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**Moving Words:
Shifting Boundaries**

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Moving Words: Shifting Boundaries *

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“A border region in the northern Kutch, where on one side of the international boundary lies the beautiful Sindh swinging in its cradle the ancient civilization of the Mohan-jo-Daro. On the other side lies Kutch and swinging in its cradle is the Dholavira, a part of Sindhu civilization, striving to meet its other half across the border. The cold winds of Thar bring messages of affection from Sindh to the people of Banni who have nurtured the Sindhu civilization and emerged as its custodians.”

Kaladhar Mutwa, *Runn jo Rang*, 2002 : 1

The writer Kaladhar Mutwa quoted above is considered by the literary circles to be the first rural Sindhi writer, and also the first one to initiate a written tradition of literature in a region fertile with orality. He belongs to Banni, the region that forms the basis of this paper and also a larger study, *Memories and Movements: Borders and Communities in Kutch, Gujarat* (forthcoming).

In the preface to his book *The folk songs of Banni* [2002], Lalwani provides the genesis of his relationship with Banni. In 1960 Narayan Bharti, a well-known Sindhi writer published a compilation called “Hojmalo” that included oral traditions of the Hindu Sindhi community living in refugee camps of Ulhasnagar. Meanwhile, the linguist Parso Gidwani had ‘discovered’ Banni as an authentic rural Sindhi and undertaken research on its linguistic traditions that had retained features seldom found in Sindhi of the urban people. Lalwani followed the footsteps of both Narayan Bharti and Parso Gidwani by making Banni his arena of studying its folklore. Thus Banni provided to intellectuals in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s a repertoire of Sindhi oral traditions that the Hindu Sindhis had probably jeopardized by being a scattered and uprooted post-partition community in India.

The boundaries in northern Kutch, at least where Banni is situated, mark off the Indian territory from Pakistan along the Rann of Kutch. Hence Banni is officially a border zone, patrolled regularly by the border security force. It is former grassland and its inhabitants are largely pastoralists who speak a mixture of “Kutchi-Sindhi.” The borders of this language are as contentious as that of the nations, it is difficult to tell where “Kutchi’ ends and ‘Sindhi’ begins. This border is also being increasingly patrolled,

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but that's another story. Meanwhile Banni has a population of approximately 30,000 people, of which about 22,000 Muslims by religion. The rest are Dalits, Meghwals in more specific terms, and a tiny group called the Wadhas whose origins are not full certain. The Muslims are a cluster of about nineteen endogamous Sunni groups. They recount having come from parts of Sindh in Pakistan, and some trace the origins of their races to Afghanistan and Iran. This memory of mobility in both near and distant time is very characteristic of Banni, and it generates an imagination of Sindh as a place of origins and belonging, which is with varying intensities shared by all three groups. Former grassland, Banni is now a dry and arid region, tucked away in a corner of Gujarat. In the past its rich ecology and grass drew pastoralists from far and wide, and the two mythologies of a greener Banni and free movements in and out of the region intertwine to create accounts of the past. Even today's Banni is linguistically and culturally closer to Sindh in Pakistan than Gujarat in India. It shares with Rajasthan (especially habitations such as Barmer and Jaisalmer along the Thar Desert in Western India) and lower Sindh (the area called Thar Parker) histories of movements communities and narratives made.

Meanwhile, a region, remark Vora and Feldaus, is a mental construct. "It is always a human product, whether the product of scholarship, political ideology or daily life" [2006: i] For those living in Kutch (and even to those limited few outside Kutch that have some familiarity with it), Banni is associated with milk and embroidery; the first a product of its largely pastoralist economy, and the second, a traditional art that became a market commodity when pastoral life was severely affected.

For the average mainstream Gujarati, Banni may have become a familiar name (if at all) only through the promotion of Kutch as a tourist centre. For its own inhabitants, Banni acquires reality in many ways. To the older generation of pastoralists who moved back and forth between Sindh and Banni, it is not a place of origin, but a destination determined through State-made boundaries which arrested their mobility. For the generations born after the promulgation of the international border, Banni is the place of origin, but one defined through both Gujarat and Sindh, as dimensions of physical and metaphorical belonging. The women make sense of the region through limited movements within it; as they visit each other when occasions of marriages and childbirth legalize their movements outside their homes. A large number of Dalits, involved in trade, consider Banni as a part of Gujarat, an entity they seek to integrate with, in most cases. The tiny group of the Wadhas who claim to have always been in Banni relate to the region through their past animistic practices, and therefore their lives intersect with Banni's nature and topography differently. Shared linguistic practices evident in the everyday life of Banni also help create very significantly a sense of region. Thus regions are made 'sense' of in different ways, and invested with meaning and memory and their boundaries may/not coincide with the administrative boundaries drawn for generating revenue, or controlling by the State.

Banni, the sub-region of Kutch that this paper focuses upon, also interrupts the idea of Gujarat as a linguistic, cultural and politically cohesive territory with bounded citizenship. Along the regions of Kutch, Saurashtra, Rajasthan (in Western India) and Sindh (in Pakistan) there exists a civilizational unity which

expresses itself in several ways, one of which is language. This precedes and supercedes the formation of the international boundary between India and Pakistan as well as subsequent linguistic divisions between Rajasthan and Gujarat. By an intimate interaction with people who speak Sindhi and see Banni as a part of this “composite west” as it were, this paper examines the making of this region as a cultural imaginary, and examines the apparatus which generates and sustains such an imaginary. Besides that, this paper is about oral traditions – songs, stories and memories passed on orally from generation to generation --- in Banni. It shows how orality provides a prism through which Banni can be seen as a part of western India, amidst historical circulations of people and common vocabularies. Orality is also how Banni is made sense of to its own people who share with each other common narratives and allusions. Finally orality helps bring Banni closer to the cultural imaginary of Sindh, a state in Pakistan, rupturing dominant narratives of an excluding and exclusive state of Gujarat. Based on the linguistic and cultural contiguity between Sindh, northern Kutch and Western Rajasthan, this paper delineates in the first section a dislodging of nations as units of meaning. This unfreezing of political cartographies is suggested through the cartographies of a song or story. Section II focuses upon the fertile relationship between oral traditions and Banni. A range of oral traditions in Banni are shared by men and women, and also members of the three different social groups mentioned above. This shared context is epitomized by the figure of Shah Abdul Latif, the sufi saint poet who hailed from Sindh but sung and invoked in the entire western region discussed in Section I. The paper argues that orality creates a sense of region by aiding a common imagination, at the same time, it helps diffuse the existence of political boundaries. In Banni especially the reality of an unsurveilled and mobile word is lived out despite and because (of) constant reminders of borders from the Border Security Force that dot the landscape.

I

In his travels to Jaisalmer and Barmer in Rajasthan, Pritam Varyani notes how he was reminded of Badhin in Sindh. His travels show how the clothes, language, and the luxuriant oral tradition prevalent amongst the musicians in Western India make the realities of the nation-state suddenly collapse [2010: 82-83]. Varyani is a linguist by profession and works with the Institute of Sindhology in Adipur. He and his contemporaries saw Kutch as the most natural habitation for the Sindhi language and therefore established an institute to preserve the Sindhi language and the various traditions they see as “Sindhi”. On the other hand, Komal Kothari who has devoted a lifetime to the preservation of musical traditions in Rajasthan has this to say:

“The Sindhi language is the only one that does not have a state, and yet has a vast geographical expanse.... What is considered as Thar Desert region in geography is really speaking the region of the Sindhi language. I don’t think Partition has made a difference to this linguistic reality. If we had to think of a natural location of Sindhi, it should be the Thar region of Rajasthan” [Khemani 2003: XV].

Western Rajasthan was an integral part of Sindh prior to Partition. This was known as the Thar region. People living here refer to their language as Sindhi, or more specifically Dhatki. In her research on folk traditions in Western Rajasthan, Kishni Khemani notes that ‘Dhatki’ has elements of Marwari, Gujarati

and Sindhi. This confluence is natural, she says, considering that Jodhpur in Rajasthan, the Palanpur state in Gujarat, the Rann of Kutch and some of Sindh's districts were geographically close to the Thar Desert [Khemani 2003: 7]. Thus, both culturally and historically, northern Kutch touching the Rann of Kutch was closer to Sindh than to central Gujarat. It was interconnected with the Thar Parkar for centuries, and even today its inhabitants consider Sindh as the nation of their origin; especially the ones living in Banni. They speak of their language as "Kutchi Sindhi". Kutchi, as mentioned earlier, the language most commonly spoken in all of Kutch, can be considered a dialect of Sindhi.

Through the mobility of the word; and therefore the mixing and merging of languages, the Western region partakes of this civilizational continuity. The continuity itself has been a result of centuries of migration caused by famine, search for fodder, trade, pilgrimage and political upheavals. The continuity may even be traced to the fact that at least three out of the four regions I mentioned (Saurashtra, Kutch, Sindh and Rajasthan) are sites of the Indus Valley civilization (see [Relwani 1996; 2008]). My discussion focuses on language, because it forms part of my engagement and understanding with Western India. It extends as well as critiques my previous work on Sindh, which showed the waning of a distinct Sindhi identity among the Hindu Sindhis of Gujarat who wish to obliterate their past (and language as its legacy) in their desire to become fully acceptable Indian citizens [Kothari 2007]. Their intense involvement in trade and mercantile activities also perhaps made this necessary. However, parts of Kutch and Rajasthan have a more vibrant and living connection with Sindh, compelling us to see the multiple inhabitations of the same language in the subcontinent, and rethink nations as discrete entities.

In the western regions of Jaisalmer and Barmer, the musician communities of Langhas sing songs for their Sindhi patrons, living both in India and Pakistan. The Langhas continue to visit their patrons in Sindh. They earn their livelihood from a bardic tradition of singing for them. The groups of families who have patronized the Langhas are known as "*Sindhi sipahi*", found in Thar Parkar and Sanghar districts in Sindh, as well as Barmer, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur in Rajasthan¹. The Langhas themselves are found in all three regions – Gujarat (Kutch and Saurashtra) Rajasthan (Jaisalmer and Barmer) and Sindh (Thar Parkar and Sanghar), i.e. across the two nations of India and Pakistan as well as across two linguistic states within India. The Langhas are one of the communities who contribute to the circularity of narratives in the Western region. And yet they are officially "non-Sindhis". However, the *Sindhi-sipahis*, such as the community of Mohars in Jodhpur, lay claim to a purer lineage of Sindh by asserting their arrival into the subcontinent with the army of Muhammad Bin Qasim. And yet, they do not speak Sindhi. "Like your community of Sindhi Hindus, we also came from Sindh. We were mercenaries brought for different wars.

¹ The state of Gujarat also has a group of people called the "*Sipahis*." The *Sindhi Sipahis* in Rajasthan and Sindh claim to have converted during the 8th century when they joined the army of Muhammed Bin Qasim who took Sindh over in 711 A.D. Gujarat also has a group called '*Sipai*' which claims to have served in the armies of the various rulers in the Western India during 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. In addition to the etymological similarity between the use of the word '*sipahi*' (i.e. soldier) and a historical descent from *Rajput* clans, there may be other similarities between the two groups, a subject not yet examined.

We were brought to the Nagori gate here in Jodhpur, our ancestors were in the army of Bin Qasim. It is just that we have no language left. We speak Marwari. We have become *baniyas* like you now!” (Shahbuddin Mohar, personal communication).

Where do languages begin and end, and how does one determine their boundaries? To what extent do identities of people and nations draw from languages? Sudipto Kaviraj alerts us to the dangers of treating languages as fully-formed discrete entities. He argues that traditional society is made up of a structure of groups which are, in some crucial cases though not in all, fuzzily conceived; fuzzily conceived space, and fuzzily sensed and imagined time. Villages do of course begin and end, and therefore have their boundaries, though here too, in the most immediate form of lived space, there is a certain ‘approximateness’ and ‘indeterminability’. Boundaries of villages are not like boundaries on a map; they are a world devoid of spatial mentality. Boundaries do exist, things, spaces, groups do begin and end. But they tend to shade off, merge, graduate, and languages illustrate this principle best. Where does Kutchi end and Sindhi begin or Thari merge into Sindhi? Differences of this kind shade off the way distinctly different colours are arranged in a spectrum. Hence, notes Kaviraj, “it is a world, to put it dramatically, of transitions rather than of boundaries” [2010: 142].

Sorath gada sun utri

Janjhar re jankaar

Dhrooje gadaan ra kangra

Haan re hame dhooje to gad girnaar re...

[Kothari 1973: 53]

As Sorath stepped out of the fort
Not only the hill in the neighbourhood
But the walls of Girnar fort trembled
By the sweet twinkle of her toe-bells

The verse quoted above is one from amongst a vast repertoire of the narrative traditions of the Langhas. It belongs to the story of Sorath and serves us well to understand the pre-modern civilizational continuities which characterize the Western region, of which Banni is but one example. Based in what was the well-known princely state of Junagadh in the region of Sorath/Saurashtra, the story goes like this:

King Diyach who ruled over Junagadh was married to a beautiful woman named Sorath. The neighbouring King Anirai was jealous of King Diyach’s reputation as a powerful king, as well as of his beautiful wife. King Anirai commanded his *charan* (bard) Bijal to ensnare Raja Diyach and have him killed. Bijal was a mesmerizing singer who played the *chang* and held his audiences captive. As a bard, it was his tradition to seek generous gifts from the king, and displeasing the seeker, especially from the *charan* caste was considered inauspicious. Bijal acted on Anirai’s command and headed off to Junagadh

where King Diyach lived with his wife Sorath. A sensitive and kind man, Bijal undertook a mission filled with cruelty to save his own life. His voice made life in Junagadh come to a standstill; it filled the air with pain and longing. The king begged him to name his reward, whilst his queen Sorath watched him with misgivings. She offered him riches in the hope that he would not seek anything more serious. But Bijal stood his ground and sought the king's head as his reward. True to his word, the king cut off his head and gave it to Bijal for him to carry to Anirai. Meanwhile, Sorath followed her husband and jumped into the fire. The story becomes a glorious documentation of Sorath's love, and the king's generosity. A Sufi version of the story celebrates the fact that King Diyach's surrender to music is the ultimate surrender of the body to mystical sound, which represents God [Advani 2006].

There are many smaller stories attached to this, for instance, ones that relate Bijal's identity as the King's nephew or Sorath, who also belonged to Anirai's family, but the emphasis of our discussion is in the mobility of the story, its various versions notwithstanding. Based in the geography of Saurashtra, the Sorath story is an integral part of poetry and music in Kutch, Sindh, and Gujarat. Kothari heard it from the Langhas who are dispersed across the same regions. To them, it is neither a Sindhi nor Kutchi song, but one that they are used to singing for their patrons.

The story and its various versions and recitations have elements from Sindhi, Marwari, Gujarati and dialectical inflections from all three, pointing to its mobility in Saurashtra, Kutch, Sindh and parts of Rajasthan – regions that show, with varying intensities, many threads of continuity. If the story has travelled, so have the Langhas, and other tribes who carried the story with them. King Diyach, who hailed from Sindh, belonged to the tribe of the Sammas who ruled Kutch and Saurashtra². It is possible that the story travelled with the Sammas who recreated through its dissemination the glorious sacrifice of King Diyach. Also, Shah Abdul Latif, the famous sixteenth century Sufi of Sindh had travelled the entire western part of the subcontinent, and his popularization of these folk tales has contributed immensely to the sustenance of narrative traditions. A similar phenomenon becomes apparent through another narrative which originates in Sindh – the story of Umar-Marui.

Umar Sumra, the second, ruled what are now parts of Rajasthan and Sindh in the fourteenth century. He heard about the beauty of a woman called Marui, from the village of Maleer, who was engaged to Khetsen. Once, when Marui was busy filling water, Umar Sumra came riding on a camel and abducted her, taking her to his fort, Umarkot. Marui would not forgive Umar for taking her away against her will. His entreaties and allurements make no difference to her. Shah Latif renders with poignancy Marui's pain

² *Tuhfatu-L Kiram*, an Arab source from the fourteenth century reminds us, "Be it observed that the Sammas are the owners of the land throughout Sind, as far as Guzerat, including the greater part of Rajputana, and they form the majority of the population of Sind" (in Elliot and Dawson, 1866-77: 339).

and longing for her land and people in Maleer, which is about 40 kilometers from Nagarparkar where the Sumras ruled. Maleer evokes images of a lost homeland in the poetry sung by musicians in Rajasthan, Kutch, and Sindh. Meanwhile, Umar Sumra brought Marui back to her community, although she had to prove that her virtue (supposedly violated by Umar Sumra) was intact, to be accepted back again. In the story of Umar Marui, the continuity of the Thar region dividing Rajasthan from Sindh gets played out, its current-day borders notwithstanding.

If the story of Sorath originated in what is now Gujarat, and that of Umar Marui in what is Sindh, the one of Moomal Rano may be considered as originating in Rajasthan, although such claims to ‘origins’ also belie the inseparability of one region and linguistic tradition from another. For instance, the story of Moomal Rano is also a product of a synthesis between Sindh and Rajasthan. Moomal was from Sindh, but her beloved Rano Mendro was a Sodha Rajput from Rajasthan³.

Thus movements of words and the people who carry them throughout the Western region dislodge the territorial conception of languages and the linguistic conception of nations today. They also dislodge the political division between India and Pakistan. Unlike bodies, words do not need passports and visas.

II

Awal Allah Aalim Allah, Aalam jo Dhani

Kadir Pahinji kudrat se, kaimu aahe kadamu

Vaali, vaahid, vahdah, raazik, rabbu, rahim

So saarihi sacho dhani, chai hamdu hakim

Kare paan Karim, joru jor jahaan jee [Latif in Advani 2006: 2]

Without beginning

Without end

All knowing monarch

Of the universe

Omnipotent and benevolent

The one and only

Lord

Utter his name

Sing his praises

The ever compassionate

Creator of the cosmos [Makhija and Dilgir 2005: 29]

³ The Sodhas are also spread in Sindh, Kutch, Rajasthan and Saurashtra. After India’s war with Pakistan, a large number migrated to Kutch and Rajasthan to settle. (See Sikand and Sodha, Unpublished Report)

Shah Abdul Latif, popularly known as Shah Sahib (1689-1752) is an iconic Sufi saint poet and wanderer of Sindh. His work epitomizes the syncretic nature of Sufism in Sindh. Folk tales about famous lovers such as Moomal-Rano and Sasui Punhun a human relationship with God in Shah's poetry. It is said that Shah Sahib himself was unhappy to be read and preferred to exist in the oral tradition, because fixity leads to dogma. On finding his disciples compile his verses, he threw the manuscript in a lake. His disciples sought his permission again and compiled them in a collection referred to as Shah jo Risalo. The Risalo is an example of hybrid traditions in Sindh. Recited in Sindhi, Siraiki, Arabic, Thari, Kutchi and drawing upon Vedanta, Quran and the Gita as well as the folk stories of Western India, it runs as a common thread in the communities living in Kutch, Sindh and Rajasthan. In fact Kutch on the whole is considered to have over 300 disciples of Shah Sahib who claim to inherited their status as 'murids' through an ancestry in the seventeenth century when Shah Sahib traveled to Kutch.

Shah Abdul Latif lives in Banni, among other places. He comes to the rescue of people of Banni as they make sense of their world. The hostility of environment, the paucity of fodder for the cattle, the greed of fellow-men and women, unrequited desires and wants, competing messages about BJP and Congress, and many more such situations in this desert region are articulated and understood through a bait or two from the Risalo. Building up on this affinity, especially among the Jat community, a group of election volunteers from the Mutwa community were found singing the verse I heard in the region of Banni :

Hanjra heraan thee

Pahinja para na pusainje

Hina chillre jee chaal te

Pahinjo var na vinyayeenje

So sar sangayaj

Jite parakh the pakhin jee

Swans, do not be led astray

Dip your wings in water

Misled by these owls

Do not lose what is precious to you

Offer your head

To those who know and discern

Addressing the Jats as 'swans', they warn them against the misleading Sammas (who represent the Congress). The Mutwas were contesting on behalf of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The ideological divergence of the two parties notwithstanding, the commonness and efficacy of Shah Sahib could be taken for granted across different communities.

This is as true of the pastoralist Sunni Muslim communities as of the Meghwals and Wadhas, the other two groups in Banni. I have discussed elsewhere how the folk stories in Shah Abdul Latif's Risalo are alluded by the Meghwals and Wadhas also who share with the Muslim an affection and familiarity with Sindh. The movements the Meghwals have made in Western India get foregrounded in their narratives of arrival. Upon being asked when his community of the Marwada Meghwals came to Banni, Summar Bhuro referred to times when Sindh was free, expressed as "*Unhan dihan mein Sindh chhut hui* (Sindh was free during those days)" (personal communication, Sumar Buro). Implying that Sindh is not free anymore suggests how the people of Banni transfer the restriction placed upon them as bounded citizens to nations who are bounded. He explained that initially "our elders came towards Pachham, a region adjacent to Banni, but on seeing opportunities of livelihood, they settled down here." Wherever the Meghwals traveled – Rajasthan, Tharparkar, Pachham and Banni, they also established a Ramdev temple, marking their identity on each geography and culture. As they circulated in the Western region between Sindh, Rajasthan and Kutch, their movements also embodied those of the narratives of Sasui Punhun, and Umar Marui. "Marui is weeping for her homeland Maleer, Sumar Bhuro explained to me, from the story of Umar Marui. She does not want the expensive things Umar Sumra is giving her, but she wants to go to her humble home."

III

Up until the fifteenth century, the term 'Gujarat' referred to different cultural and political zones – the peninsular Gujarat (comprising Kutch and Saurashtra, different from mainland and Adivasi Gujarat) of which Kutch was one, distinctive and different, and very often unaffected by the processes of social and economic transformation that took place in mainland Gujarat [Yagnik and Seth 2005; Ibrahim 2008; Sheikh 2010].

The idea of Gujarat as a land of Gujarati-speaking people, consolidated as a single region during the 'golden' period of the Chalukyas, interrupted by occasional irritants of Muslim and Maratha invasion, and formed by its upper-caste Hindus and Jains has come under severe scrutiny. The inquiry has also opened up peripheral discourses and smaller narratives to counter the grand narrative of Gujarat and underscore its fragile and uncertain foundations in history. My intersection with these interrogations about Gujarat as a timeless eternal and cohesive nation is to suggest a story of otherness in Banni. In my view, the contemporary self-perception of Gujarat is based largely on selective memory and selective amnesia, the focal point of which is language. This paper enters that zone with the story of people who do not speak the major language of Gujarat, whose ancestral roots lie in what Gujarat sees as an 'enemy' nation, who are themselves not upper-caste Hindus, but Muslims little known even to the urban Muslims of Gujarat, and who are far removed from the urban, modernizing, and entrepreneurial drive of the mainstream state. Their mobility, necessitated by their occupation as pastoralists, has not helped their documentation in histories of the region; their socio-cultural distance and distinctiveness keeps them out of the sociological and psychological bounds of even contemporary Gujarat. However small and isolated the region, Banni provides an illustration of the contradictions underlying the idea of Gujarat, and helps

unfold the many histories it has chosen to selectively forget.

When Gujarat was separated from the Bombay state in 1960, it managed to do so by mobilizing language as a site of both difference and unity. Through the decade of the 1950s, the movement for a separate Gujarat called the 'Mahagujarat,' consolidated itself by claiming sameness of language between Kutch, Saurashtra and what was then considered 'mainland Gujarat.' This unity also served as an evidence of difference from the Marathi speaking region of Bombay. The extent of homogenization and erasure of difference this entailed is not directly germane to this paper. The background merely helps me to articulate a premise, by no means new, that language both extends and limits conceptions of geography. The linguistic state of Gujarat took in its fold a language like 'Kutchi,' which has more in common with Sindhi (originating in the province of Sindh, now in Pakistan) than Gujarati. However this homogenization helped an expansion of the physical, administrative, and eventually even the cultural territory of mainland Gujarat. At the same time, languages do have their own stories to tell, which they do, when not noticed and surveiled. The linguistic state of Gujarat asserted its sovereignty over Kutch but is oblivious to hybridities of region and nation that get played out in songs and stories circulating in Kutch.

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