

## **“Hear the Tale of the Famine Year”: Famine Policy, Oral Traditions, and the Recalcitrant Voice of the Colonized in Nineteenth-Century India<sup>1</sup>**

**Gloria Goodwin Raheja**

We desire to place special emphasis on the immense importance of “moral strategy.” There is no greater evil than the depression of the people. . . . A main trait in Oriental character is proneness to succumb to difficulties and to accept them as inevitable. But, if given heart at an early stage, the Oriental will fight upon the side of the Government, which is his own; for his belief in the power of Government is of a kind which to Western ideas is almost profane. The fullest advantage should be taken of this belief at all stages, but especially at the outset, for the moral impetus given should last through the first period of the famine.

*Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901*

*Jihre lok is raj ich vasde*

*Kai ronde kai hasde.*

*Niaun na kita koi Sarkar.*

Of the people who live under this government’s rule,

Some weep, some laugh.

The Government has done no justice.

Lines from a song sung by Lalu, a tenant of Dabwali Dhab, quoted in J. Wilson’s 1884

*Final report on the revision of settlement of the Sirsá District in the Punjáb, 1879-83*

### **Introduction: “Tell Us Why We Are Here”**

In “Sly Civility” Homi Bhabha writes about the paranoia of colonial power in India and its ambivalence about its own authority, an ambivalence that produced a demand for native authorization of colonial rule, a demand that the colonial subject “tell us why we are here” (Bhabha 1994:142). Similarly, Sara Suleri (1992:108) has written about how colonial administrators were uncertain about the validity of the knowledge they produced about Indian

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society. Colonial ethnographic commentary, for example, in Watson and Kaye's *The People of India*, "hysterically insists on the static readability of physicality" and thus betrays a radical ambivalence about the categories of colonial knowledge of Indian society, and a striking awareness of their inadequacy. Watson and Kaye's 1868-75 work, she suggests, focuses on the supposed fixities of caste-based racial categories and bodily types "as a means to stave off its hidden admission of cultural ignorance" (Suleri 1992:104). In this essay I suggest that these two profound anxieties, coupled with a need to explain away the countless revolts against colonial rule that had occurred in India since the late eighteenth century, prompted an explosion in the collection and entextualization<sup>2</sup> of Indian speech in colonial documents, at the very moment in the nineteenth century when the triumph of scientific knowledge of Indian bodies had been uneasily declared. Particular varieties of Indian speech, often characterized as "the voice of the people," were inserted into colonial texts to serve as authorizing narrative, to create an illusion of consent to colonial rule, while other voices, the voices of critique or rebellion, were erased, marginalized, or criminalized. And more generally, as Sharma (2001:38) has argued, famine policy and colonial writing about famine were closely intertwined with the British need "to legitimize its authority in the eyes of its subject people and to itself."

The fact that "ethnographic occasions" (Pels and Saleminck 1999) for the collection of native speech often unfolded in disciplinary spaces such as famine relief kitchens, prisons, and court rooms, or involved primarily high caste assistants and informants that also shaped the interaction, was not acknowledged by colonial ethnographers. Words spoken in prisons and relief kitchens and other colonial spaces were taken as exhibiting the invariable "mind of the people," although, as both Homi Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee have reminded us in different ways, native assertions of "tradition" and "claims of conscience" in such spaces might in fact have arisen from the "yeast of modernity" (Bhabha 1994:211), and the possibility must be recognized that they might therefore be local responses to colonial power that "opened to question some of the very procedures in the practice of modernity" (Chatterjee 1995:8). It is certain that peasants had come to know by the latter part of the nineteenth century that the surest way to forestall the progress of a colonial project was to raise the cry of religion or custom defiled, given the British notion that revolt was fomented only when a violation of religion occurred, and that such violations should therefore be avoided.<sup>3</sup>

Bauman and Briggs (1990 and 2003) have written about how oral narratives and other stretches of speech are transformed as they are decontextualized and excised from the situation in which they are produced, and entextualized in various kinds of ethnographic documents. They are interested, for example, in the question of how the apparent meanings of such speech may

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<sup>2</sup>Bauman and Briggs define "entextualization" this way (1990:73): "In simple terms, though it is far from simple, [entextualization] is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a text—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting." My use of the term here is intended to draw attention to the fact that when British administrators extract the songs from the contexts in which they were sung and insert the texts into administrative documents, the texts are subject to radical reinterpretation and are often used in attempts to justify colonial policy and the colonial presence in India.

<sup>3</sup>For an example of native appropriation of the language of "tradition" and "religion" to oppose the operations of the Survey of India, which was then interpreted as peasant subservience to custom, see Raheja (1999b).

appear radically different when the interactional context in which they were uttered is hidden from view. Expanding upon the questions raised by Bauman and Briggs, I ask how and why colonial administrators performed such decontextualizations, as they ignored the fact that the Indian speech about “tradition” that they recorded was in fact produced in colonial spaces and therefore must be read, in some respects, in relation to colonial disciplinary procedures there and in relation to modernity’s yeast. We should ask how colonial ethnographers erased these aspects of the ethnographic occasion in which the speech was written down, and to ask about the uses to which the erasures were put, in the project of fabricating the illusion of consent, an authorizing narrative, and an authenticating signature for colonial rule.<sup>4</sup>

The devastating famines that occurred in India throughout the nineteenth century set the scene for the exercise of an unprecedented degree of colonial surveillance over the lives, bodies, and social practices of ordinary Indian cultivators and laborers, for a new array of “ethnographic occasions,” and for new attempts to create this illusion of consent. Famine reports consistently spoke of the “prejudices” and unshakeable “customs” that, in the view of administrators, could be used in the fixing of “tests” that would limit relief expenditures. There were constant, though contradictory, observations concerning “caste prejudices” that might prevent people from eating in relief kitchens, repeated discussions about the masses of “respectable women” who were so addicted to “*purdah*”<sup>5</sup> that they would not venture out of their homes to procure food, preferring death to the supposedly unthinkable rupture of norms of seclusion, and a simultaneous denial of the possibility that avoiding relief kitchens may have been an act of defiance against the colonial disciplines imposed upon the people who entered them.

In the first half of this essay, I consider the relationship between such representations of “custom” on the one hand, and pragmatic calculations of famine relief policies on the other, as an instance of the relationship between colonial knowledge of Indian society and forms of disciplinary control. I examine how representations of caste, gender, and supposed compliance with colonial rule figure in famine documents, and I ask what kind of speech was produced, as Indian men and women remembered those calamitous encounters with famine, hunger, and colonial discipline and surveillance of relief works and in famine kitchens. In the second half of the paper, I address this last question by considering Hindi and Punjabi poetic speech that addressed itself in tones of interrogation or “sly civility” (Bhabha 1994:99) to those encounters and to issues of famine, “tradition,” and the state, in eleven narrative songs in north Indian languages that were recorded in colonial texts: in notes published in the *Indian Antiquary*, in manuscript collections compiled by colonial administrators, in language texts, and in a land

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<sup>4</sup>Stoler (1992:166) has also commented on the use of Malay language entries in late nineteenth-century colonial documents from Sumatra as an authentication of colonial narrative. I have elsewhere written (Raheja 1999a and 2010) on the relevance of Bernard Cohn’s (1985) work on “the command of language and the language of command” in colonial India for this project, but because of space considerations I cannot review it here.

<sup>5</sup>In many north Indian languages, the word *purdah* simply means “curtain.” As Ann Gold explained (Raheja and Gold 1994:168), observing *purdah* typically involves a constellation of behavioral components “adhered to with highly varying degrees of strictness: in her marital village [a woman] doesn’t leave the house, and she veils her face in front of all strangers and certain categories of male kin. Husband’s father, husband’s elder brothers, and, in public, husband himself are the figures before whom a woman most strictly observes *purdah*.”

settlement report from the Punjab.<sup>6</sup> The singers of these songs occupied various locations within local hierarchies and with respect to the colonial state, and their words must be read in terms of these varied positionings. Without assuming that these are “representative” specimens of cultivators’ or laborers’ or bards’ speech about famine, I examine these narratives as reminders that there were more articulate and more particularly *positioned* signs of subaltern memory and critique than one might imagine from the descriptions of “obscure, enigmatic symbols [and] manic repetition of rumour” that Homi Bhabha (1994:199-200) sees as constituting the “intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance” in the nineteenth century; these songs are not enigmatic or obscure, they are highly articulate and compelling poetic critiques of both “custom” and the colonial state. I also look at these songs as reminders of the inadequacy of representations of peasant “tradition” simply as “conventional wisdom” (Arnold 1984:85), as “unquestioning obedience to authority” or as “traditionalism” (Guha 1983:36); such characterizations have often figured in even the most sophisticated interpretations of nineteenth-century Indian peasant consciousness and action that stops short of overt rebellion.

I view these sung narratives then, patterned as they are in terms of conventional genres of Indian oral tradition, as sites where “tradition” reveals itself not as homogeneous, unchanging, or unquestioned “custom,” but as historically situated, reflective, heterogeneous, and diversely positioned critique and memory. As Lalu’s song reminds us, some people weep and some people laugh in the face of “tradition” and in the face of the colonial state.

### **Famine Envisioned in the Colonial Archive**

William Simpson’s 1866 ink and sepia wash sketch entitled “The Famine in India” (Fig. 1) depicts a scene along the Ganges River in Varanasi, of figures making supplication to an immense image of Nandi, Shiva’s bull, and in the background, to an image of Ganesh the elephant-headed god.<sup>7</sup> A woman holds her infant child aloft before the bull, another figure huddles at its feet, and an emaciated bearded man approaches the bull with outstretched arms as the less clearly differentiated figures in the distance make obeisance to Ganesh. Only a pair of herons standing at the river’s edge seem oblivious of the gods, in what the artist clearly intended as a scene of superstitious Hindu idolatry, enacted as a customary response to famine.

After I had written these observations, I discovered that the central portion of this sketch had been the basis for an engraving on the cover of the *Illustrated London News* of February 21, 1874, at the beginning of the famine of that year. And there is a short accompanying article that in effect instructs readers in precisely this aspect of colonialist discourse about famine. The first half chronicles the irrigation projects and relief efforts put into motion by the colonial government, and the second half describes the “idols” being worshipped by the natives at the time of famine, complete with stretches of the imagined speech of the colonized. And here the

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<sup>6</sup>In this essay I have restricted my analyses of famine songs to those from northern and central India and the Punjab, and to those languages and dialects in which I am reasonably fluent or at least have some reading knowledge.

<sup>7</sup>This sketch is reproduced in Pal and Dehejia (1986:123).

reader is also advised that while native faith in the gods is folly, faith in the benevolence of the empire is not (“The Famine in India” 1874:167):

The scene delineated in our front page Engraving is an illustration of the mode in which the Hindoo people may be seen, upon any occasion of great prevailing distress, to implore the aid of one of their deities. . . . In the scene our Artist has drawn we see people, young and old, before this idol in agonies of prayer. The mother, in despair, holds up her bucha or child to Nandi, and begs for kana—that is, food. She exclaims “Hum burra bhoohka hai!” (We are very hungry!) “Humara bucha burra bhookha hai!” (My child is very hungry!) “Hum log morghia hai!” (Our people are dead!) Such are the cries of lamentation that may too soon be heard in India. The bull Nandi may be deaf to them, but not the English John Bull.



Fig. 1. Engraving from *Illustrated London News* of February 21, 1874, based on William Simpson's 1866 ink and sepia wash sketch entitled "The Famine in India." Courtesy of Digital Library Services, University of Minnesota.

During the same sojourn in India, Simpson depicted the British administrators' response to such crises in a watercolor entitled "The Ganges Canal, Roorkee, Saharanpur District" (Fig. 2). The painting suggests to the viewer that colonial administrators did not implore the gods at times of famine, but instead built the Ganges Canal, an irrigation project explicitly authorized by official cognizance of the fact that the famine of 1837-38 had cost the Government about two million pounds in famine relief and lost revenue (Stone 1984:239). It depicts another assemblage of massive animal statuary, not a sacred bull and an elephant-headed god, but a pair of imperial lions erected on either side of the Canal in Roorkee; they stand guard over the Canal that would supposedly prevent the loss of revenue occasioned by another devastating famine.<sup>8</sup> And thus the sketch and the watercolor exactly mirror the suggestions made in the *Illustrated London News* article about the contrast between British and Indian responses to famine, a purported contrast between economic and technological rationality on the one hand and "superstition" on the other.



Fig. 2. William Simpson, "The Ganges Canal, Roorkee, Saharanpur District." Courtesy of British Library Board (WD1012/manuscript).

<sup>8</sup>Although they had been moved upstream to a different location, the imperial lions themselves were still standing guard alongside the Canal in Roorkee when I first visited the town in the late 1970s, and they remain there to this day.

### **Hunger, “Tradition,” and the Politics of Famine Relief: Disciplinary Uses of “Custom” in the Nineteenth Century**

Simpson’s depictions of Indian and British responses to famine manifest several commonplace colonial assumptions about “tradition” and famine in India. The ubiquity of these assumptions, however, did not mean that questions about famine policy were completely settled in nineteenth-century India. On the contrary, each famine prompted debate on procedures for the administration of famine relief. Representations of “custom” and “tradition” were central to many of these discussions however, and provided a discursive frame for them. On the one hand, colonial administrators frequently asserted that famine relief policy was congruent with “native custom” and that certain features of the relief efforts were in place so as to “accommodate” those customs and traditions. On the other hand, colonial understandings of customs relating to caste and gender were often invoked explicitly in the formulation of disciplinary routines designed to limit the amount of relief to be provided. Regardless of how the policies shifted, however, colonial discourse and colonial procedure revolved around assumptions about Indian subservience to “custom” and Indian consent to colonial rule, often in contradictory ways.

David Arnold (1984) has critiqued the views, found in both colonial administrative reports and scholarly writing, that Indians evince only attitudes of fatalism and passivity in response to famine. He launches his critique by noting the absence of peasant perspectives on famine in colonial documents and later research. His essay “Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action: Madras 1876-8” has two objectives: to “determine how peasants perceived and responded to the crisis created by drought, dearth and famine” (63) and to “use the crisis of the famine as a window onto subaltern consciousness and action” (64). Arnold posits two phases in peasants’ response to the famine. He suggests that in the initial phases of famine peasants responded in terms of village collectivity: they attributed the famine to divine action, they performed collective rituals of placation and rain-making ceremonies in whose efficacy they had implicit belief, and they heeded prognostications about the rains and the course of famine on the basis of shared and indisputable proverbial wisdom. Arnold (1984:107-09) uncritically reproduces colonial characterizations of the supposed “cultural resistance” exhibited by the peasantry to government food relief distributions, founded on a hesitation about “accepting food prepared by cooks from ritually inferior castes. He similarly reports without question a missionary observation concerning the “bewilderment” (74) of villagers at the failure of their rites to elicit divine aid in the face of the severe famine. And he relates uncritically the statement emanating from the Madras Board of Revenue that peasants are “reluctant to break through custom” (defined by proverbial sayings) concerning the timing of agricultural operations (84-85). Thus in every instance Arnold adopts a view of “tradition” as un-positioned and homogeneous, and as generally unreflected upon and unchallengeable. Without entirely denying the power of peasant convictions on caste and ritual and gender, we may wish to pay particular attention to the positionality of such convictions, to the possibility that “tradition” is already at its origin a site of ambivalence and skepticism as well as “belief,” a site of negotiated and contested social realities as well as consensus. We may wish to call into question both the colonial texts and more recent historical writing that speaks only of unambiguous capitulation to the weight of tradition.

In the later stages of famine, according to Arnold, village solidarity began to break down, an enhanced peasant awareness of exploitation by the wealthy developed, and looting of the grain stores of village elites and of traders commenced. But in Arnold's view, insofar as "tradition" addressed itself to famine and drought, it did so collectively and in terms of implicit faith in the power of ritual and of custom. By entirely separating the moment of "tradition" and "solidarity" from the moment of violent revolt and seeing the former only in terms of a homogeneous collectivity, Arnold thus reproduced colonial ideas about Indian "tradition." But it is these representations of "tradition" that nineteenth-century famine songs permit us to critique.

*Famine, "Tradition," and "Moral Improvement"*

Famine was often said to be exacerbated by the "traditions" of the masses, as when William Crooke wrote that (1897:173-74):

There is, perhaps, no more pathetic situation in the whole range of human history than to watch these dull, patient masses stumbling in their traditional way along a path which can lead only to suffering, most of them careless of the future, marrying and giving in marriage, fresh generations ever encroaching on the narrow margin which separates them from destitution.

Indians were said to have little ability to cope with even one year of scarcity, because of their "improvident habits, and . . . the system of borrowing and receiving money in advance on the credit of their coming crops" (Colvin 1870:159); famine reports speak repeatedly of the "wasteful expenditures" on weddings and rituals that supposedly make crisis inevitable when scarcity strikes. And Indians were supposedly unable to respond aggressively to famine because "a main trait in Oriental character is proneness to succumb to difficulties and to accept them as inevitable" (*Report* 1902:11).

Colonial administrators occasionally expressed the opinion, however, that the experience of famine might provide an opportunity for the state to encourage peasants to break through "traditional" constraints and thus acquire "habits of work" that would ultimately put more revenue into the government's coffers. J. C. Colvin, for example, wrote of the constriction of the agricultural labor market in the 1868-69 famine in the North-Western Provinces, not in terms of the desperate situation of the laborers who were left without means of subsistence, but in terms of a possible inculcation of state-approved "habits" among the landholders (Colvin 1870:168):

The agricultural population were too poor to hire labour; many hundreds of farmers, who in ordinary years never touched a plough or handled a hoe, were now hard at work with their own hands. . . . Men who last year sat at rest, giving two or three annas a day to labourers, were this year working away like common coolies. It is to be hoped that a habit of work may thus be contracted, and so out of the vast amount of misery a little good may be reaped.

John Strachey, who as Collector of Moradabad administered famine relief there in the 1860s and provided an influential model for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, summed up



the colonial perspective on the dangers of supplying too much relief with an allusion to J. S. Mill (Strachey 1862:4-5):

The evils of indiscriminate private charity are universally admitted. . . . Under the pressure of extreme famine, it is true that the difficulty of discrimination may become too great to be contended with, and it is possible that in some districts this may have occurred already. But such cases must be extremely rare, and until distress becomes altogether unmanageable, there can be no reason for the disregard of the obvious principles upon which public charity ought to be administered.

The problem, as Mr. J. S. Mill has said, is, “how to give the greatest amount of needful help, with the smallest encouragement to undue reliance upon it.” This is equally true, whether relief be given to the infirm in the shape of simple charity, or to the able-bodied in return for labor performed.

Thus it was the general view that Indian habits and “custom” rendered the danger of “demoralization”—laziness and a reliance on relief—greater than it would have been in Britain, and that measures had to be taken to ensure that “discrimination” could be maintained as famine relief was administered, so as to provide relief only to those who were deemed to be truly starving because of the famine, and in such amounts as would discourage reliance on relief. And as Veena Das (1995:97) has pointed out, colonial administrators also frequently demonstrated a disinclination to provide for the maintenance of unproductive populations, such as vagrants and paupers. Thus famine reports throughout the nineteenth century insist upon the need to separate those made destitute by famine from such “professional mendicants,” ordinary beggars, and vagrants, and aggressive measures were taken to exclude the latter from famine relief, through the use of tests. Greenough (1982:60), for example, points out that in the official report on the famine of 1866 in Bengal and Orissa, famine commissioners lament the fact that Bengali *zamindars* (“landlords”) and other native dispensers of relief show no interest in discriminating between the “really destitute immigrants [into Calcutta] and the ordinary vagrant beggars of the town” and their “strong repugnance to apply very strict tests.” Greenough (1982:59) also comments that such tests were not popular with the hungry poor; the tests were partly devised to ensure that relief was funneled to the “respectable classes” who were affected by the famine, and away from those who had been suffering from poverty and hunger prior to the famine.

*Famine, Caste, and “Tests” for Destitution: Contradictions of Colonial Representations of Caste*

Colonial representations of native capitulation to “custom” and “tradition” are evident in far more specific ways as well in discussions of famine-relief measures. Famine-stricken Indians may refuse to eat from colonial workhouses and relief kitchens, we are told over and over, because of caste prejudices concerning who can eat with whom, and because *purdah-nashins*, women under the sway of *purdah* restrictions, would rather die of starvation in their homes than break the hold of custom. These ubiquitous observations on “custom” and its hold on the Indian mind were based on four ideas: first, that Indians were strictly observant of rules concerning caste hierarchy; second, that women were equally observant of norms for female behavior vis-à-

vis veiling and seclusion; third, that the behaviors exhibited at government labor camps and poorhouses were equivalent to behaviors and attitudes exhibited in ordinary times and places, away from the surveillant gaze and disciplinary power of the colonial government; and fourth, that the “respectable classes,” which typically meant people of higher caste, were more deserving of relief than the chronically hungry poor.

In writing of “caste prejudices” supposedly exhibited in the poorhouses, what was ignored was the disciplinary context, the fact that a poorhouse is, as it was defined in the 1898 *Famine Code* for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, “an institution where cooked food is distributed gratuitously to the inmates on the condition of their residing therein and conforming to the rules of discipline and order.”<sup>9</sup> But what is the precise connection between the colonial concern with such decontextualized “custom” and the administration of government relief according to these rules?

Beginning with the famine of 1837-38 in northern India, and gaining momentum with the famine reports of the 1860s, there was a preoccupation with caste and food restrictions, and how these could be utilized to minimize relief expenditures during periods of famine to control the number of people seeking relief, which would at once minimize the cost of relief and also, in the colonial view, minimize the chances of “demoralization.”

Knowledge of caste and caste identity was seen by colonial administrators as critical to the distribution of famine relief, despite the varied interpretations they encountered and despite their often contradictory understandings of practices related to caste. The *Famine Code* for the N.-W. Provinces and Oudh contains, for example, a sample ticket of admission to a poorhouse; on it was to have been recorded an admission number, the name of the ticket-holder, age, sex, caste, village, and occupation. A note is appended to this, stating that “Inhabitants of different villages and members of different castes must never be included in the same ticket.” Thus, here and in the *Famine Code* pronouncement (1898:179) that “Great care should be taken that the persons employed in the cooking and handling of the food are of such castes as shall not offend the prejudices of the inmates” and that “[cooks] must be Brahmans” we see moves toward the colonial institutionalization of caste ideology in an arena in which we might expect it to be generally of marginal concern to the segments of the population—generally low-caste laborers—who were most hard-hit by famine and who would have appeared most frequently in the famine kitchens. More frequently however the colonial preoccupation with caste and commensality had more to do with curbing expenditures and preventing “demoralization” than with accommodating caste customs.

In the *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866*, there is a lengthy section devoted to statements taken from local elites, both Indian and European, regarding the efficiency and efficacy of various relief measures in relation to caste. Members of the colonial and native elites frequently asserted that many people refused to accept food from the relief kitchens because they feared that in so doing they would jeopardize their caste status. Dr. N. Jackson, the Civil Surgeon at Balasore, stated, for example, that “Sheds were erected from nearly the beginning of this state of things in which the homeless might have found shelter if they had chosen; but the paupers had a strong objection to going into them. I

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<sup>9</sup>This definition is set forth in p. 23, Chapter VII of this *Famine Code*, titled “The Poorhouse.”

believe the objection was founded on considerations of caste” (*Report* 1867:lxv). A Mr. J. W. Lacey told the commissioners that “I have been engaged in establishing centres and superintending them. We commenced with uncooked rice and afterwards gave cooked rice. . . . Many died because they would not come to the . . . centres for fear of losing their caste” (*Report* 1867: vii). Baboo Poorosotum Patnaik of Puri testified that “The better castes of people who were fed at the *unnochatros* [famine kitchens] will not be re-admitted to the privileges of caste; but those belonging to lower castes will be able to get theirs back by giving feasts” (*Report* 1867: xvii). And Baboo Radhsham Nurinder, a *zamindar*, reported that “The Deputy Magistrate began to distribute cooked rice to the poor. . . . He asked me to belong to the Committee, but I refused, because he would not, as I suggested, give relief in the shape of raw rice instead of cooked food. I objected to the latter arrangement, because it deprives people of their caste, and high caste people could not therefore benefit by it. The result of distributing only cooked food over the Cuttack district was that respectable people preferred dying in their houses to accepting relief” (*Report* 1867: lxxii).

Some members of the local elite who responded to the questions of the commissioners were unconvinced that people would rather die of hunger than eat food prepared at the famine kitchens. Moulvie Mahomed Abdoolla, the Deputy Magistrate and Collector in Balasore District, testified, for example, to the lack of caste scruples in this regard, and he also provided insight into other reasons for any observed disinclination to eat or be confined in the relief facilities (*Report* 1867: cxlix):

From the first the paupers used to lodge in the *dhurmsalah*, but that did not afford sufficient accommodation to all; so the [Relief] Committee erected a number of sheds. . . . These sheds would have accommodated all, but very few availed themselves of the shelter. The cause of this was that the food supplied to them at the *dhurmsalah* was insufficient, and therefore the paupers used to supplement it by begging from door to door; and at night, they lay down by the sides of the road and in the verandah of houses, wherever they happened to be. I do not believe that those who took food at the *dhurmsalah* had any objections to congregating in the sheds with other castes; all such scruples were given up when they came to the *dhurmsalah* for food.

Here we are given an intimation that, despite the claims of some members of the elite, the paupers’ reluctance to accept relief may have had to do with the insufficiency of the food that was provided in the relief kitchens and the imposed confinement in the sheds rather than a reluctance to infringe upon caste-related commensal restrictions. For many people the reluctance to eat at the kitchens had more to do with colonial disciplinary practices than with a possible violation of caste traditions.

As Paul Greenough (1982:188-89) has pointed out, this particular famine report caught the attention of Max Weber and he took notice in *The Religion of India* of the purported necessity of providing high-caste cooks in the relief kitchens and marking “symbolic *chambre separée*” by means of chalk lines drawn in the eating places, as evidence of the tenacity of Hindu notions of “magical defilement” (Weber 1958:36-37). When we listen to Abdoolla remark upon the insufficiency of the food relief dispensed in these same relief kitchens, Weber’s interpretation seems compromised by the failure to consider colonial disciplinary power as well as the local

relations between the elite and the paupers in which the discourse about caste and food restrictions took shape. “Magical defilement” does not seem to be the whole of the story. As Baboo Radhsham Nurinder’s account suggests, such “defilement” may have been a matter of great concern only to the high caste elite who spoke to the famine commissioners and it certainly seems to have been far less salient to the paupers described by Abdoolla than the surveillance, confinement and labor requirements imposed at the colonial relief operations. In thus eliding positionality and politics from his account, and in producing the evidence of the chalk lines as a token of an essentialized Hindu “tenacity,” Weber’s interpretive strategy conforms with colonial erasures of politics from accounts of “tradition” and it also prefigures later anthropological reifications of caste and “tradition” as well.

The opinions of Brahmin *pandits* were sought after the Bengal famine of 1866 and recorded in colonial documentation as evidence of generalized Hindu “custom.” A Mr. Kirkwood submitted a report entitled “Recovery of Caste After Partaking of Cooked Food at a Poor House” (1874:173):

The matter was one full of anxiety. There were crowds of women and children daily leaving our *Unmochutters* [*annachatras*], but to go where? To go to their homes, there probably to be refused all intercourse with their kindred? In such case it would be no difficult task to cast their horoscope. Their future could be foretold with tolerable certainty; beggary and plundering, every degree of turpitude, and every form of loathsome disease; in short, a course of life that might go far to undermine the moral and physical well-being of the province for years to come. Such a prospect was not one before which to sit down quietly and contemplate. Many influential resident and non-resident Bengali gentlemen, *zemindars*, began to agitate for the restoration of caste; but the Central Relief Committee [a semi-official organization] declined to move in the matter, thinking that any interference that might partake of the nature of a policy would not only place Government in a false position, but rather retard than hasten the desired solution of the difficulty. But meanwhile, influential natives of Calcutta and Cuttack had consulted the pundits [scholarly Brahmins] of Pooree, Cuttack and Calcutta on the subject. The pundits gave their opinions in language as clear as it is decisive. These opinions all set forth that no act committed in order to save life occasions loss of caste; but the Cuttack pundits enjoined the payment of a few annas [coins] and certain ceremonies, not because the *Shastras* [sacred texts] so directed, but because they deemed it expedient. The others stated that no penance whatsoever was necessary. The authoritative ruling thus obtained has been made widely known and, I believe, with considerable effect, for now I frequently hear of those who have eaten of the cooked food being re-admitted to their castes.

Despite Kirkwood’s assumption that it took this “authoritative ruling” from the *pandits* to dislodge the hold of “custom,” Kirkwood himself noted that an insistence on the commensal restrictions was found only among Brahmins, and that he frequently heard of people who had eaten in the kitchens and returned to their castes; one doubts whether this effect would have followed so rapidly upon the *pandits*’ pronouncements if there had in fact been such uniformly strong “traditional” scruples. It is not at all clear that the actual relief recipients were themselves preoccupied with this issue, before or after the local elites called in the *pandits*.

During the famine of 1876-78, when Sir Richard Temple (1874) was asked to devise policies that would accomplish the goal of minimizing famine relief expenditures, he was instructed that “it is essential, in the present state of finances, that the most severe economy should be practiced,” and that if the government pursued a policy of attempting to save as many lives as possible in the face of famine, such action would “go far to render the future government of India impossible.” Temple was also told that “the task of saving life, irrespective of the cost, is one which it is beyond [the power of the government] to undertake.”<sup>10</sup>

Beginning with the famine of 1837-38, a principal means of effecting such economies had been arrangements for “test” relief. The means through which relief recipients could be “tested” as to their actual destitution and the direness of their need for relief were constantly under discussion. “Tests” that were implemented included compulsory residence and confinement in enclosed workhouses, and providing relief work for wages at a distance from the homes of those who needed it, so as to eliminate those who were not in entirely desperate straits. Recipients were also “tested” through the manipulation of wage levels to very low and extraordinarily precise levels, far below market rates for labor and minutely calculated so as to provide the barest minimum for survival. The result was that in some famines, laborers in relief camps were paid wages (in cash or in grain) that were in fact inadequate (Bhatia 1991 [1963]: 115-18). The dire consequences of the stringent enforcement of these tests have also been documented. Klein (1984:200) points out, for example, that in the famine of 1876-78 in south India, “People perished in the greatest numbers where local officials were most suspicious about distress and most restrictive in offering relief, or villagers were least able or willing to take relief at large, distant works.”<sup>11</sup>

*The Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901* sets forth the principle that the tests that are decided upon in any instance “should be stringent though not repellent” (1902:5). It is within the colonial endeavor to devise such tests as a means of curbing expenditure that we locate the incessant discussions of caste, “caste prejudices,” and commensality in the famine documents.

In taking note of local practices concerning caste and commensal restrictions, colonial administrators seized upon them, generally viewing them as incontestable and of universal Indian concern even when there was much evidence to the contrary, and they made attempts to codify them in the famine deliberations.<sup>12</sup> It was thought that, as cooked food is more subject to caste restrictions than raw foodstuffs, the distribution of cooked food would serve as a test of desperation.

Colonial administrators sometimes saw distributions of cooked food as imposing a too “repellent” test, but here too the argument was based on an assumption of unquestioned

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from the Government of India to Richard Temple, dated January 1877, quoted in Bhatia (1991 [1963]:90, 111).

<sup>11</sup> Hall-Matthews (2008) reviews the debates among colonial administrators about the level of wages that should be provided to laborers on the relief works, and takes stock of the hundreds of thousands of deaths that occurred when the tests were strict, as in the famine of 1876-1878.

<sup>12</sup> The variability (by caste and by region) and indeed the contestability and transformability of such commensal restrictions have been documented. See, for example, Marriott (1965 [1960] and 1976) and Raheja (1988:239-44).

submission to the dictates of caste. Thus, the 1898 *Famine Code, N.-W. Provinces and Oudh* set forth its instruction that “[cooks] must be Brahmans” (179), and a report on the famine of 1868-70 in the North-West Provinces asserted that “the food so distributed shall be cooked by persons to be engaged for the purpose, care of course being taken that these persons shall be such as that none may object on the ground of caste prejudices to receive food from their hands” (Henley 1871:lxvii). There is in these famine reports an insistence on the necessity of providing relief to the “respectable classes” of high caste people who were most likely to exhibit scruples about accepting cooked food. The effort was not simply to make accommodations for purported native sensibilities, but to devise such precisely calibrated “stringent but not repellent” tests that would discourage applicants while at the same time providing some relief, especially to those of the “respectable” classes who would in non-famine years provide revenue to the colonial government.

But there were continual vacillations on this issue of providing cooked or uncooked food, and employing Brahmin cooks. At times of heightened concern that providing raw foodstuffs would provide no disincentive to applicants for government relief, distributing cooked food was deemed to serve as a useful “test.” We find in these famine documents only occasional concern with questions such as the nutritional levels of the gruel that was provided in the kitchens, or whether those people stricken by famine had access to fuel and cooking hearths and other means to prepare the raw foodstuffs that might be provided, or whether the rules about “confinement” were too harsh. Rather, the primary consideration was whether caste sensibilities were such that providing cooked food either as wage on the test works or in the kitchens set up for gratuitous relief would deter unworthy relief applicants, while at the same time allowing “respectable” people to avail themselves of aid.

It was remarked in the 1901 *Famine Report* that “the conditions which we lay down are hard, and they will not be long endured by the people; but it is of the essence of test works that the lesson which they are intended to teach should be quickly learned and unhesitatingly applied” (*Report* 1902:18). Later in the report, the serving of cooked food as a “test” is commented upon (48-49):

The word “kitchen” appears to have been adopted into the vernacular; and certainly in no previous famine were kitchens employed in anything like the same degree. They rose into favour as importing a test of distress; and when in the Central Provinces the test completely failed, they remained in favour, or at least in prominence, by stress of the inexorable law of famine administration that a fundamental error, once made, can never be retrieved. . . . At first, indeed, there was some small reluctance on the part of some people to take cooked food, but it did not last long; and, when it broke down, every barrier simultaneously gave way. It is now generally admitted by the officers of the Central Provinces that personal selection is as necessary for kitchens as it is for village relief. This conclusion deprives the kitchens of the principal advantage expected from them, namely, the enforcement of an automatic test of distress.

The authors of the *Report* admit that distributions of cooked food rather than grain were not effective as a general test primarily because the eating of cooked food in a common kitchen had not been viewed by most of the famine-stricken as an insurmountable barrier or as unacceptably

damaging to caste status.<sup>13</sup> In a number of famines in the nineteenth century, distributing cooked food as a “test” was abandoned as this fact became clear, and local officers were instead instructed to inquire into the circumstances of individuals who appeared at the kitchens, in order to devise strategies of “personal selection” that would replace other ineffective tests.<sup>14</sup> But despite the fact that the 1901 *Report* discouraged the distribution of cooked food as a general test, it nonetheless recommended that it be used in certain circumstances (*Report* 1902:18):

Experience . . . shows that women and children in need of relief are apt to flock in numbers to test works from the neighbouring villages. If their numbers are excessive, it may be desirable, as a temporary measure, to give the women and children cooked food as a wage, with a view to ascertaining the reality and extent of the pressure.

The famine of 1873-74 was the only one in which the use of “tests” was substantially relaxed, and the only one in which the saving of all life was held out as the goal of famine policy. This policy was repudiated in the famine of 1878-79, and despite a great increase in famine mortality, the 1880 *Report of the Indian Famine Commission* (33) emphasized the necessity of the tests, asserting that “we cannot doubt that the measures taken in the famine of 1873-74,—though they must be recognized as successful so far as the absence of mortality can be perceived as a test,—exceeded the necessities of the case.” As the severity of the tests was increased in 1878-79, and as the wages provided at the relief works declined dramatically, there was an apparent increase in those years in the reluctance of people in Bihar and other areas of northern India to come forward for famine relief, and an increase in reports of caste scruples being cited as the reason for this. There were in fact so many such reports in 1878-79 that the phenomenon, for those years at least, would appear not to be simply a figment of the colonial imagination. Perhaps we come closest to the truth if we take seriously an interpretation put forward, and then discounted in Part III (*Famine Histories*) of the *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, issued in 1885 (200): “possibly the rumour of the lavishness of relief in Behar in 1874 may have spread over the country, and led the people to expect the repetition of that great blunder,” and when that level of relief was not forthcoming, they hesitated to submit to confinement. The report goes on to insist that the only satisfactory interpretation for this is that the people were not “sufficiently starved” to come forward for relief, in the form of lowered famine wages or cooked food. Yet there was the beginning of an insight in this 1885 report that the talk of “caste scruples” may have been a screen behind which people were critical of the government efforts and thus refusing not the cooked food but the confinement in the kitchens, especially when the level of relief was so low.

It is apparent that the contradictory and constantly vacillating colonial assertions about the inclination or disinclination of relief recipients to accept cooked food because of “caste

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<sup>13</sup> During the Bengal famine of 1943-44, Tarakchandra Das carried out a survey of the destitute population in Calcutta. In a section of his report entitled “Observance of Social Restrictions on Food,” he (1949:87-89) argued that such restrictions are normally observed at the top as well as the bottom of the social hierarchy, but that his survey revealed that “during the critical period of the famine these socio-religious restrictions practically disappeared from the vast majority of the destitutes.”

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Bhatia’s (1991:114) descriptions of procedures in the 1874 famine in Bengal and Orissa.

prejudices” must at least in part be interpreted in light of the connection between colonial knowledge about castes and shifting modes of colonial disciplinary control. Such knowledge was constructed and deployed in attempts to arrive at that precarious balance between “stringent” tests on the one hand, and on the other, those “repellent” measures that would have had such dire effects upon the population that agricultural operations (and revenue collection) in the following year would be disrupted. The location of each assertion about caste restrictions, the particular administrative context in which it is situated, makes it possible for us to discern the disciplinary intent. Ethnographic observations in these famine reports thus cannot be regarded as transparent windows onto subaltern subjectivity or as inquiries into Indian “tradition” whose object was the “accommodation” of Indian custom. Such observations were located in projects of control and discipline and take their character from these projects, and colonial assertions about the observance of caste commensal restrictions often obscured the fact that hungry people avoided the relief works because of insufficient wages or because people resented confinement at the works, and not just because of caste traditions.<sup>15</sup>

### *Famine, Gender, and the “Stringency” of Tests*

Just as a contradictory colonial discourse about caste traditions took shape under the impetus of administrative and economic imperatives, so too are contradictory assertions about gender, hunger, and “tradition” evident in these famine reports.

Colonial administrators frequently expressed concern about the large numbers of women who appeared at the test works. In the *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901* quoted above, for example, so many women were seen on the works that famine officers strove to limit the number who received such aid. And there was also much deliberation as to the wages to be paid to men on the one hand and women on the other. Wages for women became an important issue because in many cases famine codes discouraged administrators from providing an allowance for the dependents of laborers on the famine works. Famine commissioners argued, for example, that if village works were established and “distance tests” eliminated, “undue popularity” of the works would be the result, and so some other “test” would have to be mandated to limit the numbers of people receiving relief. So, the commissioners recommended that a policy of “no relief to dependents” be imposed in these instances, to serve as such a test. Thus women were frequently obliged to labor at the works if they needed relief, but wage levels too were used to discourage them. Women were paid less than men for their labor in the attempt to devise “stringent” tests; arguing that it was a “physiological fact” that women required less food than men and pointing out that such a measure was deemed necessary for “economy” and for “control and discipline,” famine officers recommended that a “sex distinction” in the matter of wages be maintained (*Report* 1902:38-39). In the *Report*, the commissioners weighed the arguments for and against this distinction; the main argument in favor of abolishing the differential wage scale was that a uniform wage would be easier to administer. But the conclusion was that “In so far . . . as the question is resolved into a balance of a certain

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<sup>15</sup> For examples of other colonial uses of knowledge of Indian caste “customs,” see Dirks (2001), Freitag (1991), and Raheja (1999a).



convenience against financial and disciplinary interests, we are of the opinion that the latter ought to prevail” (39).

Colonial assessments of “custom” were brought into play in this respect as well. Despite their insistence in other situations on the colonial mission of “reform” in the matter of Hindu treatment of women, administrators here cite “the universal custom of the country, which allots a much lower wage to women than to men” as a justification for the wage policy, averring that “no unavoidable step should be taken, which conflicts with the custom of the country” (*Report* 1902:39).<sup>16</sup>

Colonial administrators thus deplored the fact that so many women appeared at the relief works and that so many appeared at poorhouses along with their children (Henley 1871:31), and they cite “the custom of the country” as a means of legitimizing the use of a lower wage for women as a “test” to discourage this. They also report on the large numbers of women seen begging for a piece of bread for their children (*ibid.*) and, during the 1866 famine in Orissa, on the large numbers of women “wandering about the marshy bottoms, picking a kind of salt herb, which . . . form[s] the main article of subsistence at present, but the supply of which must soon be exhausted.”<sup>17</sup> Yet they also speak of the large numbers of *purdah-nusheens*, women who are said to submit blindly to norms of seclusion and veiling, and who would supposedly prefer starvation to breaking such norms and appearing in public for relief. The 1898 *Famine Code, N.-W.Provinces and Oudh* (20), for example, comments on the “respectable women, who, being debarred by national custom from appearing in public and deprived of male guardians, are in danger of starvation, shall be regarded as entitled to gratuitous relief” to be distributed at their homes. And Henley’s famine narrative (1871:133) speaks of the “*purdah-nusheens* . . . who either never go abroad in public, or would feel themselves degraded by the receipt of alms in a poorhouse.” By constantly publicizing the connection between “respectability” and the maintenance of seclusion, and speaking of it as a “national custom,” it is likely that the colonial administration heightened local awareness of this practice as a demonstration of status, just as the practice of disallowing widow remarriage became more prevalent when the administration came to view it as a mark of respectability and high caste status (Carroll 1989).

In the many references to the problem of the *purdah-nashins*, there is an evident recourse to representations of “tradition” and of women’s submission to it. Yet, in one instance, we are provided with a terse report that makes it apparent that even women of the “respectable classes” were not perhaps so blindly submissive to “tradition” and to colonial authority as we are otherwise given to believe, and that they were in fact challenging colonial disciplinary practices. In Frederick Henley’s 1871 *Narrative of the Drought and Famine Which Prevailed in the North-*

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<sup>16</sup> The “custom of the country” did not serve as a hindrance in other matters that in fact exacerbated the effects of famine. This same report provides an account of land revenue policy in the Bombay Presidency, under which it was deemed “an obvious advantage to get land out of the hands of cultivators unable to pay their way and to transfer it to cultivators with more capital. . . . As the customs and native revenue systems of India are adverse to land transfers, it is therefore all the more necessary to adopt measures for giving them effect” (*Report* 1902:107). The famine commissioners writing in 1902 discerned that this earlier colonial policy had made it difficult for cultivators to withstand the pressures of famine.

<sup>17</sup> This statement is found in a report submitted by W. C. Lacey, the District Superintendent in Puri, and published in an Appendix to the 1867 *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Famine in Bengal and Orissa in 1866*.

*West Provinces During the Years 1868, 1869, and the Beginning of 1870*, the following brief notice concerning famine relief to women of the “respectable classes” in Ajmer appears (92):

Relief was . . . given to women of the respectable classes, but it was found necessary to take precautions against imposition. As the recipients were veiled, they were able occasionally to obtain alms in the evening as *purdah-nusheens*, when they had already received wages as famine labourers during the day. This trick was defeated by a re-arrangement of the hours for the distribution of the food.

In this warning to other administrators about the women’s deception, we find a crack opening up in the colonial discursive edifice concerning “tradition” and women’s submission to it. Just as women’s songs from all across northern India nowadays speak of women’s subversive uses of the veil (Raheja and Gold 1994:47-52, 127), here too we are provided with a vision of women actively appropriating *purdah* veiling “tradition,” feigning submission to it, and using it for their own subversive purposes. Perhaps women appeared reluctant to be seen in the relief kitchens not so much because of their submission to the dictates of “tradition,” but because of colonial attempts to confine, discipline, and control them there, and perhaps because they had learned, in some cases at least, how to mimic the colonial caricatures of their social practices and turn them to their own advantage.<sup>18</sup>

### **Positioned Critiques and “Sly Civilities”: Songs of Famine in the Nineteenth Century**

At the margins of this set of official records and reports there are a few vivid reminders of the heterogeneity of “tradition,” and reminders of the fact that in India as elsewhere, eloquent and diverse critiques of hierarchy, power, and domination are often lodged in poetic speech genres.<sup>19</sup> I have been able to locate eleven nineteenth-century songs about famine, scarcity, and the consequences of colonial responses to them from northern India, entextualized in colonial documents. The words of many of these songs go against the grain of the official characterizations of “tradition” and compliance with colonial rule. These songs were sung by people who were differently positioned with respect to local systems of domination and with respect to the colonial state, and they articulate a diverse set of perspectives on famine and its consequences. Within the bounds of these “traditional” speech genres we hear, if we listen closely to them, not the echoes of a monolithic and conventionalized “tradition,” but rather, poetic readings of the politics of famine from several different vantage points.

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<sup>18</sup> See Hodges (2005:379) for a discussion of how destitute women confined in “lock hospitals” in Madras during the 1870s “incorporated the lock hospitals into their strategies for survival and transformed these institutions into (albeit grim) asylums of relief” during the Madras famine of 1876-78.

<sup>19</sup> On the uses of song and “traditional” narrative in the articulation of critiques of gender ideologies and the hierarchical ideologies of caste in India, see, for example, Flueckiger (1987 and 1996), Prakash (1991), Ramanujan (1997), Raheja (1999a), Raheja and Gold (1994), and Trawick (1988).

*Famine Years: the Poetic Use of Time and Historical Specificity*

In these songs from northern India, the particular *time* of a famine, the year in which it made itself felt, figures prominently in the poetic representation of famine and its effects. The famine of 1783-84, for example, was popularly termed the *chalisa* or “fortieth” because it occurred in the *samvat*<sup>20</sup> year 1840 (Crooke 1897:169). The famine of 1837-38 was remembered as *chauranve*, from the Hindi term for ninety-four, a reference to the famine’s occurrence in the *samvat* year 1894 (170). A Maithili song composed after the famine of 1873-74 begins with the line referring to the *fasli*<sup>21</sup> year: *sal ekasik varanan suno, chaudas paral akal* (“Hear the tale of the famine year 1281, on every side a famine fell”) (Grierson 1882:24). In writing of conditions in Gwalior state in central India, Charles Eckford Luard (1908a:87) reported in 1908 that “Malwa has not yet recovered from the famine of 1899-1900, and the numerous empty houses to be seen in every village [are] referred to as the results of ‘*chhappan-ka-sal*,’” a reference to the *samvat* year 1956.<sup>22</sup>

The poetic possibilities of this linguistic resource are utilized particularly effectively in a song about the famine of 1899-1900, from Ratlam state in western Malwa, that Luard (1908c) published in the *Indian Antiquary*. In this song the famine itself is addressed as *chhapania* in the refrain, “O cursed Chhapania, return no more to this innocent land.”<sup>23</sup> And, as Luard himself points out in a footnote (1908c:329 n.5), the word *chhapania* is used in the song to refer as well to a person stricken by famine, as in the ironic line “the famine-stricken (child’s) mother has found and cooked a morsel of *dal*,” and to the year itself, as in “Now in 1956 [*chhapaniyan*] half [of us] are already dead, by 1962 we shall all be gone.”

The monthly course of events during a famine is sometimes charted in these songs. In Luard’s manuscript collection, Devanagari and English texts are provided for a *powada*, another song about the *chhappan* famine. The song was sung two years after the famine by two bards, Nunna Khan and Amir Uddin, in central India. The song tracks the sequence of the famine events, describing the encouraging rains in the month of *jeth* and the anticipated price of grain; the failure of the rains in *shravan* and the rise in prices that followed; the starvation and migrations of people from Marwar to Malwa in the month of *bhadon*; the fact that beggars of higher castes quarreled with people of the untouchable Sweeper caste over the food leavings on discarded leaf-plates, foods that higher castes would normally disdain; the grain-dealers’ profiteering; the rising prices of wheat and millet in the month of *kartik* and the looting and bloodshed that resulted; the gratitude felt by the recipients of cooked food distributed by local rulers, and so forth. The singers go on to say that people of different castes and different faiths all ate together in a single line at these food distributions. This is the only song in which caste (*jat*)

<sup>20</sup> Years in the Vikram *samvat* calendar, a calendar used in India, are calculated beginning in 57 BCE.

<sup>21</sup> *Fasli*, from the word for harvest, refers to another Indian calendrical system.

<sup>22</sup> Luard (1908b:58-59) makes a similar observation about local perspectives on the effects of the famine in Bhopal state.

<sup>23</sup> For all eleven songs I discuss here, the Hindi or Punjabi text as well as an English translation is provided in the source. Unless otherwise noted, I quote from the original translation.

is mentioned in connection with famine foods; it remarks not on people's reluctance to eat in famine kitchens in which cooked food was served, but on the fame of local rulers who provided "three pieces of bread and a spoonful of curry" to the famine-stricken of all castes. The line that immediately follows this one seems also to suggest that people of many ranks may have taken such food: *chote mote sabi jae ku chappan ki malum pari* (literally "the knowledge of the famine of the *samvat* year 1956 came to everyone, low and high"). The song's account of the relief provided in the form of cooked food, and the remark about higher caste people fighting for food leavings thus go against the grain of colonial descriptions of Indians' unthinking adherence to caste "custom" even in times of distress.<sup>24</sup>

Like the bards, Luard (1908d) also provides a month-by-month recounting of the course of the famine in the various states of Malwa, in the *Western States (Malwa) Gazetteer*. It closely follows the bards' chronicle, documenting the same monthly patterns of rainfall, migrations from Marwar, grain prices, looting, selling of jewelry and metal ware, and cattle deaths.

In a Maithili song of the famine of 1873-74 that begins by announcing itself as a tale of the year 1281, the six couplets that follow describe the levels of rainfall with reference to a temporal sequence of lunar asterisms: the unfulfilled expectation of rains in *rohani*, a meager rainfall in *mrigsirias*, the saving of but a few seedlings in *aslekha* when only a few drops of rain fell, the terrible drought in *utra* and *chitra*. Grierson (1885:285) quotes these six couplets three years later, in his *Bihar Peasant Life*, in a chapter called "Agricultural Times and Seasons" that consists primarily of proverbs about the weather and the months of the year. He adds marginal notations, as to the actual recorded rainfalls in these periods of time, to illustrate the accuracy of the song's descriptions.

Just as famine is represented in its temporal specificity in these songs, so too is the positional specificity of the singer clearly evident in them, as will become clear as we listen to the words with which singers recall the famine years. The overwhelming effect of these poetic narratives is one of particularly situated narrators speaking critically and often ironically about historically specific events, about the "traditions" that may exacerbate famine's effects, and about the famine policies of the colonial state. This poetically created effect stands in sharp contrast to representations of the fixity and unquestionability of "tradition" in colonial writing about famine, representations of the belief of the "Oriental" in the inevitability of disaster, and his "almost profane" belief in "the power of Government," as it they were set forth in the *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901* (1902:11). But how did the colonial administration interpret these songs about famine when they came to their attention, and how were the songs entextualized in colonial documents?

### *Famine Songs Framed by the Colonial State*

"The colonialist demand for narrative carries, within it, its threatening reversal: *Tell us why we are here*" (Bhabha 1994:100). This colonial desire for authorization, as Homi Bhabha

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<sup>24</sup> This song was written in the traditional form of a *barahmasa* (a "song of the twelve months"). In central and northern India, this is almost entirely a male performance genre, and such songs tend to be sung mostly by people of lower castes (Susan S. Wadley, personal communication). As noted above, the *barahmasa* song genre is often used for political commentary and critique.

has characterized it, is particularly evident in famine reports. The occurrence of famine is described as “beyond the control of the Government” (East India 1901:17) and not in any way a result of Government policy, and the relief efforts are always, in the colonial view, met with gratitude and approval. One of the very few instances in which the speech of ordinary farmers and laborers has been inserted into official famine documentation is at the conclusion of the “Statement of Famine” in the *Proceedings of the Governor General of India* for 1900, in which the “homely and touching phrases” in which this gratitude is expressed are reproduced: “If the English had not sent us this money, the thread of our lives would have been broken.” And the text goes on (East India 1901:267-68):

“We have *heard* of the generosity of Hatim Bai, but we have *tasted* that of the Great Queen.” How timely was the arrival of this charity, and how much it meant, is seen in scores of affecting incidents. “Now I have got through to the other side,” said a poor cultivator with tears in his eyes, to the English officer who had given him a few rupees to buy fodder for his famished bullocks. There is ample evidence that this gratitude is of an enduring nature. Some of the happiest memories of Famine-officers are those of unexpected visits from men who had been helped back to their old life by grants of seed and bullocks, and who returned after many days to again acknowledge the value of the gift. . . . It is these incidents which lead us to hope that this great national charity has not been misplaced, but has been received in the spirit in which it has been offered.

The narrative repetitiveness in this instance is striking: I have come across these identical anecdotes elsewhere in administrative reports, repeated over and over without attribution as if each author himself had heard and recorded this speech.

In other ways, outside of famine commission reports, poetic speech was entextualized in particular ways to create the illusion of consent to colonial rule. In the long Maithili/Braj famine song reproduced in George Grierson’s *Maithili Chrestomathy* (1882:24-34), the poet Phaturi Lal describes the onset of drought conditions, the failure of the spring crop, the laments of men and women, and the sale of cooking pots and women’s ornaments to buy a bit of food: “Men’s bodies were all shriveled up,” he sang, “and their very speech was halting.” He is highly critical of the Indian merchants who hoarded grain and profited from the famine, but the poet appreciatively describes the efforts of the colonial government to distribute famine relief, and to organize relief works. He alludes to the numbers of people working for relief, “on embankments, towns and roads,” and describes in critical terms attempts that were made by local elites to “rob the

Government of money” on the relief works.<sup>25</sup> Most importantly, the climax of the song comes when Sir Richard Temple, the Lieutenant-Governor of India, is described as visiting Darbhanga and a committee of the relations of the Maharaja of Darbhanga was assembled to welcome him. The twenty stanzas that follow praise in unmeasured terms the relief operations, the men of the Sappers and Miners, and the other army regiments who were sent to stop the looting and who “leveled mounds and groves, and made roads and bridges.”<sup>26</sup> The song concludes “Bless the noble Englishman, for everyone’s limbs became fat” (*dhanya dhanya angrej, sabh ke jutal gat*).

The song is clearly a panegyric, sung in the presence of an officer of the colonial government who wrote it down and communicated it to other such officials; at the time Grierson published this song, he was serving as assistant magistrate and collector in Patna. Yet the possibility of Phaturi Lal’s strategic use of speech is entirely denied by Grierson, who introduces the song thus (1882:24):

It is a description of the Famine of the Fasli year 1281 . . . and it was written by a man of the people. It is worth noting this fact, for it praises both the English and the Maharaja of Darbhanga in no measured terms, and speaks of native speculation in tones of grim and unsparing satire. I can certainly say that the Maharaja of Darbhanga had never seen it, and that certainly no Government official had ever heard of it, till I brought it to notice. Hence, it cannot have been written in a tone of false flattery, but must be a really and truly sincere production; that it chimes with the feelings of the people is shown by its immense popularity with the lower orders, and I may take it as proving that a lively gratitude is felt in the hearts of the natives of Tirhut for the efforts of Government and of the Darbhanga Raj in the disastrous year 1874.

In disregarding the performative and pragmatic aspects of the speech, and insisting on the authenticity and universality of the praises of British famine policy and of Sir Richard Temple found in the song Phaturi Lal performed in his presence, Grierson elides the positionality of the singer as well as the strategic use of speech; his own presence as a colonial official in the interactional context is thus effaced. Grierson can read the song only as a generalized Indian expression of gratitude, sung by “a man of the people.”

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<sup>25</sup> Phaturi Lal’s song opens in the manner of a *barahmasa* song, a North Indian poetic form that took shape as a vernacular genre as early as the fifteenth century (Zbavitel 1976:137). The form of its composition, like other nineteenth-century politically relevant famine songs, was partly inspired by an ancient oral tradition. Before moving on to his assessment of the praise and blame to be meted out to those responsible for the famine conditions, Phaturi Lal begins by describing in general the weather, farming, and famine conditions in the famine months, exactly as *barahmasa* (“twelve month”) songs in general describe relationships between month-by-month climatic conditions, human emotion, and distress and suffering (Wadley 1983:58). We know from British records of published books that *barahmasa* songs sometimes articulated political critiques in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Wadley 1983:55), and we know that *barahmasa* songs frequently give voice to an agrarian view of the world. In writing of Bengali *barahmasa* songs, for example, Zbavitel (1961:583-84) has this to say: “Most of the Baromasis that have come down to us do not describe the beauties of nature . . . but rather its other aspects, such as the troubles it brings, the work in the fields, the fruits of different months, and so on; in short they describe nature as seen through a countryman’s eyes, more precisely through a farmer’s eyes. Nor was this basic character commonly lost, even in those Baromasis which have very little in common with the farmer’s life.” Phaturi Lal is thus participating, in his song, in a centuries old oral tradition, even as he adapts and reshapes it in his encounters with the colonial state.

<sup>26</sup> Companies of sappers and miners, and regular troops as well, were deployed to establish transportation routes for rice imported from Burma, for distribution to famine areas (Klein 1984:193).

In his insistence that this song truly “chimes with the feelings of the people,” Grierson (1882:24) in effect creates an authorizing narrative for colonial rule and the illusion of universal consent. Yet, we can occasionally see what aspects of the communicative event have been occluded when speech such as this is written down and inserted into colonial texts. During the same famine tour as the one described in Phaturi Lal’s song, Sir Richard Temple also made a stop at Cuttack in Orissa. John Beames was posted at Cuttack at the time, and he intensely disliked Temple and disapproved of various aspects of his famine policies (Hill 1991:267-68). His description of the visit to Cuttack provides an interesting counterweight to Grierson’s commentary. Despite the tone of bemused sarcasm that Beames adopts as he describes the Indian participants in the events, he was also capable of discerning their “sly civility” as they welcomed Temple. In his *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*, Beames (1961:236) describes Temple’s arrival in Cuttack, in which members of the local elite read out addresses to him, in which they spoke of their “speechless admiration” for the brilliance of the Lieutenant-Governor’s management of the famine. Beames (236) comments then that “Your Bengali Babu can reel out this stuff by the fathom from morn to dewy eve and then begin again,” and goes on to ridicule Temple: “He believed it all!” One can imagine the likelihood that songs such as Phaturi Lal’s were commissioned and sung specifically for Temple, as panegyrics with a purpose. Yet, in Grierson’s account, no such contextualizing occurs. Because of his own dislike for Temple, Beames has provided us with a glimpse of the positionality of the Bengali orators, a reading of the possible projects that the flattering speeches conceal, and a description of a probable context for songs like Phaturi Lal’s. Grierson, on the other hand, in explicitly denying the existence of such a context for the song, reads it at face value.

We might, however, also want to contextualize this panegyric more broadly in relation to famine relief policies implemented in the famine of 1873-74, and those in effect a few years later when Grierson published the song. The famine of 1873-74 in Bengal and Bihar was the only famine during which the colonial government had as a goal the saving of all lives, and the only one in which a policy of liberal gratuitous relief, with much relaxed “tests” and labor requirements, was set forth.<sup>27</sup> But the expense incurred was so great, and the policy later so criticized for its excessive liberality, that in the next famine, of 1878-79, Richard Temple was called upon to formulate the strictest possible “tests,” primarily in the form of “wages” on relief works that could barely maintain the laborers above starvation levels, and he was, as we have already noted, instructed in 1877 by the Government of India to practice “the most severe economy” with respect to famine relief measures. By the time Grierson had published the song of the 1873-74 famine, there had been a turnabout in famine relief policy, a reversion to the policies implemented in the famine of 1837-38 and 1867. If Phaturi Lal and his listeners admired colonial famine policy at all, it was the relief measures of 1873-74 in which “tests” were greatly diminished in severity, and not those relief measures that were otherwise implemented

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<sup>27</sup> In a Minute dated October 31, 1874, Temple (1874:8) himself quoted from a resolution issued by the Government of India on the preceding March 6: “Active operations for the relief of distress having now commenced, the Governor-General in Council reminds local officers that it is their duty to see that the arrangements for the relief of distress are adequate within the area under their charge, and that they will be responsible that no deaths from starvation should occur which could have been avoided by any exertion or arrangements within their power, and the means placed at their command.” Hall-Matthews (2008) discusses some of the correspondence between Temple and Strachey, concerning the shift away from this policy in the famine of 1876-77.

throughout the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> In fact, there were so many native critiques of the far stricter “tests” during the famine of 1876-1878 that the colonial administration passed the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, explicitly banning criticism of the government (Hall-Matthews 2008:1204).

There were, in fact, songs that provided a different and far more defiant answer to that colonial demand for authorization. Songs that are forthrightly critical of colonial policies that exacerbated scarcities or widened the chasm between rich and poor can be found in a few colonial texts, but they are entextualized by administrators in such a way as to marginalize and discount and, indeed, criminalize the critiques apparent in them. In 1882, R. C. Temple (the elder son of Sir Richard Temple) commented upon and published in *The Indian Antiquary* two songs from the Punjab, collected by Flora Annie Steel, that concern food scarcities and the irrigation works that were built in the Punjab by the colonial government partly as insurance against famine. In the very different ways that Temple frames the two songs, the contrast between colonial attempts to contain and nullify the effect of such critical songs, while conferring authority and authenticity on the panegyric verses, is vividly drawn.<sup>29</sup>

One of the songs Temple presents to the reader is a panegyric, praising the colonial administrators who built the canal and describing the enthusiasm of the villagers, who are made to say, collectively, “the canal water has come and the thorns have become flowers.” Temple introduces the song by assuring us that the song was written “by one of the people,” and he does not further describe the origin or provenance of the song.<sup>30</sup> The signature line at the end of the text tells us though that “Ghulam Ahmed asked me to tell the story of the canal, / So I have joined together some ten or twenty verses about it. / I live in Ferozpur and my name is Fettehu’d-din.” A footnote informs us that Ghulam Ahmed is a bookseller of Ferozpur. We cannot from this information discern very much about the origin of the song or about Ghulam Ahmed’s motives in commissioning it, though it seems likely that Ghulam Ahmed planned to print a broadside containing the lyrics. But since the song begins with sixteen lines in praise of Major Grey, who constructed the Ferozpur canals, I suspect that it may also have been commissioned for performance in his presence and the bookseller who commissioned it may have imagined that he would sell more copies if the song were to be sung publicly. We can take note, however, that Temple does not describe the commission or the occasion on which the song was sung, nor does he characterize the author in any specific way: he is content to say that it was written by “one of the people,” just as Grierson assured his readers of the authenticity and typicality of the earlier famine panegyric.

The other song that Temple puts before the reader is very different, and Temple himself acknowledges the critique that it contains. In several quite perceptive notes to the song (1882:163), he draws the reader’s attention to the song’s “sarcasm in making the first fruits of the

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<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed account of this shift in colonial policy, see Klein (1984:193-95).

<sup>29</sup> A brief discussion of these two songs appears also in Raheja (2010).

<sup>30</sup> Temple (1882:166) does, however, tell us that the song “is written in very smooth verse, and the author shows his education by the frequent interlarding of Arabic and Persian words.”



canal to be the profits of the watchmen and the contractor, and the presence of vegetables, and so on, a secondary result”:

Where the canal goes there are the profits of the watchmen and the contractors  
Also there are cucumbers, onions, and vegetables on the canal banks

Just after this verse, two more tell us that:

Where the canal goes there the people eat wheat and pulse  
Where the Jats take the canal cuts there grow wheat and cotton

Temple observes that these verses too are sarcastic, since wheat and lentils are foods that are far beyond the reach of the poor and landless Sansis, and that only Jats, the relatively prosperous farmers of the Punjab, can engage in the remunerative planting of wheat and cotton, a new cash crop. A later verse describes the burden of the canal tax that must be paid to the government, and the lesser amount that must be paid at the village level for the use of the water: “A rupee an acre to the Government and an anna to the Lambardar.” The verse that follows describes the collection of cash fines from people who make a cut in the canal to draw water for their use without paying the tax:

The Magistrate demands silver in payment of fines for cutting the canal.  
The Magistrate takes good silver for five feet of water.

Here Temple notes that the fine exacted in silver falls unequally on the rich and poor; both may draw water illegally from the canals but it is the poor who can ill afford the fines. And the next verse describes the punishment for this: those caught making cuts in the canal must, as Temple notes, “use their own labour and the straw from their fields, which consequently have to be neglected while the work of repair goes on.” This order emanating from colonial administrators is parodied in the song: “Drive in the pegs! Give up your straw; and then your field will go to the bad.”

This song is far more critical of the canal operations, on the grounds that the benefits fall to the government and to the high caste landholders and merchant moneylenders, while the burdens fall most heavily upon the poor who may go hungry because of the fees and fines to be paid in cash.<sup>31</sup> There is at work in this song a critical apperception of the several interconnected systems of power and intertwined hierarchies in which Sansis live their lives; as in nineteenth century Meo bandit narratives from Rajasthan analyzed by Shail Mayaram, there is a targeting here of “the triumvirate of *sarkar*, *zamindar*, and *sahukar*, or state, gentry, and merchant usurer” (Mayaram 2003a:326, 2003b) that so controls the lives of the rural poor. This much was

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<sup>31</sup> Though government policy stressed the importance of canal irrigation as insurance against famine, there is compelling evidence that it failed to provide such insurance, partly because cash crops such as sugarcane were most frequently grown in canal tracts and because other consequences of canal irrigation adversely affect food grain yields (Whitcombe 1972:79-81), but more importantly because the most pernicious effects of famine derived from colonial *laissez faire* policies with respect to the market distribution of food grains and not simply production levels.

at least somewhat evident even to Temple. His entextualization of this critical or at least ironic view of the benefits of canal irrigation is far different from his entextualization of the panegyric. While the panegyric is described as “of the people,” we are told that this song is sung by the Sansis, which Temple tells us in the very first sentence of the article, is one of the so-called “criminal tribes” of the Punjab. Temple describes their wandering habits, tells us that they are “great thieves,” and relates the collection of the song to Gottlieb William Leitner’s publications concerning the supposedly distinctive languages of such “criminal tribes.”<sup>32</sup> Temple (1882:163-64) suggests to the reader that this song is “rough and homely in the extreme,” its meter “exceedingly rough and its rhythm uncertain,” and that it “exhibits in a most interesting manner the popular (illiterate) history and notions regarding the canals of Ferozpur.” Thus, the provenance of the song that is critical of the colonial state is set apart; unlike other folklore specimens Temple comments upon, this particular song is not viewed as speech that reveals “the mind of the people,” but as the marginalized and highly specific speech of a criminal caste. We are encouraged, by contrast, to imagine that the panegyric is the undifferentiated speech of the colonized, the “voice of the people” that authenticates colonial claims to authority and truth.

J. Wilson’s *Final Report on the Settlement of the Sirsá District in the Punjab* was published in 1884. Because he opposed certain Punjab Government policies concerning the management of tenurial systems, Wilson included in his report several songs by a man named Lalu, a tenant of the village of Dabwali Dhab. These songs are critical of government policies in the Punjab that permitted the “ejectment” of tenants from the land they had been cultivating, after being encouraged by the government to migrate to the canal irrigation tracts in times of famine and scarcity. Had Wilson himself not been critical of these particular colonial policies, we can be sure that the songs would not have been included in his report or, like Temple, he might have included it while devising a textual strategy for taming its recalcitrant speech.

The longest song that Wilson includes in the report comments upon the migrations in times of famine. The transliterated Punjabi text of the song is given along with an English translation (Wilson 1884:x-xv of Appendix II), which I have revised very slightly to clarify the meaning:

People who are dying of hunger and thirst,  
Go to Ropar and work on the canal.  
They go back with all their savings, and pay up all their rents,  
But live always in a state of fear.

What is the source of this fear? Sirsa District had been particularly hard hit by famine in the years before Lalu sang his song, especially in 1860 and 1868 (*Report* 1885:97), and hit by scarcities in the latter years of the 1870s. Wilson writes critically of the “system of average cash rents payable for good and bad years alike” especially as it is applied in a district whose produce is so precarious; rents were to be paid even in years of crop failure, and so there had been, as he

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<sup>32</sup> I have elsewhere characterized Leitner’s work in relation to colonial discipline and control of the supposed “criminal castes and tribes” (Raheja 1999a). Considerable efforts were made in the nineteenth century to characterize these supposedly distinctive caste-based “criminal” languages and dialects, as a further means of identifying “criminals by birth.”

observed, a rapid rise in the profits of the *lambardars* (“proprietor,” “landlords”) at the expense of the tenants and a rapid rise in the money value of the proprietorships. Wilson suggested that a return to earlier systems of collecting rents and revenue in kind would mitigate the effects on the tenants of crop failure and famine.<sup>33</sup>

Wilson is most concerned, however, with policies of the colonial government that favored the *lambardars* and allowed proprietors to evict tenants who had settled on lands brought under cultivation with the development of the irrigation works, in the years following the Regular Settlement of revenue in the Punjab. To illustrate the magnitude of this problem, he pointed out that between 1878 and 1882, nearly one-fourth of the tenants-at-will in the Sirsa District received notices of ejection.

In 1880 Wilson (1884:345) submitted a report “urging that some step should be taken to protect the tenants from arbitrary ejection. . . . I urged that the legislature should be moved to pass a special Act for the Sirsa district, granting rights of occupancy to all tenants who had broken up land and held it continuously for more than ten years, provided they agree to pay on it a rent equal to three times the land-revenue assessed on the land.”

The Settlement Commission’s response to his report is reminiscent of the situation described in George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” in which a colonial officer realizes that he has made a grievous error in judgment but is reluctant to reverse a stance he has taken because of his unwillingness to jeopardize the authority of the colonizer by appearing inconsistent in the eyes of the colonized. Wilson (1884:346) tells us that Colonel Wall of the Settlement Commission thought the tenants’ expectations were reasonable, but “he thought that such a measure as I had proposed would appear to both proprietors and tenants to be a second reversal of policy, and the tenants would feel that they had gained a victory over the law, while the proprietors would feel that they had relied on it and that it had failed them.” He proposed other less definitive measures and the issue was further debated, but as Wilson says, the relative status of proprietor and tenant was, despite his advice, left to be regulated by the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1868, as in the rest of the Province.

Wilson thus provides the Punjabi texts of songs composed at this time by Lalu, a tenant of the village of Dabwali Dhab in Sirsa District. The songs, comprising five full pages of the Settlement Report, are critical of the policy that encouraged tenants, in times of scarcity, to settle on land brought under cultivation by the building of the irrigation canals, critical of the government policy of permitting ejection, critical of government legal procedures that favor the wealthy and make it difficult for the poor to present their cases, and critical of the *lambardars*, the wealthy hereditary landowners who with Government approval control the tenants and serve

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<sup>33</sup> Reluctance to suspend land revenue demands during times of famine in British India stemmed from several considerations. First, of course, was the cost to the Government that would be incurred; the economic “needs of the State” were to be of paramount consideration. Second, there was a concern on the part of the colonial government that if suspensions were to be granted, cultivators would expect them in future years, and fail to exert themselves in extending cultivation and in making agricultural improvements (*Report* 1885:17, Part III). Third, there was a concern that suspensions of revenue demands in times of famine would discourage cultivators from “prudent” efforts to save from one year to the next. During the famine of 1877-78, Sir George Couper explained this reasoning in a report to the Government of India: “Our revenue theory is, that the people should meet the losses of a bad year from the gains of a good one. But, as a matter of fact, these prudential considerations are unknown to them. They never save. When they have a good harvest, they spend the proceeds on marriages and in other ways.” Suspension was seen as “a direct encouragement of the unthrift” (*Report* 1885:197-98).

as mediator with the colonial government. The song is critical of British rule because it has, according to the singer, made it possible for the *lambardar* to “devour the profits,” while the tenant is ejected. I provide six of the twenty-two verses of Wilson’s translation of Lalu’s longest song (1884:x-xv of Appendix II):

God peopled the desert:  
 People came from all corners of the land.  
 The *lambardars* settled them there,  
 And coaxed them to break up the land.  
 Now they have thrown away their good faith,  
 And brought claims against their tenants.  
 The ruler has taken the land from the tenants.  
 We knew nothing of this law  
 Which the Government put in force.  
 Ejectment is not right.

The tenants who gathered together,  
 They worked very hard.  
 They cleared away the bushes and cultivated the land.  
 They took out the roots and made field boundaries.  
 Yet the *lambardars* had them declared tenants-at-will.  
 The ruler took away their land.  
 The government has done no justice.  
 Ejectment is not right.

The tenants do the *begar* [forced labor] work,  
 The *lambardar* devours the profits  
 And is ready to eject.  
 Sarkar itself ejects.  
 The people settled the desert under hardships;  
 The brackish water distresses them;  
 Let anyone think of this.  
 Ejectment is not right.

Of the people who live under this Raj,  
 Some weep, some laugh,  
 The tenants are ejected from the land and flee to another place.  
 The *lambardars* do not tell the truth;  
 Nothing is believed without written evidence.  
 Ejectment is not right.

What law is this our rulers have imposed  
 In giving the order for ejection?  
 They have made it a means of gain,  
 Exacted stamps and process fees  
 That thousands in profit may come in.  
 Ejection is not right.

The English have taken this country  
 That they might dig canals and irrigate it.  
 No one stands by his word.  
 Whoever practices deceit,  
 On him fall a curse.  
 Ejection is not right.

The poet Lalu discerned with great clarity the manner in which the colonial government favored the wealthy and disadvantaged the poor in the Punjab, and Lalu curses the government for it. An even more finely honed poetic sense of the ironies attendant upon a consideration of famine and its unequal effects on the poor and on the wealthy and on men and women and on a consideration of the efficacy of religious rites is evident in a famine song from central India collected by Charles Eckford Luard during the famine of 1899-1900.

*Ironic Apperceptions of "Tradition" and the Gendered Effects of Famine*

Of the eleven songs about famine and scarcity that I found in colonial documents, male singers or authors are identified by name in six. The authors or singers of two others are not named but are identified as male. One song from central India is identified by the caste of the singers but not otherwise, for one it has been noted that the song was "recorded by a schoolmaster of the district," but for only one song is the singer or singers entirely unidentified.

Charles Eckford Luard (1908c:329), who published this last song in the *Indian Antiquary* as part of his "Gazetteer Gleanings in Central India" series in 1908, noted only that the song "was composed in Western Malwa in the great famine of *Samvat* 1956 or 1899-1900" and that it was sung in the "rough rustic form of the *garba*." He does not attempt to frame it using the commonly used colonial entextualizing methods of taming recalcitrant Indian speech that I describe above. He tells us though that he is "indebted to Mr. Vakil, Gazetteer Officer of the Ratlam State, for writing down the vernacular version." I was not able to locate a manuscript version of this song or any notes about it in Luard's manuscript collections in the British Library and thus I can offer no further details of its composition or performance or transcription. There is however among Luard's papers a large manuscript collection of women's songs, written down in Devanagari script, and Mr. Vakil had contributed some of these. For this famine song in the *Indian Antiquary*, Luard provides the Hindi text as well as an English translation, and I feel entirely confident that this too is a women's song: because of the recurring pattern of ironic juxtaposition that is so characteristic of women's songs in northern India (Raheja and Gold 1994:73-106); because of its insistent focus on the gendered effects of famine and scarcity that is

entirely unlike any of the other songs whose singers are identified as male; and finally because *garba* was traditionally a female song/dance genre. In nearly all the verses of the song, we hear the story of famine from a woman's point of view. Throughout the song the famine is referred to as Chhapania, "the fifty-sixth," for the year in which it occurred.

The song is composed of fifty-six lines arranged in twenty-eight rhymed couplets, nearly all of which follow a pattern of ironic juxtaposition, constructing an implicit critique of the role of grain merchants and the grain market in exacerbating famine conditions, and of the social practices that result in women suffering the worst effects of famine. What follows is a selection of the song's couplets (in the translations that Luard provided), with some commentary on the ironies exhibited therein. The refrain that was apparently sung after each couplet is "O cursed Chhapania, return no more to this innocent land" (1908c:329):

In every (city) home a goat is found, and (in many even) a camel.  
The Chhapania has traveled into the remotest corners of the land.

As Luard himself remarks in a footnote, this couplet ironically observes that because people in the countryside were suffering from famine, they had been forced to sell their goats and camels to merchants in the cities, who had grain to feed them and money to buy them. The merchants profited from this and from their sales of grain (1908c:331):

The balance of the merchant broke and the weights were scattered,  
But he is rolling in wealthy splendour.

Luard notes that the allusion here is to the brisk market trade in grain in times of famine that has worn out the weights and balances of the merchants but has allowed them to profit from the famine, a situation exacerbated by the official Government *laissez-faire* economic policies that benefited Baniya grain merchants and moneylenders, policies that were upheld by the British even in famine years. The song thus critiques the grain merchants who created artificial shortages and high prices, and who were, as David Arnold (1979:112) has pointed out, the nearest and most accessible link in a chain of responsibility for food shortages.<sup>34</sup> While the song does not directly critique government famine policy, it is critical of those who profited from it.<sup>35</sup>

Hardiman (1996) has described how peasants at the Rajasthan and Gujarat border understood Baniya grain merchants and moneylenders to be responsible for much of their suffering during times of scarcity and famine, and he has analyzed peasant imaginings of rituals they believed Baniyas performed in order to hold back the rains and bring about food scarcities so that they may profit from them, and he writes (154) that "popular belief in Baniya sorcery

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<sup>34</sup> The *powada* discussed above contains a similar stanza: "The rich were shutting their doors against beggars. The grain dealers were feeling exultant at the profits they made in the market" (Luard n.d.:255-61).

<sup>35</sup> David Arnold (1979) has documented the occurrence of looting as a form of popular protest against such traders and their participation in the speculative grain trade, at the time of an anticipated famine in 1918 in Madras. Famine distress also led to the occurrence of looting in the Central Provinces during the famines of 1896-97 and 1899-1900, during which "the grain-dealing classes were the object of the greatest clamour," according to an 1898 government report (quoted in Baker 1993:329).

would appear to have persisted there because it has provided a focus for continuing resistance of peasants” to the forms of usury that exacerbate hunger. He describes a ballad (but does not provide the lyrics for it) current in that area that tells a tale of a terrible famine (149):

The people requested the goddess whom they worshipped to tell them the cause of the failure of the rain. She agreed to help them and led them to the house of their Baniya, where they found huge stocks of grain, which they seized and redistributed. As soon as they did this his spells were broken and there was a cloudburst, with the heaviest fall of rain for a whole century. Seizing the Baniya, the goddess took him to a river, where she held him by his topknot and ducked him in and out until he begged to be killed. She told him that she would agree to this if he sacrificed a buffalo. He said as he was a Jain who practiced non-violence he could not comply; she replied that she would respect his religion and that he could sacrifice a grass buffalo instead. He made the creature and cut its throat with a knife. Torrents of blood flowed out, making all the floodwater red. The goddess then cut off the Baniya’s head.

Hardiman (118) suggests that this song indicates that the poor knew that the rich often profited from famine while they suffered grievously from it, and that “they sought to oppose what they assumed was divine support for the rich by appealing to the gods . . . using their own prayers and rituals.” What’s more, the goddess rewards their own efforts at seizing and redistributing the merchant’s hoarded grain. Thus we have an instance in which peasant imaginings of a recourse to religion and ritual indicate not helpless obeisance to gods, but a challenge to the networks of power in which they led their lives. Since these same peasants also rioted against what they regarded as the immoral tactics of the Baniyas who profited from the *laissez-faire* economic policies advocated by the colonial state, the religious imagination clearly did not render them fatalistic in their experience of famine or passive in the face of elite exploitation.

The song Luard collected is particularly poignant in its depiction of gender inequalities during a famine (1908c:329):

No millet bread, no lentils,  
And so the husband has deserted the wife.

This couplet alludes to the well-known phenomenon of familial disintegration at times of famine. Such allusions are found in other famine songs as well, but the disintegration is described differently in songs sung by men. Despite the fact that during times of famine the numbers of abandoned women testify to a pervasive tendency for men to abandon women or give priority to feeding male rather than female members of the family during the time of a famine (Greenough 1982), and despite the fact that women were often the first casualties of a famine (Chowdhry 1989:306), in the songs sung by men the effects of famine and familial disintegration on men and women are not distinguished. In a song that tells of the famine of 1770 and the subsequent Rangpur revolt against agents of the East India Company in Bengal, for example, familial disintegration is described as caused by the desertions of both men and women (Kaviraj 1972:103):

There is no straw on the roof, no rice in the stores.  
 The mother goes away, the father disappears, so does the wife  
 and without caring for anybody go away the son and the daughter.

The male bards who sang of the 1899-1900 famine in the manuscript *powada* in Luard's collection sang that "Wives left their husbands and joined with others. Fathers left their children whether boys or girls grown up or otherwise" (Luard n.d.). Among all the famine songs that I have found, only this one song speaks directly of the historically documented gendered pattern of abandonment: it is indeed more often husbands who abandon their spouses in times of famine (Luard 1908c:330):

The famine-stricken mother has found and cooked a few lentils,  
 And in his joy her son leaps nine cubits off the ground.

In this couplet the irony lies in the observation that during a famine a child could feel joy at the prospect of having just a spoonful of *dal*. We see in these words the contrast between a husband who abandons his wife because she has no lentils to cook for him, and the mother who gives her last bit of food to her son (Luard 1908c:329):

Black, black clouds are overhead, but only a small drop falls.  
 The once well-nourished women are now grown thin and weak.

The irony in this couplet is worked out at several levels. At the simplest level, there are rain clouds overhead, and yet there is no rain. But the reference to black, black clouds, *kali kali badli*, introduces a more complex ironic apperception. In both literary and folkloric South Asian poetic traditions, black clouds in the rainy season figure as signs of sexual intimacy, the rainy season being a time when husbands and lovers return home from distant places, to be reunited with the women who wait at home for them.<sup>36</sup> In this famine season, however, when black clouds appear but no rain falls, the women's bodies are thin and weak and the husbands have deserted their wives. Only in this song do we hear such ironies of desire and abandonment (Luard 1908c:330):

Go fetch the quilted saddle and bring the camel's pack.  
 The Chhapania has penetrated into every corner of the land (and we must fly).

The irony of this verse concerns the fact that Malwa, one of the hardest hit regions during the famine of 1899-1900, had always been regarded as a land of plenty (Habib 1963:109), as a verse from the *Prithviraj Raso* reminds us (Growse 1870:57): "Rich and deep is the Malwa plain, / At every step water, at every foot grain." Proverbs from Bihar also speak of Malwa as a place to go at times of drought (Grierson 1885:277-78). Malwa had in fact been a destination for people fleeing distressed areas in prior famines, as during the famine of 1877 in the Lower Doab

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<sup>36</sup> This association is particularly common in the poetic tradition of the *barahmasa* songs of the "twelve months" (Wadley 1983).



and Bundelkhand (Whitcombe 1972:197). And now, even this proverbially fertile and luxuriant land is famine stricken, and the people of Malwa themselves must flee (Luard 1908c:330):

Bring *bajra* bread and curds of buffalo's milk:  
So shall the Chhapania be driven out by the back way.

Luard notes here that this verse refers to the “well-known custom of driving out any disease, such as cholera, and so on, by placing some curd and a *bajra* [millet] cake at the back of the house.”<sup>37</sup> Because every other verse of the song is structured around an ironic apperception, this verse too can only be read as an ironic evaluation of the efficacy of ritual rather than an unthinking reliance on “tradition”; the singers seem to be mocking “custom,” not stating their unequivocal faith in the ritual. This ironic view of ritual efficacy runs against the grain of Simpson’s sketch “The Famine in India” that depicts an abject obeisance to the gods as a universal response to famine in India, and also against the grain of colonial representations of the universally suasive power of “tradition.”<sup>38</sup>

The last verses of Luard’s song return to the theme of the gendered effects of famine (1908c:331):

The mother’s brother has tied up a turban and decorated its folds.  
He’s eaten his fill, but he’s sold his sister’s daughter.<sup>39</sup>

A particularly poignant ironic stance is given voice in this verse. Throughout northern India a mother’s brother is expected to provide lavish gifts on the occasion of the marriage of his sister’s daughter, and he is expected to welcome her and give her gifts whenever she might come to visit him; the mother’s brother is more than anything else a bestower of gifts, affection, and hospitality. Yet, during famine, the song seems to say, such familial bonds and responsibilities

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<sup>37</sup> The removal of misfortune and disease by passing bread or other food items beyond the boundary of the house or village is a familiar ritual in nineteenth and twentieth century rural India (Raheja 1988:171-72 and Arnold (1986:133-34). I do not mean to dispute the idea that people can sometimes take this very seriously, indeed. In fact, in Pahansu (the north Indian village in which I have conducted most of my ethnographic fieldwork) in 1978, a serious fight broke out between people of two villages when a goat was driven over the boundaries from one village to the other, in order to remove and transfer a cattle disease. I acknowledge, though, the fact that such rituals are never a matter of unthinking submission to “tradition.” They are always subject to debate and disagreement, as Gold (1988) has so eloquently shown.

<sup>38</sup> There are, however, songs that are less ironic about ritual efficacy and the help of the gods in time of famine. In 1911, a song of the famine in Saharanpur in 1877, collected by William Crooke, was published in *The Indian Antiquary*. The song, recorded by “a schoolmaster of the District,” describes the selling of cooking pots and women’s jewelry for food, and appeals to the god Ram to protect the world from the famine (Crooke 1911). And there are other seemingly reliable colonial reports of ritual actions undertaken to ward off the worst of the effects of famine: the giving of *dan* and the banishing of a scapegoat beyond the boundaries of a village, goat sacrifices, the posting of verses of the Koran above house doors, and so on. Thus, again I do not argue that the occurrence of famine inevitably brought with it a skeptical attitude towards religion and ritual; I intend, rather, to highlight here the heterogeneity of attitudes towards “tradition” and “custom.”

<sup>39</sup> I have revised Luard’s translation of this verse, replacing his terms “uncle” and “niece” with the specific English equivalents of the Hindi kinship terms for mother’s brother and sister’s daughter occurring in the text.

might just be abandoned. Here, too, it is the gendered effects of famine that are dwelt upon: in the earlier verse, wives are abandoned by their husbands; and here, a woman comes to see that she cannot rely even upon her mother's natal kin. And if a mother's brother is not generous and if indeed he even turns upon his sister's daughter, then how, the song seems to ask, could a woman expect anyone at all to stand by her? All expectations are dashed: the expectation that the plain of Malwa will be fertile, the expectation that a ritual will move ill fortune out of the house, the expectation that husbands will be loyal to their wives, and the expectation that mothers' brothers will protect and nourish their sisters' children.

And the final verse of the song asserts that a married woman will suffer the effects of famine even as her husband's male kin are protected from them (Luard 1908c:331):

The mother-in-law bakes bread, the father-in-law eats it:

(While) the "dutiful" daughter-in-law counts (minutely each mouthful swallowed).

The song's irony is very sharp, and so obvious that even Luard remarked, in a footnote, on the irony of the use of the word "dutiful" (*saputi*) here. It explicitly describes the familial hierarchies that structure food distribution in ordinary times as well as in famine. Although women's songs in northern India do sometimes allude to and critique gendered inequalities in household food allocation (Jassal 2012:76-84), such a reference to domestic hierarchies and unequal distributions of food within families is not found in any of the other famine songs I found in the colonial archive. Several verses in this song ironically contrast ordinary kinship expectations with the collapse or reversal of kinship solidarities during the famine, as in the verse about the mother's brother and his sister's daughter. But in this final verse, the reference to unequal food distributions and domestic hierarchy seems to speak to inequities in ordinary times as well as in famine. There is, for example, a common Hindi proverb that explicitly endorses this hierarchy of food distributions: *nar sulakkhni kutumb chhakave, ap tale ki khurchan khave* ("a proper wife feeds the household first, and saves only the pot-scrapings for herself"). This proverb plays upon several prominent conceptions of familial well-being and familial hierarchy to reinforce the subordinate position of women within the kinship group. *Sulakkhni* is an adjective that means literally "having propitious signs" or "auspicious." The auspicious wife, one who brings well-being to her husband's family, is one who eats only the food remaining after the men have eaten; this is a common expectation for proper wifely behavior in north and central India. In the proverb the woman who accepts her subordinate position in the everyday distribution of food and other matters, and who is ready to sacrifice her own well-being for that of others, causes her husband's family to prosper.

In ordinary speech women sometimes use other proverbs to comment ironically on the gendered hierarchies of hunger. One such ironic proverb, in circulation in the nineteenth century (Fallon 1886:218) as well as today, is *saram ki bahu nit bhukhi mare* ("a wife who is modest always goes hungry").<sup>40</sup> In much of the discourse of north Indian kinship, the possession of

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<sup>40</sup> R. C. Temple (1886:218), the editor of Fallon's collection, provides a different and problematic explication for this proverb. He translates *saram* as "bashfulness" and does not appear to view it as a demeanor that is *required* of a woman in her conjugal place, and the illusion is created that the hunger is the woman's own fault, a result simply of this "bashfulness," and not a result of a set of power relationships in which women's lives are led.

*saram* (“reticence,” “modesty,” “deference”) is perhaps the most highly valued feminine attribute; one of the most damaging criticisms of a woman is that she is *besaram* (“without *saram*”). And yet when they use this proverb women cast a skeptical eye on the value of modesty and deference, and focus only on the deprivation that is often a consequence of the cultivation of *saram*.

The gendered effects of famine, the daughter-in-law being deprived of food while her father-in-law eats bread, are perhaps seen by the singer as part of the everyday consequences of domestic hierarchies in her husband’s place; women’s subordination, and their possible deprivation in ordinary times, make inevitable their more serious deprivation during a famine. Paul Greenough (1982) has described the moral dilemmas created by famine and suggested that the Bengali value of preserving the patriline and its male members took precedence over other values such as kinship reciprocity during the Bengal famine of 1943-44, with the result that many women were abandoned during the famine.<sup>41</sup> The singers of this song seem to be critically aware of the existence of a similar moral dilemma occasioned by the Chhapania, and how it was resolved.

An analogous poetic equation, between famine priorities on the one hand and everyday domestic hierarchies and food priorities in a woman’s conjugal place on the other, in fact occurs in contemporary women’s songs from central India. Joyce Flueckiger (1987) has written of variants of a women’s “parrot dance” song in central India in which the *sasural*, the conjugal home, is spoken of by the singer as a “land of famine,” in contrast to the natal home, where her brother lives in a “land of plenty.” Famine becomes, poetically in those songs, like everyday life in the conjugal place. In the Chhapania famine song from Malwa, the ironically characterized “dutiful” *bahu* experiences hunger in her husband’s house, while her father-in-law eats the bread.

Thus, far from passively and unthinkingly submitting to the dictates of *purdah* and gender hierarchies, women speak throughout the Chhapania song of the disadvantages of “tradition” and of the disappointments occasioned by it. The colonial rhetoric of the *purdah-nashin*, and of women willing to die of hunger to preserve the custom of *purdah* and the gender hierarchy it supports, seems far removed from this poetic speech of Malwa women. That Luard includes this text in his ethnographic reporting, without the kinds of entextualizing strategies that normally frame such critical speech when it appears in administrative documents, is perhaps an indication of his own ambivalence about the colonial ethnographic project, an ambivalence that, as I have suggested elsewhere (Raheja 1999a) led to an unusual awareness on his part of the limits of colonial ethnographic classifications and typifications.

Taken together and juxtaposed with colonial representations of “tradition” in times of famine, these songs can be read as running against the grain of such typifications. In their commentaries on colonial famine management, in their aversion to hoarding and grain profiteering on the part of wealthy merchants and money lenders, in their critiques of the power of the local landed magnates to profit from famine policy, and how the colonial state favored the wealthy and shifted the burden of famine to the poor, in their ironic view of ritual and the powers

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<sup>41</sup> While I draw upon several of Greenough’s observations about such dilemmas here, I am obviously not in agreement with his argument that the caste system legitimized an idea that prosperity flows from deities and high caste patrons, and, thus, peasants were fatalistically silent in times of famine. See Hardiman (1996:117-18) for a brief summary of critical evaluations of this argument.

of the gods, in their relative inattention to caste restrictions at times of crisis, and in women's ironic perspectives on everyday kinship hierarchies and the gendered effects of famine, these songs challenge those typifications that speak of peasants' capitulation to "custom" or of a gap between tradition and revolt. In their positionality and heterogeneity, they challenge attempts by colonial administrators, historians and anthropologists to contain them within the boundaries of a unitary "tradition" or unitary and supposedly unquestioned caste and gender ideologies. The singers of these songs use "traditional" song genres to comment critically and variously on the workings of the colonial state and on local hierarchies and traditions that advantage some and disadvantage others. Because such songs, and other forms of oral tradition as well, were in fact occasionally recorded and printed in these nineteenth-century colonial documents, we have the opportunity to read the far more common ethnographic typifications found in the famine reports against the grain, and to discern more clearly the entextualizing strategies that were so often used to tame this recalcitrant speech and to create the illusion of peasant acquiescence to "tradition" and to colonial famine policy.

### **Conclusion: Colonial Textuality and the Production of Ethnographic Knowledge**

In the face of their authors' ambivalence, anxiety, and uncertainty about the claims of ethnographic and scientific projects (Suleri 1992; Prakash 1999) and about Indian consent to colonial rule that intensified after the revolt of 1857, famine commission reports and other administrative documents and reports on folklore came to be shot through with many contradictions and hesitations, and also with a constant demand that the native provide reassuring authorizing narratives. It is in relation to this demand for an authenticating narrative of consent to colonial rule that the production of ethnographic and folkloric knowledge in colonial India must be understood. Entextualization processes had as a primary aim the taming of any recalcitrant speech and oral traditions and any notes of critique that might have been found in them. The creation of this illusion of consent, and the illusion that colonial policies were in congruence with Indian "custom" had been, since the late eighteenth century, of central importance in the administration of colonial rule. I have not been able, in this essay, to describe how entextualization processes underwent a transformation as those uncertainties mounted, and as that illusion became more and more difficult to sustain after the momentous rebellion of 1857.<sup>42</sup> But it should be clear that administrators and ethnographers working in India in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century struggled to find ways to tame recalcitrant speech and to claim that "the voice of the people" was the voice of a homogeneous "tradition" and the voice of consent to colonial rule. Colonial textuality itself, whether in administrative documents or more overtly ethnographic writing, consistently exhibited this demand for an authorizing narrative even as translations of disruptive and unruly oral traditions were often preserved in them.

*University of Minnesota*

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<sup>42</sup> On the issue of the important differences in how folklore and Indian speech were entextualized before and after the revolt of 1857, see Raheja (1999a).

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