

SHARED BLESSINGS AS ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE¹

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In this tentative essay I attempt to think about my own fieldwork experiences and interpretive practices in the light of ongoing, ever troubling critiques of the “awkward relationship” (Strathern 1987) between feminism and anthropology, and the still more awkward relationship between anthropology and asymmetrical power structures—an awkwardness with deep roots in colonial and postcolonial histories.² I hope I have not written only in retrospective self-defense, but rather that what I have to say about fieldwork will illuminate what I have had to say about women’s expressive traditions, rituals, and lives (see especially Gold 1994; Gold 2000; Raheja and Gold 1994). I hope also that the thoughts formalized here, when added to that more substantive body of writing, might contribute to thinking through the ultimately intractable problem of how it is possible in these somewhat gloomy latter days of the second millennium to learn from, talk with, write and teach about, cultural others (which is, incidentally, what I do for a living). Rather than putting together a jigsaw puzzle, this enterprise felt to me more like adding layers of texture and images to an already very complicated and overloaded collage.

¹ I have tried out these thoughts in seminars hosted by the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania; the Center for South Asia Studies, University of California, Berkeley; and by the South Asia Area Center, Syracuse University. I thank all participants for thoughtful and helpful comments. Thanks also to Corinne Dempsey, Daniel Gold and Gloria Raheja for careful readings of earlier drafts. Eight months of fieldwork in India in 1992-93 was funded by a CIES Fulbright Scholar Award for Research; I am most grateful for this support, and for my affiliation with the Institute for Economic Growth of Delhi University where Professors T. N. Madan and Bina Agarwal offered generous intellectual inspiration. My greatest gratitude is to Bali and Bhoju Ram Gujar and their extended family.

² Strathern, in a somewhat later work, elaborates further on the difficulties with feminism: “Feminists and anthropologists comprise different communities of scholars; Haraway’s image of half-animal, half-machine captures their incompatibility. ... Together they do not form a whole.... Possibly one intellectual reason is feminism’s own particular potential for dissolving the notion of society” (Strathern 1988:36); see also Shaw 1995. References for anthropology’s collusion in colonial enterprises are too vast to list; for some germinal moments, see Asad 1973; Said 1989; Trinh 1989.

I begin with two passages, one from Jane Flax's essay "The End of Innocence," (from *Feminists Theorize the Political*) and one from my field diary. Flax writes:

Postmodernism calls into question the belief (or hope) that there is some form of innocent knowledge to be had. This hope recurs throughout the history of Western philosophy (including much of feminist theory). While many feminists have been critical of the content of such dreams, many have also been unable to abandon them. (447)

I write in 1993:

In the night [I] went with Bali to Tulsa Mali's house, invited, for no special reason. I sat on the edge of a cot and they both crouched and we talked woman talk and I loved it. She asked me not quite the usual questions [about my clothes, jewelry, and family] but "Do you cry when your relatives die?" and this led to Bali narrating the story of her father's death and how she fainted in the monsoon water and her wrap flowed away.³ And Tulsa said "we come from different countries but we're human [*manakhi*]⁴ and we give birth to children and we don't give them food we suckle them." Yes. On the way home she joked with me about missing my husband—*where* do you miss him, *what time* of day, ... and she play-embraced me with her very very strong arms. (Gold 1993: field diary)

Are these moments of sheer, relaxed, intoxicating intimacy belied by the seating arrangements? In Rajasthan who sits on what is a major indicator of hierarchy, and one I have learned from countless futile efforts is almost impossible to oppose.

A dogged reluctance to abandon dreams of innocence informs the benign implications of my title, "Shared Blessings." It was intended to evoke a subtle array of meanings that play through various contexts. However, I can state fairly bluntly two of the intended senses around which this essay has arranged itself.

The first derives from an oral text: Rajasthani women commonly utter a short prayer at the close of ritual storytelling, in which they ask that the fruits of their worship be diffused among all beings in the world. For example: "Hey Dasa Mata, give well-being to the whole world and then give it to me"—the final words addressed to a form of the goddess Lakshmi, Dasa Mata, whose name means "Mother of Well-being." From this and many similar utterances, I understand

³ The wrap (*orhni*) is an emblem of female modesty, often discursively unwrapped in women's performance genres (Raheja and Gold 1994: 47-52).

⁴ An inclusive masculine noun meaning "human being" (Lalas 1962).