

Special Issue Afterword

“What counts as Gaddi?”: An Afterword

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Abstract

The afterword reflects on the generations of anthropological scholarship on the Gaddis of the Western Himalaya, and its import for anthropology itself. It takes up Roy Wagner's productive concept of “strategic relic” to understand the changing place of pastoralism and the enduring ideal of egalitarianism in the Gaddi worldview.

Keywords

Gaddis; Western Himalaya; pastoralism; egalitarianism; hierarchy

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In many ways, this collection of essays can easily be inferred as anomalous. An entire special issue on a single people is certainly unusual, especially in this day and age. It is unusual because it invokes fears about assigning a singularity to a people when now longstanding anthropological scholarship has shown us the dangerous pitfalls that lie therein. And yet, this unique and timely collection brings together several generations and genres of anthropological scholarship to showcase precisely how Gaddis are anything but singular, in their pursuits, ambitions, politics, and beliefs. This special issue is perhaps a perfect example of the very nature of anthropological knowledge. It captures the diversity of perspectives, the transformations and mutations of a people in and through the passage of time, but most importantly of all, it serves as a salutary reminder that anthropological knowledge is and will always remain partial. Or in other words, social life will always exceed its representation.

“What counts as Gaddi?” This is perhaps the question that has animated the scholarship contained in this Special Issue. To a large extent, the answer to this question would depend on who is asking it. As an enumerative category of the Indian state, the answer may at first appear fixed and static, but scholarly attention over these decades has revealed the inherently malleable nature of state classification that the “looping effects” of any drive to “make up people” (Hacking 1986) brings with it. That much is clear right from the outset when the colonial state’s own capacious framing that synonymized Gaddiness with herding, so that *all* herders in the late 19th century western Himalaya were officially categorized as Gaddi. But what of the looping effects of the anthropological attention that has “made up” the Gaddis?

The introductory essay provides a comprehensive historiography of several generations of scholarship on the Gaddis, revealing both the common ground as well the divergences of both analysis and the objects of investigation. The latter is also perhaps a map of the wider changes in the

world, as they are as well a reflection of the changing nature of anthropological scholarship. While in the 1950s Newell described the social structure of whole Gaddi hamlets in Bharmour, Phillimore’s anthropology of Karnathu gave us an understanding of not just the Gaddis living in Karnathu but how Karnathu was constituted in relation to the world. In other words, not just predominantly a Gaddi village, but importantly how and why it gained a reputation as a site of witchcraft. This reputation was achieved not just in distinction from Gaddi hamlets in the area but also from other villages nearby. This very place of the Gaddis in the wider world today leads Phillimore to retrospectively reflect on the national question at the time - and why he had not paid attention to the response of Karnathu Gaddis to the Emergency prevailing in India at the time of his first fieldwork. Ironically, the anti-fertility drive of the Emergency’s forced sterilization measures spoke directly to the pre-eminent marginal figure contained in the ethnography of Karnathu’s Gaddi kinship. The *saadhin* gave us an important ethnographic insight - that even with the highly systematized kinship models strictly adhered to by people, no system was ever entirely exhaustive of its people. The *saadhin* was very much a product of the kinship system and the system’s way of resolving the tension between the economy and reproduction. Thus, the question that was to be posed a few decades later - what counts as Gaddi - had animated perhaps Phillimore’s scholarship first all those years ago.

Roy Wagner (1981), in his masterly *The Invention of Culture*, explained contrary to the then prevailing wisdom, that “culture” is less a logical or inevitable outcome of human existence but is a product of human imagination and creativity. Drawing on his fieldwork among the Daribi of Papua New Guinea, Wagner notes the significance of symbolic systems as the fulcrum of cultural creativity. The essays contained in this collection may not elaborate singularly on symbolic systems, but the volume is testimony to the ongoing resignification of several aspects of the Gaddi world.

While they diverge in their interests and emphases, what comes through in each of these papers is the insistently agentive disposition of the Gaddis in relation to their place in this world. Be it the changing place and practice of pastoralism in the world at large but more importantly in their own world (Axelby, Christopher, Sharma), or then the reconfigurations of their domestic, interior, and intimate lives (Phillimore, Simpson). As a people, Gaddis across their differences have successively projected a seamless continuity with remembered pasts (Sharma; Kapila 2022), forging a sense of continuity ironically—or perhaps strategically—to always innovate a better place for themselves in the world.

Unlike the revisited field sites to map change or errors or prejudice of previous ethnographies (eg. Tilche and Simpson 2017; Hutchinson 1996; Moore and Vaughan 1994) these are additive—exploring ever more aspects, but at the same time Gaddi life always exceeding its ethnographic or even anthropological encapsulation. Their agentive disposition towards the world has meant that instead of becoming nominatively determined historical subjects, they rather exemplify the dynamic nominalism theorized by Hacking (1984). The moving place of pastoralism as documented by Phillimore, Saberwal (1999), Kapila (2022), Axelby, Sharma, Christopher, and Simpson is a case in point. Each successive (generation of) anthropologist has had the opportunity to document its receding place in their day-to-day life as fewer and fewer Gaddis pursue this for livelihood. But far from becoming a diminished presence, and similar to what Wagner (1981) illuminates for the Daribi, pastoralism, and the entailed landscape and herd, are successively resignified into a register different from labor and livelihood. It is not surprising that latterly when fewer Gaddis follow pastoralism as a livelihood, pastoralism has become the lynchpin of identitarian claim-making. In the Wagnerian sense, it has today become *the* “strategic relic of [their] invention of the past” (Wagner 1981: 28). Pastoralism is the conduit to their link with higher powers—whether that of

divinity (Bulgheroni; Kapila 2022; Sharma) or of the state (Axelby; Christopher; Kapila 2022). Therefore, despite the denuded political economy of pastoralism (Axelby; Bulgheroni), its resignification as a strategic relic not only keeps the coherence of “Gaddiness” alive and non-nostalgic but also the source of new stratification between the so-called “pure” or “*asli*” (lit. “real”, “authentic”) Gaddis and not so pure or real Gaddis.

This relatively new fracture reflects at least two things: that pastoralism is the nub of Gaddiness and not just a methodological inflection queried by Christopher in this volume. Christopher and Simpson capture Gaddis in the post-liberalization and global world, where in the wake of their own identitarian politics and of the sharpening of caste politics in India, existing and new fractures among the Gaddis have taken on different hues. With ever-increasing numbers of non-pastoralist Gaddis now migrating to other routes, living within the thickness of new urban and peri-urban spaces, sometimes far away from Kangra and Chamba in the dust plains of north India, “what counts as Gaddi?” is not just animated around the axis of pastoralism and non-pastoralism, but equally in terms of categories of lived experience and practices that find wider purchase. The most prominent of these is a fast-emerging politics around caste-like divisions by those placed on the lower end of the Gaddi hierarchy that Simpson and Christopher powerfully write about. While it is easy to read this as the assimilation of Gaddi society into the wider social fabric and the purchase of its prejudices, Halis and Sipis in (at last) opposing their status or their treatment, are perhaps also cleaving to another strategic relic—the egalitarian ideal. This egalitarian ideal is not merely about treating others as equal but more importantly perhaps in the insistence of being treated as the interlocutors’ equal, or then that at least the interlocution takes place on egalitarian terms (Sharma; Kapila 2022). As a result, egalitarianism in Gaddi politics is not happenstance but an insistence, a dynamically achieved position rather than

a passive assumption of a predefined or preexisting place in the world.

The egalitarian ideal is best reflected in the practice of isogamous marriage (*attasatta*, or sister exchange) as the preferred marriage system among the Gaddis. In this ideal, substantial exchange being symmetrical, there can exist no room for any hierarchy to develop between wife-givers and wife-takers, and hence for casteist distinctions and ideology to take root. Yet, it would be naive to suggest that Halis and Sipis, for example, find themselves occupying the same position as those considered at the upper end of the internal hierarchy, such as Khatri or Rajput Gaddis. It is also naive to suggest that the reversal of the direction of marriage payments from bride service to dowry bears no significance on not just caste relations but also gender and intergenerational relations. However, the work of egalitarianism as a strategic relic is different from its work in the public sphere because in the public sphere the egalitarian ideal augurs utopian and hopeful politics, whereas in the domestic sphere, it portends the darkness of what is now resignified as an undesirable, unmodern past. Vita Peacock's (2015) provocative and excellent analysis of the flattening of hierarchical models in scholarship and the rise of structural inequalities in the world post-1968 is salutary here (see also Rio 2014). A very similar pattern is afoot among the Gaddis, in their insistence on being considered as equal by others when their external and internal worlds become ever more hierarchized.

What then counts as Gaddi? Axelby, Bulgheroni and Sharma provide sharp insights into the *longue durée* of that question, mapping as they do longer patterns of change of not only their internal worlds but crucially the world in which they live and work. The incorporation of Gaddi pastoralism into contemporary developmental infrastructure and vice versa has fed the denuding of pastoralism and the landscape. In a reversal of Saberwal's account of the late 19th and early 20th century, contemporary environmental concerns surrounding

the deleterious impact of pastoralism and herds on forests and biodiversity, today it is the encroaching infrastructure of roads and telecoms that threaten the survival of pastoralism itself. As fewer people now go on the trail, anthropologists observe the Gaddis' pursuits at home - hence newer aspects of their innovative and creative capacities become subjects of scholarly concern (eg. Christopher).

What then counts as Gaddi?

The accounts of Younghusband and other 19th-century explorers of the Western Himalayas had inspired Christina Noble to trace their footsteps in the early 1970s. Her *Over the High Passes* (1987) may well be the first and the only amateur ethnography of the Gaddis and especially Gaddi pastoralism. Noble has since spent several decades in that part of the western Himalayas and her keen photographing eye has resulted in an invaluable treasure trove of images¹, all of which combine the rare mix of high aesthetic and high documentary detail.

"Unlike other communities I interacted with in the mountains, two things stood out for me and drew me to them immediately. The first was that, unlike many other travelers on the way, the Gaddis knew the routes and could give you proper and very detailed directions. Their knowledge of the landscape was unrivaled even in comparison to other regular travelers in the region. The second was that, again unlike others, Gaddis were not shy. They seemed to welcome a conversation with strangers. It's as if they seem to have the idea of how interesting they are as a people, just as others are to them. With them, curiosity and interest was mutual." Noble said this to me while I stared wide-eyed at some of the images of the higher pastures and people from the 1970s. So much has changed since Noble walked alongside Gaddi shepherds in the 1970s. The landscape, the places, and even the people don't look anything like the images in front of me. Yet, her words perhaps encapsulate the common ground of the essays collected in this volume.

Roy Wagner called anthropology the “culture cult” (pace cargo cults), that is a discipline that traffics in culture, and fieldwork a euphemism for “culture shock” (Wagner 1981: 31). Perhaps the reason Gaddis have attracted and will continue to attract generations of anthropologists is precisely because the ‘shock’ is and will always be experienced and articulated as mutual.

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Endnotes

1. The images are in the process of becoming a digital archive for public reference.

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