Prospecting in Rajasthan

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Ann Gold's anthropology is focused on the village of Ghatiyali and its environs in Rajasthan, India. For nearly four decades, she has visited the village, maintained friendships there, and seen things change. She has written on pilgrimage, devotion, gender, sexuality, popular Hinduism, ethno-history and environmentalism. Her methodological approach has been to blend participant observation with the collection and translation of oral traditions of song, story-telling and myth. Early on, she explored death, renunciation and miracles. As time passed, at the most general level, her work developed to become an examination of three broad and intersecting dimensions of meaning: environmental, sociological and cosmological, rather broadly, perhaps, coded as landscape, gender and beauty.

In addition to the contribution to a subtle and nuanced understanding of rural Rajasthan, Gold's work is often cited for the pioneering application of the reflexive turn in the late 1980s and 1990s to ethnographic practice. Later, she developed additional writing techniques and partnerships which allowed her to explore and acknowledge the co-creation of ethnographic material and authority, her long and productive relationship with Bhoju Ram Gujar being particularly notable in this regard.

Instead of trying to cover all the topics on which her work touches, in what follows I will discuss the way social change is evoked in and by her anthropology. My focus is thus twofold: (a) to look at the way in which social change is explicitly discussed in her work and (b) to highlight how India might itself have changed by reading across the range of her publications. The second strategy inevitably raises questions about the shifting contours of

the discipline of anthropology, as well as changes taking place within the Indian countryside. At the end, I will reflect briefly on what kind of place Gold has written into existence.

I make no secret of the fact that I am fan of Gold's work. I can vividly recall reading the book on pilgrimage, *Fruitful Journeys* (1988) when I was in undergraduate, although I can no longer recall who was teaching the course. As a graduate student, one of the first brace of anthropological monographs I proudly purchased at the erstwhile OUP shop in Bombay was *Listen to the Heron's Words* (1996), an evocative and memorable study of gender, sexuality and kinship, co-authored with Gloria Goodwin Raheja. The second of the pair was Jonathan Parry's *Death in Benares*. Parry was one of my own doctoral supervisors. I am not sure that I grasped the importance of either work at the time, as I was still learning the interpretive terrain and imaginative structures which make the world of anthropological argument.

Subsequently, however, I have often imagined the two books in conversation on the shelf. Each might praise the other for intellectual adroitness and for the elegant ways in which theory is elaborated from the ethnography; each might also admonish the other for blind spots, or for the overdone focus on negative or positive aspects of life, or for seeing louring disorder instead of beauty and devotion as the key to understanding society. Needless to say, the conversations I imagined between these two books often went on until late.

Drawing on Elaine Scarry's (1999) writing on beauty, Gold (2008) sees glimpses of similar ideas amongst the rural Hindu goddesses of Rajasthan. Beauty is sacred and unprecedented; beauty is life-saving, an idea which literally describes the ways in which devotees understand the healing and protective powers of the Goddess. Finally, beauty is 'deliberative'. That is to say, beauty is challenging and often causes people to rethink what they know; beauty leads to self-correction and self-reflection. The interaction of minds and something or someone which is beautiful invites the mind to search for something beyond itself, something greater or at least equal to that which is beautiful and needs to be brought into an appropriate relation of scale or magnitude.

Without wishing to overstate the point, Gold's anthropology of beauty and landscape provokes similar reaction, prompting a searching or correction to the worlds of violence and dark and muscular politics which have come to dominate the social anthropology of South Asia. There is no end of suffering in Gold's work (and often her own), but it is a suffering

rooted in the everyday relations of kinship and getting by rather than in an abstract galactic regional or nationalist polity. It is a suffering embedded in connections between domains of life and non-life in a world animated by active substances and interactions between the landscape and its inhabitants.

In the introduction to *Fruitful Journeys*, Gold (1988: xii and fn 1) describes her anthropological roots as having been fed by Schneider's cultural analysis, Singer's ideas about cultural performances, and Marriott and Inden's ethnosociology. To unpack these little, Schneider (1968) saw cultures as coherent systems of meanings and values which were fundamentally constitutive of human realities. Singer (1972) saw the possibility of using cultural performances as units of observation which might give access to units of cogitation. Variously, Marriott (1976) and Marriott and Inden (1977) developed an ethnosociology of India, influenced positively by Redfield (1956) and in a more complicated fashion by Dumont (1970). In this view, at least in its early manifestations, all elements of the cultural realities of a transactional society such as Hindu India could be thought of as particulate substances or substance-codes. Substance was also seen as divisible, and coded in bodies, food and territory, as well as in the immaterial world of words, ideas and appearances (Marriott 1976).

Marriott's ethnosociology was, as Moffatt (1990) describes, seductive, especially when held against Dumont's rival views of monism. Marriott's version of India was fluid, open, essentially changing and life affirming; it was a place in which social mobility was possible; caste was no longer the singular essence Indian society. However, the language, models and modes of explication Marriott used to express his vision (codes, diagrams and maths), which were idiosyncratic at the time, have not stood the test of time well, remaining influential as a set of general ideas rather than as particular publications.

In my view, although Gold herself is more reticent about Marriott's influence in her published work, she takes Marriott out of the abstract and into the landscape of Rajasthan. The power of Marriott's analysis was that it established the possibility and plausible mechanisms for relations between humans, landscapes and deities. Stripped of its mathematical aspiration and laboratory language and formulations, in Gold's writing ethnosociology becomes alive. In her rendering, nothing seems forced or contrived; rather, people seem at ease in their relationships with food, misfortune, power and the changing

landscape around them. The language and poetry of their relationships and misfortunes sing, sigh and weep in golden prose.

This approach is most explicit in *Trees and Sorrows* (2002) which was co-authored with her long-term assistant and companion in the field Bhoju Ram Gujar. The volume is an exploration of the relationships between nature, power and memory in the context of post-colonial Rajasthan. In colonial India, hundreds of semi-independent tributaries thrived. They usually had their own rulers, and often their own courts, currency and traditions. Ghatiyali was within one such kingdom known as Sawar, and the book explores the ethnohistory of this relationship. What was it like for the poor farmers, herders and labourers during the time of kings?

The narratives presented in the book suggest that the present is happier than the past, when the kings ruled the land under the British. Life in the past was bountiful, but sorrowful. The tree-covered hills were completely enmeshed with the rule of kings and ruthlessly controlled by them. There were fewer people in the past, the land was farmed less intensively, cattle and milk were more abundant, organic fertiliser plentiful, and coarser but more nourishing and tasty grains were at hand. People had stronger powers of digestion, greater qualities of compassion, more leisure time to tell stories and to recall the fables of older times. There were fewer consumer goods to crave and to arouse envy and animosity between neighbours.

In the 27 villages of the kingdom of Sawar, nature was experienced, produced and understood, ‘not only as sustenance but as meaning, not only as goods but as identities and tales’ (Gold and Gujar 2002: 4). The well-being of the population depends vitally on the qualities of soil, animals, crops and weather. However, well-being is also in mutual formation with human temperaments and behaviours - whether generous or selfish, and here the ethnosociology is particularly subtle. Since the time of kings, tragic deforestation has reduced biodiversity and the solidarity of local communities, but despite such losses life is presented as better in the democratic set-up.

Here we see, at least in my view, Sawar as an ethnosociological kingdom from a subaltern perspective. The qualities of the world are divisible and transmutable, set in bodies, food and territory. Power and inequality, as well as words, ideas and appearances bring together sorrow, abundance and, perhaps, melancholia (although the approach is far from nostalgic

and explicitly unsympathetic to the whys are wherefores of the rulers of Sawar). The story brings to life a transactional world of qualities and essences.

In a more recent publication, Gold describes a further transformation, only partially captured in *Trees and Sorrows*: the transformation from a moral subsistence economy to an amoral market economy. Or, to put this in other words, the transformation from 'finite need to infinite desire' (Gold 2009: 265). In this work, Rajasthan has changed, again. Production and profit have increasingly become the organisational principles of agriculture, food has become flavourless and people mean-spirited. Contemporary Rajasthan is 'tasteless and sinful'. The present marks a form of deterioration, religion is on the decline and virtue is hard to find. Sensitivity and affection have declined as proper forms of behaviour in the face of increasing individualisation. People are less polite than they used to be, respect their elders and neighbours less, and are generally more violent and unpleasant. These are the unsavoury conditions of life today.

In the 1990s, when the research for *Trees and Sorrows* was undertaken, the past of the kings was a time of abundance and suffering, the present time was an improvement. In the following decade, life had become tasteless and sinful as the transactional economy of the early post-colonial decades of independent India was gradually usurped by the free market. Another way of seeing this, is to see the gradual disappearance of the kinds of particulate and relational ideas which associated people through moral transactions. In this view, the market economy has replaced, at least in part, the ethnosociology (in the style of Marriott) of everyday life. Rajasthan continues to change, power moves, the mood of the moment shifts again. Marriott's India fades.

The changing details of life in Ghatiyali mirror shifts described by other scholars (Gupta 1998, for example) who have taken a harder line on the political economy of agrarian Indian. Even so, I cannot help but wonder, if Gold's Rajasthan is not a bit too pleasant. There is an absence of party, muscular and communal politics, but Gold acknowledges this herself. At the very beginning of her fieldwork in Ghatiyali, and at about the time she first met Bhoju, they attend an all-night devotional singing session. Bhoju described the things Gold was experiencing in his village as 'brown sugar for the deaf and dumb.' Gold later discovered that this was among the verses attributed to the poet-saint Kabir as a way of describing the formless Lord. Gold interpreted Bhoju to mean that the potential sweetness of his village

world – the brown sugar of his saying, the sugar molasses used in village cuisine – to have a deeper flavour than any refined American product. Gold writes:

> Not only was this sweetness inaccessible to my foreign ears … but more than this it was certain to be inexpressible through my voice. I might somehow absorb its flavour, living as I was in the midst of so many sweet impressions, but this flavour I could never convey to others, lacking language to do so. What a perfect metaphor for the anthropological enterprise! (1988: xiv)

It is not my intention to quibble with Gold's analysis, but in the spirit of her anthropology I hope she would allow me to proffer another interpretation. The 'brown sugar' might have meant opium, as is common usage in western India, where the trade and consumption of the substance was widespread. And, if Bhoju's meaning is traced not to Kabir but to Marx then everyday life in Rajasthan might have looked rather different from the outset.

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