, and perhaps on the degree of selfishness enacted. The mouse who instructs the carpenter to take good care of the bundle of tails for future mice in need would be a perfect practitioner of approved reciprocity. But I also suspect him of being a product of the shift from folklore to literature, or perhaps from kitchen to public performance. Kirin Narayan, in a recent and appreciative review of Blackburn's *Moral Fictions*, suggests that "moral packaging" may get added to stories, even as collectors probe their meanings, making the tellers nervous about ambiguities and complexities (NARAYAN 2003, 306).

In present-day Ghatiyali, people often critique changing times, contrasting the old days when, they say, most interpersonal relations in the village were characterized by "love," with modern times when anger and selfishness prevail, love is finished, and community and personal moralities have dwindled. Sometimes things are still freely given, without expectation of return, and villagers may call this "village love" (*gāñv kā prem*). For me, village love was epitomized by the way gardeners who had nothing to hope for from me so kindly dug up masses of carrots on which my greedy children gorged themselves. This love strongly contrasts with the normative take-and-give (*lenā denā*)—the commerce of everyday life.²⁹

I do not intend to suggest that we view the rat tale as expressing a moment in an evolutionary history when loss of love, a moral shift, surfaces. We must remember that profitable exchange stories are far older than these changes experienced in the late twentieth century. As Stith Thompson noted, discussing "Deceptive Bargains" in 1946, "The joy in a shrewd deal is by no means confined to the world of good business and does not depend upon modern capitalistic society" (THOMPSON 1977, 198). Moreover, the exchanges these stories describe are a far cry from marketplace commerce; rather, they invoke altogether crazy swaps. Far from implying transition to a rational economy, the tales caricature exchange values as purely context-dependent, personally constructed, and wildly arbitrary.

For all its fanciful loopiness, the long-tailed rat story is probably closer to the way things really work most of the time than is the story of the starving boy and his magic cows. Some Fortunate Exchange tales seem to demonstrate ways that the values of generosity and reciprocity can be twist-

ed into a kind of racketeering. Depending on how presumptuous is the trader's game, manipulations may go well rewarded or reap cruel punishments. Most of the happier endings involve some kind of sharing (again echoing Blackburn's indirect reciprocity point which may not be too far from the African-American folk wisdom, "what goes around comes around"). And in those instances when the happy outcome involves a drum, the trader may be solipsistically gratified, but socially isolated (except of course in the case of the boy who goes home to show his mother his new toy).

Every generalization yields an exception. But I believe I can say that the hand of God, or any inkling of divine benevolence, is decidedly absent in all Fortunate Exchange stories. These seem indeed to teach of the mortal world where little or nothing is freely bestowed. Yet that too is not the whole truth, as we who have guiltily eaten so many free carrots know well. Most people in India and elsewhere live their lives in more than one transactional mode, attempting to negotiate advantageous deals even as they yearn for magic blessings—whether brides, sweets or lottery winnings—to shower down upon them.

NOTES

* This essay was originally conceived to honor A. K. Ramanujan's life with gratitude for his love of all stories—even those as slight as the one I treat here. I also thank Bhoju Ram Gujar, Madhu Gujar, Kusum Mishra, Gauri Nath, and Nathu Natisar Nath as well as Stuart Blackburn and Wendy Doniger for their thoughtful comments. Ruth Grodzins and Peter Knecht helped me, and saved me embarrassments, with invaluable editorial advice.

1. Misogynous proverbs link women to drums—both are best when beaten.

2. See Gregory BATESON's classic insights (1972); it strikes me that the trader's generous gift propositions, followed by his or her claims on what is evidently unreclaimable, display some key features of a "double bind" situation.

3. BLACKBURN writes, "the marvelous is less significant than the moral" (2001, 19). FERRO-LUZZI—although she is not opposed to finding morals—argues against functionalist interpretations and typologies, stressing the free play of imagination, within a given cultural universe (2002, 173–80).

4. Here is one American sixth-grader's composition, transcribed exactly as written:

Once there was a weasel. He had a long beautiful tail that he was very proud of. One day he was watching an artist paint a picture when the artist quickly turned and splashed blue paint on his tail. "Clean the paint off my tail or I will take your painting," said the weasel. The artist tried very hard but couldn't clean off the paint so the weasel got the picture. The weasel was walking down the road when suddenly the picture which was very large, slipped out of his hands and a passing farmer leading a cow stepped on his picture. "Farmer," said the weasel, "Give me another picture or I'll take your cow." The farmer gave the weasel his cow and the weasel continued down the road. Soon he came to an old man who clearly was having trouble walking. "Climb on my cow," said the weasel. The man climbed on but he was too heavy and the cow toppled over and died.

“Sir, you’ve killed my cow. You must give me something to replace him,” insisted the weasel. The man only had some earrings he was going to give his wife, but he gave them to the weasel who loved them.

5. When Wendy Doniger read this story in my 1994 conference paper she pronounced it “loopy”—a term I find highly appropriate.

6. I shall not directly engage the larger anthropological and philosophical literatures on gifts (from Mauss to Derrida), as these, however relevant and fascinating, are far beyond my limited scope in this article.

7. Now in her mid-twenties, Kusum, articulate as ever, has a daughter who is the same age she was when she told me the rat tale, and—in spite of domestic responsibilities—is pursuing her own career in teaching.

8. In Rajasthani the word for rat is *ūṇḍaro* which translates into Hindi *chūhā*. Kusum was so young that she had blithely misinformed me that lizards on the wall were called *ūṇḍaro*—the moral of which is: don’t take three-year-olds for your language teachers. There is no semantic distinction in Hindi or Rajasthani between rat and mouse, except one of gender, with a noun gendered female implying smaller size. *Ūṇḍarī* would be a female rat or a smaller rodent—a mouse. I assume that the story translated from Hindi and titled “Little Miss Mouse” is about a *chūhī*.

9. When teaching folklore I can play Kusum’s and Nathu’s performances to classes ignorant of any Indian languages, and students are readily able to appreciate—and enjoy—the contrast in oral style.

10. Most stories told by villagers of all ages to pass the time (versus ritually told tales) seem to fall into two broad content categories (1) humorous tales about caste characteristics and stupidities; (2) “fairytale”-type narratives in which orphans, stepchildren, and other disadvantaged persons suffer and triumph. Children and educated adults do know from elementary school books the didactic animal fables from India’s famous *Panchatantra*. These are learned in Hindi, not the local language; if they are performed orally, in my experience, they will be recited word for word, a bit haltingly and mechanically, from the memorized text, lacking any improvisation.

11. Fuelwood has never been abundant in this semi-arid region of Rajasthan; even at present in the twenty-first century, women and children expend considerable effort collecting enough wood for each day’s cooking. Therefore, a carpenter’s scraps are of greater value than might be imagined.

12. This of course resonates with the *Bhagavad Gita*’s advice to sacrifice the fruits of one’s actions to Krishna.

13. For more on Gauri Nath see GOLD and GUJAR 2002, 194–96.

14. Gauri Nath’s jingle-like closing formula goes *ai bāt ai chīz ai agalā kī pacīt*. This is hard to translate; it means something like, “that’s the story, that’s the thing, that’s the front’s back.”

15. The rat story is not part of children’s own folklore, of which I recorded several other examples from Madhu’s repertoire: little stories and jokes that she learned from other children, that her parents were surprised to hear and had never heard until she performed them for me. These often have scatological or otherwise irreverent content to them. For one example, see GOLD and GUJAR 1994, 74–75.

16. Tale-type 170 goes like this: “The fox spends the night with a cock in a house. He eats the cock but in the morning he accuses the sheep of having eaten it. In the next inn likewise the fox has eaten the sheep, etc. In compensation he demands a larger animal each time” (AARNE and THOMPSON 1981, 63).

17. See RAMANUJAN 1990 on context-dependency; see BAUMAN 1977, 37–45 on emergent meanings in performance.

18. By contrast, certain performance genres in Ghatiyali, such as hymns to the formless lord (*nirgun bhajans*), have rich and ongoing oral exegetical traditions and are prime subjects for lengthy discussions of hidden meanings (*bhāv arth*); see GOLD 1988, 105–19.

19. An appendix provides a list of all tales consulted, not all of which are specifically discussed here.

20. On rules about and practices of hypergamy, respectively, see for example DONIGER 1991 and INDEN 1976.

21. KINGSCOTE and SASTRI in a note to “The Monkey with the Tom-Tom” point readers to “The Rat’s Wedding,” commenting that there “a better moral from the tale is drawn” (1984, 187).

22. The game *ḡabadḡī* is played by two teams in lines; individual players take turns—all the while shouting “*ḡabadḡī ḡabadḡī*” repeatedly—attempting to cross into opponents’ territory, touch them, and return to safety on their own side without being caught, and before running out of breath. Clearly a long tail would be a distinct disadvantage!

23. See ELWIN 1944 for another male mouse slain by the bride after he wins her; thanks to Stuart Blackburn for information on this version.

24. Tale-type 170 is found in Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, Russian, Turkish, and West Indies collections, which I have not consulted, as well as African and Cuban sources, which I have.

25. It is of course something very young children do—playing the game of proffering something and then demanding it be immediately returned, and weeping if it is not. And then, I find myself humming “Take back your Mink” from *Guys and Dolls*, a 1950s musical imprinted on my childhood: “I thought that each expensive gift you arranged was a token of your esteem, but when I think of what you want in exchange, it all seems a horrible dream.” Thus any trading partner might address the rat/monkey/rascal. Although a “traffic in women” is certainly evoked by “Fortunate Exchange” tales, sexual favors, the song’s topic, are never explicitly at stake.

26. See Daniel GOLD’s translations of devotional poems that play with merchant imagery, inverting all the stereotypes of sharp business practices (1992).

27. All herding children now and then drink the milk of their charges, squirting it directly from the udders into their mouths. Often this is all they have as nourishment in the course of long days spent out-of-doors.

28. See GOLD 2002, 281–83 for more of and on this tale.

29. For more on village love, see GOLD and GUJAR 2002, 282–83; 306–19. I do not touch there or here on the vast area of ritually constructed prestations in Hinduism, for which see RAHEJA 1988. See also PARRY 1989 on the different moral evaluations of religious gifts and market commerce.

APPENDIX: INDIAN VERSIONS CONSULTED

Bargainer is male rat or mouse

“The Long-tailed Rat” (Rajasthani), told by Madhu Gujar, age 6 (recorded by Ann G. Gold, 1993).

“The Long-tailed Rat” (Rajasthani), told by Gauri Nath, age c. 75 (recorded by Ann G. Gold, 1993).

“The Clever Rat” (Hindi), in HOWER 1991, 55–58.

“A Clever Bargain” (Rajasthani), in DINESH 1979, 27–30.

- “Mota Shah” (Punjabi), in ANAND 1974, 28–37.
 “The Benevolent Mouse” (Hindi), in BAHADUR 1972, 55–58.
 “Īndarau pūñch gamāi paṇ bhārau lāyau” (Rajasthani), in DETHA 1964, 256–59.
 “The Wagtail and the Mouse” (a Gond story), in ELWIN 1944, 468–70.
 “The Rat’s Wedding” (Punjabi), in STEEL and TEMPLE 1882, 226–30.

Bargainer is female mouse

- “Little Miss Mouse and her Friends” (told by Akbar Shah, Manjhi, of Manbasa, Dudhi, Mirzapur), in CROOKE and ROUSE 1899, 101–104.

Bargainer is male monkey

- “Monkey Losing the Tail” (Tamil), in SEETHALAKSHMI 1969, 83–84.
 “The Monkey’s Bargains” (told by Rameswar-Puri, teacher, Khairwa, village school, district Mirzapur), in CROOKE and ROUSE 1899, 132–38.
 “The Monkey with the Tom-Tom” (Tamil?), in KINGSCOTE and SASTRI 1984, 187–89.

Bargainer is rabbit

- “The Rabbit and the Barber” (recorded in Simla), in DRACOTT 1906, 59–60.

Bargainer is human

- “A Drum” (Hindi), in RAMANUJAN 1991, 226–27.

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