

The ethics of efficacy in North India's *goonda raj* (rule of toughs)

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This study of *goondas* (gangsters or toughs) in North Indian politics comes by way of a comment on intellectual method in the anthropology of moralities. More especially, it offers critical remarks on the recent adoption of 'virtue' as the cardinal moral co-ordinate of human life. Drawing on field research conducted across northern India, we show that when people celebrate goondas as leaders, they do so not because they see in them virtuous men, but because they think them capable of 'getting things done'. This ethics of efficacy is neither merely instrumental nor is it but another variant of virtue ethics. It presents, instead, an altogether different moral teleology orientated towards effective action rather than excellent character. While challenging the self-centred bent of the late anthropology of ethics, we also make preliminary remarks on the contrast between 'moral' and 'practical' judgement, and the limits of 'the moral' as such.

Look, these people here give me their votes, they give me their love, because I get things done.

A gangster-politician in Jaipur (February 2013)

Of the many disquieting news items that issue from India, the most alarming perhaps is 'political criminalization', or the invasion of the country's political ranks by *goondas*, or toughs.¹ More than a third of India's parliament elected in 2014 face criminal charges (including kidnapping, murder, and rape), many own guns, and some even stand for elections or run their constituencies from prisons (Witsoe 2011: 73-4; 2013).² Despite spirited counter-efforts by a vast army of watchdog organizations and India's highly autonomous Election Commission, the trend has shown no sign of abating.³ More goondas fill India's legislative assemblies now than ever before.

Columnists and academics alike see in '*goonda raj*' (rule of toughs) a symptom of India's political and economic infirmities: its broken order of law, moribund and highly politicized bureaucracy, rogue capitalism, collapsed political institutions, mass unemployment, and an electoral process driven by fear and force.⁴ Some blame it on the 'vacuum of authority' formed by the collapse of the Congress Party (Kohli 1990; Kothari 2010); others on rampant corruption and unbridled liberalization (Sanchez

2010). Others yet link it to the unscrupulous recent rise of the lower castes to political prominence (Jaffrelot 2003; Michelutti 2010; 2014; Witsoe 2013; Yadav 2000). Whatever the cause, all agree that this is politics as politics should not be: violent, instrumental, lacking a moral base. In the bracing words of one anthropologist, '[G]oonda raj [is] a lumpenized regime of pure interest and thus a Hobbesian state of Warre' (Cohen 2008: 44).⁵

Ethnographers have nonetheless observed that goondas do not only inspire fear, but also widespread popular admiration, and many reach political office by voters' choice rather than coercive force (Hansen 2001; 2005; Michelutti 2008; Narayan 2005; Price & Ruud 2010; Vaishnav 2014). Yet when it comes to accounting for this preference, analysts normally explain it away as a practical calculation. They say that India's dispossessed and vulnerable masses, deprived of state protection and resources, must rely on informal – and often violent – political lobbies to secure protection and a share of state goods. This 'political society' of the dispossessed (Chatterjee 2004) supports criminals who are 'willing to do what it takes – by hook or crook – to protect the interests of their community' (Vaishnav 2014; also Chandra 2004). Whatever value India's citizens may confer on the goondas must be driven solely by 'material interests', not any discernibly moral sense. If only India's state really worked for its citizens, if only its politics was less corrupt and criminalized, if only 'civil society' was widely available to its citizens, they would naturally forgo 'bad politicians' (Vaishnav 2011: 2) in favour of 'clean', law-abiding women and men (Godbole 1998).

But the logic of goondas' legitimacy cannot be reduced to calculative instrumentalism – if only because many Indian citizens treat goonda-politicians as a genuine political good, not a 'necessary evil' – and any serious attempt at understanding this logic requires a much richer appreciation of its evaluative content.⁶ India's new economic and political opportunities have no doubt inspired more young men to try their hand at the risky business of strongmanship (*goondagardi*). But neither the practice of *goondagardi* nor its mythology or the logic of its legitimation are new (Brass 1984; Rao 1962). Political *goondagardi* has imaginative purchase precisely because it evokes well-established cultural idioms. Drawing on research conducted together and severally in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and Delhi, and focusing on one man's political career, we examine some moral foundations of goondas' political success.⁷ Our snapshot of the sensibilities that help goondas launch their political careers is in no sense an exhaustive account of the morals of *goonda raj*.⁸ Instead, it is an invitation to a debate on the morals of politics, violent and less so, in India and not only there.

The study also comes by way of a critical comment on intellectual method in the anthropology of morals or ethics (terms we use interchangeably here), and especially on the recent adoption of virtue as the cardinal coordinate of moral life. We show that the people we know in India do not admire goondas for being virtuous. They admire them for getting things done. What orientates this judgement is not a concern with 'selves' or their 'character', but the value of effective action – action that can transform their world – what we call 'the ethics of efficacy'. This alternative to virtue ethics challenges the presumption that virtue – or indeed any preset moral *telos* – can ground an anthropologically sound analysis of people's moral worlds.⁹ Surely, it is their own purposes that anthropologists must look for. Believing with Durkheim, Dumont, and many of the anthropologists who came between and after them, that our discipline is nothing if not the study of moralities – what Durkheim (1887) called a 'moral science' – we wish to contribute to a truly catholic moral

anthropology capable of accommodating the widest possible range of evaluative experience.

But first a few words on the recent career of virtue in anthropology. The category migrated to anthropology from moral philosophy, whose practitioners saw in it an escape from their discipline's intellectual deadlock: from the idiom of rights, guilt, and duty; the matrix of abstract principles and rules – all normative relics of the Christian belief in a law-giving God (Anscombe 1958).¹⁰ Philosophers argued that moral philosophy, stuck in this Ur-Christianity, failed to engage with vast stretches of moral life, not only in faraway times and places, but also in their own (Williams 1993). More fundamentally, wrote Alasdair MacIntyre in his pivotal recovery of Aristotelian (via Thomist) virtue ethics (2007 [1981]), moral dilemmas remained intractable because they lacked a shared analytical aim, a *telos*. Philosophers asking themselves 'What should one do?' lined up on either side of the issue, but without a common teleological focus they made little headway. What they lost sight of, he argued, was human life. The question 'What am I to do?' lacked content and was simply 'the wrong question' (Pence 1993: 249) if it was not ultimately about the kind of person who one should be. Instead, philosophers should be asking: What is a good life? How should one live it? What sort of person should one be? (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]). That is, the unit of moral reasoning should not lie in individual actions but in individual persons.

In recent years anthropologists have made calls for an 'anthropology of morals (or ethics)', a subject they claim has hitherto been neglected or obstructed from view by the conflation of moral and social phenomena (Laidlaw 2002; 2013; Zigon 2008). Virtue ethics, with its focus on the human subject, seemed to make for a more anthropology-friendly moral philosophy. It also offered exciting new interlocutors and gave moral anthropology a new lease of life (Faubion 2001; Laidlaw 2002; 2013). Since the millennium's turn, a growing number of anthropological monographs, articles, and edited volumes on moralities have appeared in print; most are organized through the category of virtue, and many focus on the fashioning of virtuous selves.¹¹ Virtue is not the only analytical frame in this new moral anthropology (value is an important other), but it has proven so powerfully absorptive that it frames most recent reflections on the subject, including those uninterested in the cultivation of virtuous selves (e.g. Englund 2008; Mattingly 2014; Scheele 2015; the present study). We shall neither characterize, much less assess, this rich and rapidly growing literature. Instead, we take to task its pivotal premise: 'the self' as the ultimate aim of all moral work.

Michel Foucault, who inspires many new moral anthropologists, is explicit about this self-centred approach to ethics (but see Mattingly 2012). For him, all moralities involve 'forms of subjectivation' (Foucault 1990: 29) and 'ethics' is that sphere of life which is concerned with 'one's relation to oneself' (Foucault 1997: 266; also Davidson 1986: 229). Rules of conduct matter, but only as 'technologies of the self'. One may wish to be one or another kind of person (a saint, a hero, a gangster) and cultivate different attributes (modesty, courage, muscle) to achieve one's aim, but the moral purpose is nonetheless fixed: '[t]he *telos* of an ethics' is not just any purpose that people may pursue, but specifically an 'ideal *mode or state of being* toward which one strives or aspires' (Foucault 1990: 26, emphasis ours). Foucault's first-person ethics is part of his late-life project of recovering the individual, who in his earlier writings on domination had been left on the sidelines.¹²

We show that goondas' decisions and actions, and their evaluation by others, are not driven by a concern with a 'mode or state of being'. What frames this evaluative

process is effective action, echoed in the ubiquitous preoccupation with politicians who ‘get things done’. Goondas become leaders (*netās*) not because people appreciate *what they are like*, but because of *what they achieve*. Character matters, but only as an aid to effective action, which can change the world, for better if often (strikingly) also for the worse. Other aids to efficacy – status, money, education, or anything else that can help ‘get things done’ – are valued as much. What is valuable in a goonda is his capacity. Thus, goondas’ reputations rest on acts that transform life: not the life of their selves, but life around them. As Cheryl Mattingly puts it, this is a ‘world-orientated’, not an ‘I-orientated’, teleology (2014). Here the social world is neither residual nor ancillary to the self, but is itself the purpose of moral judgement and action.

A goonda’s progress

Our protagonist ‘Raj’ lives in the village of ‘Ramkheri’, where he commands considerable influence and respect.¹³ He got here by a path of murder, marauding, racketeering, which earned him a goonda’s fame and delivered him from poverty and insignificance to his comfortable and well-regarded life. Raj is an implausible bruiser: slight and modest in stature, with a brush of thick hair that falls boyishly over his eyes. In the evenings, when he goes about on his motorbike, wearing bleach-white trousers, a shiny shirt like a film star’s, and a pair of Sheriff sunglasses, it is not easy to guess at his gravitas. Raj is witty, soft-spoken, and courteous, and he is always up for a laugh. A Brahmin by caste and a teetotaling vegetarian, he runs a ‘general store’, which trades in everything from sweets and toothpaste to cans of petrol and latest gossip. He lives with his wife, two sons, and mother in a spacious compound of several rooms arranged around a shady courtyard. This is where Tommaso lived for fourteen months and Anastasia visited during the 2013 state elections.

For more than a decade, Raj has been a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), then the state’s ruling party and now the national one. He is friendly with the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), whom he helps organize electoral campaigns. Raj can transfer low-ranking government or police officers in and out of the village, he is the village’s interface with the Electric Board (vital for farmers, who rely on electric pumps for irrigation), and he reputedly ‘made’ (promoted to post) the village headman. Raj claims that politicians ask him for help because, as a shopkeeper, he ‘has full knowledge’ of the lives of his neighbours: what they earn and spend, owe and borrow, eat and drink, the spices they prefer, their affairs and quarrels, and – crucially – how they vote. Like most shopkeepers in rural India, Raj is also a moneylender who knows how to call in the voters’ debts at the right time.

Raj does a lot of ‘work’ (*kām*) for his neighbours: he gets their wells fixed and electric lines connected, helps to procure loans, secures transfers to better job postings, and resolves troubles with the police. He spends his days phoning bureaucrats and policemen, solving problems and arranging deals, mostly without pay. Every day, he receives dozens of agitated petitioners, whom he greets with his studied, unhurried charm as befits a *sharif* (gentle) person. He says that fortune has been good to him and so he likes to give back. Not all his neighbours are grateful and not all return his favours and cash. But ‘people’s work’ (*logon kā kām*) earns Raj merit (*punya*) from God and respect (*izzat*) from the villagers. Less ephemeral recompense comes at election time, when he commands thousands of grateful voters, who in turn win him political favour and then again allow him to ‘do their work’. Raj shuns ‘formal politics’ – he has never

stood for any elections – preferring to act as a generous patron rather than a petty political ‘fixer’ (*dalāl*).

When Raj was 13, his father, too poor to send him to school or even feed him properly, sent him to live with his uncles in Ramkheri, where Raj walked barefoot. He went to school in the mornings, but in the afternoons he cooked and washed floors and slept on the floor like a servant. Eventually, Raj found work in a nearby town at a betel nut (*pān*) shop. The owner was a notorious goonda and he quickly took Raj under his wing. Raj started spending whole days in the town and his life changed for good. Within a year, he was running a small protection racket, which extracted money from drivers and porters in the town. This was lucrative work: every day each of the 100 porters and 24 *tāngā* cart drivers paid a daily rupee. Besides, Raj often managed to pinch a few rupees from the *pān* shop. When factory workers earned three daily rupees, Raj sometimes made 200. For three years he lived ‘like a king’. He was generous with boys who worked for him – he paid for their food, drink, and women – and still he had plenty of beautiful clothes and sumptuous meals.

One day, when Raj was hired to retrieve a runaway bride from her parents’ house, her father whacked him round the head with the flat of a sword. Raj lived, but he developed headaches, which still sometimes keep him in bed for days. After this, he quit the racket and broke all ties with the town. He dreamed of opening a general store, but in his racketeering days he saved nothing and so to buy a plot of land in Ramkheri, he and his brother sold their late father’s land. Raj got a job in the factory, but his earnings were piffling, and to open the store he borrowed 2,450 rupees from his sister. He remembers walking 15 kilometres to her village to save the 5-rupee bus fare. When Raj got married, his brother moved out of their house, but asked for compensation. Once again, Raj was broke.

For several years, he syphoned fuel from trucks passing through the village trucker stop and his shop became a flourishing source of cheap petrol, which also supplied fuel to brokers and other under-the-counter shops. One night, Raj stole an entire tank of diesel with the truck driver’s help; it later transpired that the trucker was anxious to dispose of the fuel because he had just killed his driving partner and was to drive the truck, with the body, off a bridge. This shook Raj’s nerve and he quit the work.

Raj’s days of muscling, smuggling, and racketeering are by now long gone, but he is still known in the village as a ‘big goonda’ (*baḍā goonda*), and in the town the tea sellers still never take money from him. This is, in his words, how it began:

You remember – my first job – my boss ran a *pān* shop. My boss had an enemy, a man who made scissors for cutting *pān* leaves. Good, strong scissors. We charged 25 paisa for *pān* at the shop. But one day this man gave me 20 paisa. Now, the boss had said to me earlier: when this man comes to the village, you must finish him (*niptānā*), quarrel with him a bit (*jhagarānā thoḍā sa*), you know . . . with this man who gave me 20 paisa, saying he did not have the 5 paisa change. So, I said: ‘No, no . . . You will give the full price. What is this to you? Your daddy’s shop?’ I was young then, but that’s what I said. He was a good man and he fought right back. He said: ‘Why are you doing this upside-down talk (*ultā-sīdhā bāt*)?’ This is when I started to fight. Some people gathered round us and the scissor-man slapped me across the face. So I took my *pān* leaf scissors, got down and stuck them into his gut.

The man died two days later in hospital. ‘I was young then’, continued Raj,

But I was clever; I gave the scissors to another man, excused myself, and ran to a nearby village. I said to my boss: ‘I did your work; don’t send me to jail’. So he named a different man, a poor lad with no money. They told him they’d feed his family while he was in jail. He was in for two and a half years, and for two and a half years they fed his family. Then he got out on bail.

The episode was deeply transformative: at 16, Raj was no longer a child but a formidable goonda.

Ninety goondas, nine leaders, one citizen

This is a story of rapid movement up a steep social incline against substantial odds. Not everyone has the pluck, wit, ambition, and the sheer luck it took Raj to get so quickly ahead. But his story is also in many ways typical. As Raj likes to repeat, of a hundred Indian men, 'ninety are goondas, nine are leaders (*netās*) and only one is a citizen (*nāgarik*)', a law-abiding man. On this street-fighter's path, few make out as well as Raj, and some do not make it at all; some rise right up – occasionally all the way to the nation's parliament – but most stay just where they were at the start, plus a few scars.

Analysts have suggested that this mass involvement of Indian youth in *goondagardi* is caused by pandemic poverty and unemployment (e.g. Hansen 2000; Jeffrey 2010; Ruud 2014). Both certainly play a role. But the path of *goondagardi* is not paved only with poverty and desperation; it is full of the rich and the privileged. Some of the most renowned goonda-politicians in northern India, like the legendary parliamentarian Raja Bhaiya, are Rajput aristocrats.

'Happy' is one of them: the grandson of a former Congress MLA, whom we met in Ramkheri during the 2013 elections. At 25, Happy was already Vice President of the state's Youth Congress, an important Congress Party post, which he says he 'inherited' through his grandfather's party connections. Happy speaks impeccable Bombay English, drives a vast new SUV, and has plenty of cash to entertain friends and followers. He was born into politics, but he still has to prove himself worthy of leadership. During the 2013 elections, his grandfather put him in charge of a small army of teenage goons who helped in the campaign. Over several evenings we spent with Happy and his mates, he boasted of roughing people up, orchestrating multiple voting, and capturing booths. Happy's grandfather is a suave cosmopolitan figure, who regularly visits relatives in Canada. But for the villagers he is a 'big goonda', an honour he earned in his youth.¹⁴ We shall return later to the path from 'goonda' to 'gentle person' (from *badmāś* to *śārīf* man). For now, suffice it to say that here *goondagardi* is a viable career path for youths from all castes and classes. We know rich and poor Brahmins, Jats, Muslims, Rajputs, and even Jains who ply the goonda's trade.

This career often begins in the youth wings of political parties: the militant Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Sewa Sangh (RSS) and Bajrang Dal, but also in the Youth Congress or the Youth Wing (Yuva Morcha) of the BJP, both renowned goonda nurseries. Other boys join the entourages of political bosses who deploy regiments of young street-fighters to solve village disputes, act as retainers and bodyguards, help in land grabs, or, if necessary, stage pogroms (e.g. Berenschot 2012; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 61; Hansen 2001; 2005). Not all of their work involves violence. During elections, young toughs organize feasts and rallies, hang posters and distribute pamphlets, accompany candidates on their tours, and take charge of the customary distribution of meals, meat, and alcohol on the eve of elections, known as the 'murderous night' (*qatal ki rāt*) (Piliavsky 2014b). On election day, they work as unofficial 'polling agents', guard booths against capture by rivals, and go door-to-door, ferreting out voters, and help the old, the sick, and the blind in the making of electoral choice. Wherever multiple voting takes place or booths are captured, young goondas are no doubt on the job.

In the North Indian countryside, boys are introduced to the ways of *goondagardi* from the youngest age. The first lesson is in breaking social norms. From the earliest days of their lives, young boys learn how to play by the rules of life in society, but also how to break them. They learn how to comport themselves, when and how to speak (and not to speak) and otherwise act appropriately in the hierarchies of age, kin, gender, and caste. While learning to navigate these multiple, overlapping, unstable, and often conflicting orders of precedence, boys also learn that they can subvert, or experiment with, them, a skill some will later put to good use. Adults do not only tolerate insubordination, they also tacitly encourage it in boys. While slapping boys who leap into fights, speak out of turn, or even cross their elders, parents also fondly tease them as 'rogues' (*badmāś*), 'heroes' (*bahādur*) or simply 'goondas'.

Many boys also receive practical training. Every now and again, older men dust off their staffs, swords, and rifles and let their sons play with them. Around the village, one often sees boys as young as 5 or 6 playing with their fathers' staffs in the dust.¹⁵ By the time they reach adolescence, many will have received some training in the arts of wielding a staff (*lāṭh ghūmānā*) and in swordsmanship (*talavār ghūmānā*), mostly from their fathers, uncles, and elder brothers, but also from neighbours and friends. Many join older boys who practise wrestling and staff-wielding in fields outside the village. Later on, they may flaunt their skills in public: street displays of swordsmanship and wrestling are as central to the Muslim festival of Muharram as to the birthdays of patron deities celebrated by most North Indian Hindu castes (Peabody 2009). Some boys may even train, as did Raj, with more experienced and technically proficient goondas, learning to calibrate with substantial precision the harm they might wish to inflict. As a result, advanced martial skills are available to most ordinary men, not just 'gangsters' or 'criminals', making them well equipped for a career in *goondagardi*, should they choose it.¹⁶ Older men often boast of their martial accomplishments, and many are indeed very skilled: they know how to run a staff over a man's body without breaking bones, use guns and swords 'only to frighten', inflict grievous hurt, or kill 'cleanly' without spilling blood. Raj says he can choose to leave someone in pain for a week or a month, or to cripple them.

Deeds that stand for themselves

Every goonda's career proceeds through a series of violent spectacles – fistfights, stabbings, shootings, assaults on police – whose tales are circulated incessantly and with great relish. To outside observers, violent spectacles like the one recollected by Raj, will appear as crude assertions of might over right. But what appears like an unscrupulous scramble is in fact a carefully staged performance. These shows are crucial to the goondas' recognition as leaders – *netās* – the key stage in their political ascent. Each violent outburst involves what Michael Herzfeld calls a 'poetic strategy' (1985), which is subject to the spectators' careful judgement. Such acts may impress, but they may also fail. As with Herzfeld's Cretan bandits, goondas generate 'shock, perhaps even repulsion' (1985: 16). Stories of their feats – stylized, exaggerated, often apocryphal – form the bedrock of their reputations and they are at least as critical to their careers as the violence itself. These tales also articulate the evaluative logic by which people assess and authorize the toughs.

The first lesson in this sensibility lies in the narrative genre itself. As MacIntyre (2001 [1981]: esp. chap. 10) argued for Mycenaean Greece and Michael Gilsenan (1996: esp. chap. 4) for rural Lebanon, enacted narratives do not only describe social processes;

they create charts of the evaluative terrain and plot the moral teleologies. Stories of *goondagardi* are not *Bildungsromans* that track self-reflective forging of character or string together sequences of events into a cumulative totality which biographers call 'a life'. Nor are they even character sketches. Instead, they describe wild, violent action. Raj did not claim to be the kind of person who goes about skewering people. Nor did he suggest that he cultivated the capacity to murder spontaneously into a durable disposition, habit, or character trait – a gangster's virtue. In fact, Raj prides himself on being a measured, 'gentle person', and his attack on the cutler was not meant as testimony to what he was really like. Were we to see that as his message, we would have found his story deeply unsettling. Raj was, after all, our landlord.

But he was making a different point: about what he did and the effect it had on his audience. When we first heard his tale, we were struck by the thought that at 16 he 'had it in him', as it were, to kill a man. But Raj placed emphasis elsewhere, something we realized only later, as we listened to the recording, again and again, back in Cambridge. He stressed his impressive transgression of interactive conventions: 'No, no . . . you will give the full price. What is this to you? Your daddy's shop?' Then comes the emphasis: 'I was young then, but that's what I said'.

In the North Indian countryside, social hierarchies are expressed in and sustained by rules of interactive precedence, which shape both verbal and non-verbal exchange.¹⁷ Superiors can rightfully set the terms of discussion, press questions on their subordinates, demand answers, issue orders, impose screeds on, shout or swear at, or even hit their subordinates. A blow from above hurts, but it does not constitute an insult, and can even be treated as an expression of parental care and intimacy.¹⁸ In other words, a blow from above is not an act of violence. This interactive asymmetry is most clearly audible where differences of rank are most sharply marked: between husbands and wives, parents and children, lawyers and farmers. In rural households, children and younger women refrain from as much as speaking in their elders' earshot (a rule further emphasized among women by veiling). Elders will explain that they are 'being shy' (inf. *śarmānā*), but this 'shyness' vanishes as soon as the elders leave the room, for bashfulness is not in the character of most women and children we know in India, but an *interactive attitude* which they assume.

In his interaction with the cutler, Raj violated the order of precedence with his 'upside-down talk'. These interactive mutinies are pivotal to goondas' heroics. More than mere breaches of etiquette or acts 'out of turn', they are assaults on the victims' *izzat* (respect, honour), which is as vital to their social existence as it is vulnerable to public injury. Attacks on *izzat* are highly provocative and can be deployed strategically. Raj's provocation worked and the cutler responded with due fury, for which (incidentally) Raj praises him as 'a good man who fought right back'. Things moved fast from talk to action – a stab for a slap.

Goondas engage in all kinds of carnage, not all of which is communicative and rhetorical, and some is plainly pragmatic. But to enhance their reputations they need to attack a superior. This is why in the goonda mythos the victims are typically their seniors: older men, District Collectors, police officers, or politicians. In cities, student leaders often first try their hand at bullying professors, administrators, and senior student politicians. Later in their careers, they will organize protests, when they may attack policemen or bureaucrats (generating for themselves long criminal records). When a student-politician Anastasia knew in Rajasthan received his master's degree (in political science), he had also accrued seven criminal cases in the course of his

'activism'. He went on to a successful political career and has by now assumed a genteel, law-abiding deportment. He even wears a seatbelt, an act of extreme legal piety in India.

Transformations of status are rarely as sudden and complete as Raj makes his seem. Most goondas stage agonistic performances daily and for many years. And most of them involve verbal, not physical, abuse or swearing (*gāli denā*). Like blows, swear words (*gālis*) flow legitimately down the ranks. When young boys exchange them, they are certainly jousting for supremacy: assessing and asserting their standing, testing the other's by eliciting reactions to their *gālis*, or inflating themselves by insulting absent big men.

Some performances fail dramatically. Superiors, after all, have the licence to violence and can – often do – retaliate with impunity. Although aspiring goondas try to calibrate their victims' standing carefully, they occasionally miscalculate. One boy Anastasia knew in Jaipur got it badly wrong. He was a student-politician and the son of a wealthy Jat, a mid-ranking farmer caste. He picked a fight with the Vice President of Rajasthan's Youth Congress, a 'big goonda' whose uncle also happened to be a Member of Parliament. The boy was drunk and the fight was really about a girl, or so goes the story, but he was also 'turning things upside down' as he shouted at and then slapped the VP. In response, the VP pulled out a knife, stabbed the boy, and walked off – right in front of everyone, in broad daylight. The boy died a week later and no one bothered (or dared) to pursue the case.

The difference between the perceived success or failure of goondas' antics – whether or not they impress anyone – depends neither on why they did what they did (intentions or moral imperative) nor on the moral value of their feats' outcomes (consequences). What is important is whether or not they manage to get away. Those who fail to pull it off risk being judged impertinent or simply foolish. Or they risk death, for the stakes are high in matters of honour. None of those who recounted the story of the unfortunate Jat boy did so with sympathy. He was unlucky, but he was also an imbecile (*bevkūf*) to have picked the wrong fight. On his part, Raj got away with the cutler's murder not because he was especially brave or strong. Remember: he ran from the crime scene. If his performance was meant to display courage, Raj would have done very badly indeed. Yes, he was sly, but that is neither the focus nor the point of his narrative. What matters instead is that he escaped with impunity, even if only because he was saved by his boss.

Nor are the goondas valued for bringing about any stably discernible good. The consequentialist emphasis on good outcomes does apply, but only later in goondas' careers, once they achieve the status of leaders. While the goondas' violence may occasionally bring about some good, more often it causes destruction and chaos or harms the innocent and the vulnerable who happen to get in the way. Raj's boss was no doubt pleased to be rid of his nemesis, but Raj also killed 'a good man', as he cheerily notes. Goonda folklore and its refractions in Bollywood (see the *Dabangg* trilogy) are full of such 'senseless' violence, violence that lacks moral imperatives or positive aims: violence against brothers and fathers or people who are simply in the range of their dance of destruction. This folklore celebrates the sheer force of chaotic violence, not the good it achieves or the virtue that it projects.

One minor royal, who ruled in southern Rajasthan in the 1920s, is remembered today as a 'goonda Raja' who made his concubines jump to their deaths from the walls of his citadel so he could gaze up their skirts from below. No one saw in this any kind of virtue. And yet they told the tale with audible awe. These were mad, monstrous deeds, but they showed that the raja could upturn the ordinary course of life, displaying what

Herzfeld calls 'performative excellence' (Herzfeld 1985: 16). They were deeds that in so doing strikingly stood for themselves.

Stories of North India's beloved type of hero-god, the *jhunjhār*, vividly illustrate the magnetism of violent histrionics. The story goes like this: the hero-god loses his head on the battlefield, but we learn little about why he went to battle or what he was like. We learn instead that he fought off vast armies, lost his head in the process, but carried on fighting none the less (Harlan 2003: 154-6). The *jhunjhār* is no tragic, suffering hero. His feat may or may not be an act of self-sacrifice (this is rarely clear in the narratives). It is, rather, an act of extraordinary – even incandescent – efficacy which transcends the conventional order of life (and death). There is no better image of relentless doing than a horseman crashing about the battlefield without a head, an image one finds carved into stones all over North Indian countryside (Singh 2012).

The ethics of efficacy lies at the heart of South Asian popular religion. Whereas the 'great' traditions of Brahmin, Jain, and Buddhist philosophers have been preoccupied with the self – its cultivation, denial, transference, or annihilation (Laidlaw 2013: 38), the 'little' tradition of folk deity worship has been concerned with action.¹⁹ Folk gods are neither exemplars nor saints, but fantastic *doers*. If the 'great' gods are characters described elaborately in icons and myths, the folk gods are best seen as potencies (Fuller 1992) depicted normally with symbols of their special powers (swords, spears, tridents) and mementos of their achievements (ribbons tied by devotees to mark them receiving a buffalo, a baby, or a car from a god). In the narratives the folk gods are described mainly by what they do, as in the stories of the *jhunjhārs*. In our many encounters with folk deities we have never met one with a personality.

Honour, leadership, and effective action

As goondas progress in their careers, they do not accumulate character excellence. What they accumulate instead is *izzat* (respect or honour),²⁰ which is not an attribute or a disposition that a person *has*, but something continually *given* (or withheld) by others (*izzat karnā* is, literally, 'to do respect'). If virtue is the quality of a person, *izzat* is the quality of a relation – it describes interactive attitudes and acts. The pursuit, appraisal, and negotiations of *izzat*, which are so central to goondas' lives, place interaction squarely as the focus of moral judgement. The question of who the actor – the 'real person' – behind the act may be is beside the point. What counts instead is the performance. One does not attract *izzat* by being a good wife or a generous patron, but by being good at playing the wife's or the patron's role.²¹ A young woman does not lose her *izzat* because she smokes cigarettes, but because she smokes them *in front of* parents and aunties. As far as parents and aunties are concerned, it is fine to smoke behind their backs. One rickshaw driver in Jaipur put this plainly enough when asked whether he thought 'Mr Singh', a 'criminal MLA' he admires, was a good man:

Good for some, bad for others. Why ask me? How should I know what he's like? Go ask his wife and children – they'll tell you whether he is any good. All I know is his work – the work he does for the poor people. If you act like a king (*rājā*), madam, we shall give you the king's *izzat*.

Whether or not an action merits *izzat* is a judgement about one's position in relation to others, and what one should do in that role, rather than about one's character. Instead of accruing like virtue, this position constantly shifts. It is not something cumulative and it cannot be cultivated. When people celebrate goondas as leaders, character does matter. Great goondas are strong (*tej*, *tāqatwale*, *damdār*) and pushy (*dabañg*, from the

Hindi *dabāna* 'to push', also *damdār*); they are dangerous (*khatarnāk*), forceful, and brave. But these qualities are neither definite virtues nor definite vices. The bully is both audacious and rough, both strong and brutish. A fearsome enemy and a powerful friend, he is as dreadful as he is transfixing. He frightens (*dharātā*) and troubles (*paresān kartā*), but he is also singularly positioned to help. The successful goonda is not good, he is *great*. He is a social grandee, not a moral exemplar.

People also frequently speak of the goondas' *himmat*, a word we normally gloss with the English 'courage' – a spiritual quality that allows people to act well in the face of danger. In Hindi, however, *himmat* means something slightly, but critically, different. It describes the sheer capacity to act. One may boast, for example, of having *himmat* enough to roam the cremation grounds by night or one may complain that, having eaten too much, you have no *himmat* for another bite. Acts enabled by *himmat* may be good or bad, reckless or trivial, and *himmat* is valued neither because it guarantees good outcomes nor because it reveals good character, but because it enables action – and life.

People also often refer to goondas as 'heroes' (*bahādur*), but whereas an English 'hero' is a character (in literature or in life) distinguished by the virtues of courage and readiness for sacrifice, a *bahādur* is simply someone who can do remarkable things, whether due to his courage, physical strength, or high social standing. Brave people are *bahādur* (just as in English), but so also are wrestlers, warriors, Olympic athletes, film actors, or just especially big and strong boys. Bahadur is also an aristocratic title (e.g. Rao Bahadur). This is not just a matter of 'heroic virtue' – a virtue ethics with an alternative virtue portfolio (as per MacIntyre 2007 [1981]: chap. 10) – but an altogether different evaluative orientation towards deeds as the focus of judgement.

Once goondas acquire a following, they also gain new obligations. Having proven that they can do things *to* people, they now need to do work *for* 'their people', to protect and provide. As one farmer said, 'People who get things done are the people we call leaders. We call all others *bābus* [useless bureaucrats]'. 'Getting things done' (*kām karnā*) is not only the goondas' motto; it is the central refrain of political rhetoric in the region, whatever the political party, whoever the politician, and whatever their political style may be (e.g. Berenschot 2011; Piliavsky 2014a; Price & Ruud 2010). The proven capacity to get things done makes robust practical sense in a country where politicians are widely expected to activate the state's turgid bureaucracies, deliver the goods of 'development', or protect from harassment by the police.

But political efficacy is celebrated in terms that go far beyond the immediately and the obviously practical. Popular leaders are often described, for example, as 'true leaders' (*sahī netās*) who command the truth (*sač*). Here being 'true' (*sahī*) is not a matter of honesty, but rather of fidelity to the leader's role. Like a 'true sword' or a 'true edge' in the (slightly old) English, a 'true leader' can be relied on to influence and to command.²² A 'true leader', said one woman, 'can speak the truth because he is so bold (*bahādur*), not afraid of speaking the truth (*sahī bāt*)'. One of Mr Singh's followers praised him as a man who 'can speak to anyone: chiefs of police, Block Collectors, ministers, the Chief Minister, anyone! And if the Chief Minister will not listen, he will knock down his doors and go straight to Delhi'. A 'true leader' may not be sincere, but he will get things done.

The *telos* of efficacy and the morals of politics

At least some readers will wonder by now whether it makes sense to think of the demand to get things done as a moral rather than a practical desire.²³ This brings us to our final

remarks, to make which we shall take a brief detour to sixteenth-century Florence. This was home to one of Europe's most distinguished moral philosophers. Niccolò Machiavelli was a man who spent his life thinking about the relation between moral and practical considerations, about judgement and responsibility – all discernibly moral questions (Benner 2009; 2013; Skinner 1981). Today, of course, he is remembered chiefly as an advocate of crude *Realpolitik* – the eponymous preacher of evil – not as a moral philosopher. This perception reveals something crucial about where for us 'the moral' lies.

Machiavelli argued that the Aristotelian virtues of sincerity, compassion, and endurance (as advanced by the Christian church) are no good as orienteers of political judgement. They make leaders appear 'frivolous, effeminate, mean-spirited, [or] irresolute', cause them to lose authority (to be 'despised and hated'), and undermine the distinctive evaluative sense of political life. Instead, leaders required *virtù*, a word Machiavelli assembled from the Latin *vir* (man) or *virtus* (manly strength) to denote effective excellence, virile potency, and skill. For him, it was not only that moralists advocated the wrong set of virtues, but rather that their judgement was fundamentally misaimed. Preoccupations with politicians' character obscured the fact that politics is fundamentally a transformative practice aimed at changing the world. Appraisals of politics through the category of virtue and the (monastic) value of a cultivated self miss this point (1988 [1532]: 101ff.).

Machiavelli's insistence on efficacy as the *telos* of political judgement shocked the moralists then and it shocks them now. The moralist can readily enough see the value of efficacy – the expedient achievement of a result. It is much harder to see the value *in* efficacy unless it serves a separate moral intent or end, a good or a virtue exterior to action (Geuss 2005). To a moralist, effective action without external justification appears calculating, instrumental, amoral, or indeed immoral.

Contemporary virtue ethicists are heirs to the tradition of holding moral and practical judgement apart. Both Foucault and MacIntyre of course saw 'techniques' and 'practices' as vital to ethical life, but only as aids to fashioning moral selves. MacIntyre described action as an 'external good' (2007 [1981]), or a 'good of effectiveness' (1988): something ancillary and logically subordinate to moral character. But for our informants, his so-called 'external goods' (fame, money, status, power) is precisely what shapes their decisions and judgements. Personal attributes (courage, cunning, or strength) are certainly valuable, but so are social position (both inherited and earned), wealth, and anything else that enables action.

For our informants, the question of what one *should* do is inseparable from the question of what one *can* do. In their eyes, what good leaders accumulate over time is their causal force. As the humoural 'heat' of reckless, spontaneous youth subsides and the goonda reaches the stage of calm, measured maturity, he should make things happen by softer, or indirectly violent, means.²⁴ A mature goonda commands with an arch of an eyebrow. He will tell you that the 'dirty work' of *goondagardi* is not for him. Mr Singh, the MLA with a long criminal résumé, says that now 'We don't go doing this *badmāsi* [bullying]. That kind of work is for boys'. For a mature goonda, muscling people around is not only inappropriate, it is demeaning, for violence is the preserve of someone still scrambling up. So, at a later stage of his career, a goonda actively dissociates himself from the stick-wielding youth to become a 'gentle person' (*ṣarīf ādmī*) whose status, connections, and money now have the force. There is a ridiculous and rather pitiful figure in Mr Singh's entourage, a man known by the mocking moniker Chacha,

or Uncle. Chacha has never been married, he drinks, and, although he must be nearly 50, he still joins the MLA's army of adolescent goons and roughs people up. 'Leaders', says Mr Singh, 'don't do these kinds of things'. Chacha will never be one.

Conclusion

Philosopher Raymond Geuss once described the difficulty he has with contemporary moral philosophy:

For many years [I have had a sense] that the German philosophers in whom I am most interested (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Heidegger), while obviously in some sense deeply concerned with human life in its practical aspects, are very difficult to situate in the established contexts of what we now usually think of as 'philosophical ethics'. Their theories don't seem easily to fit into the usual categories, and to the extent to which they can be read as instances of deontological, consequentialist, perfectionist, eudaimonistic, or any other standard types of theories, the results can easily seem shallow or extremely implausible (2005: 40).

As for Geuss with the German philosophers, so for us with the villagers, whose evaluative logic fits very poorly into the virtue frame, or indeed into the other major frames (deontological, consequentialist) used by Western moral philosophers. For our informants, virtues matter, as do consequences and rules, but none capture what's really at stake in their decisions, actions, and judgements. As Geuss says, the trouble 'philosophical ethics' presents to the layman is that it is 'a discipline structured around the asking and answering of a rather small set of questions' (2005: 40).

The questions that orientate virtue ethics – 'What is a good life?', 'How should one live it?', 'What sort of person should one be?' – are not as heuristically innocent as we are asked to believe. Virtue, as an attribute of the self, is a property of an individual person: a clearly bounded person with their own distinctive character (Mattingly 2014; Robbins 2007; Scheele 2015). Laidlaw, who is sharply attuned to the charge of analytical individualism, tells us that ethical subjects are fashioned within social relations, in different cultural regimes of value, and through narratives people tell; he describes collective selves, selves that stretch beyond anyone's biological lifespan, and selves that may even include animals or machines (Laidlaw 2013: 87, 82-3, 101, 105). But extending the self beyond biological individuals or pointing out that the self is socially formed does not change the analytical frame. Wherever we may draw its limits, a discrete, bounded self with a character of its own retains the conceptual shape of an individual.

In the world of the goondas it is the world, not the self, that is the focus of judgement and it cannot be simply reduced to an instrument of self-making. This world certainly needs a theory, but theory of what kind? If the world – not the individual – is indeed the *telos*, it must also be the *telos* of our analysis. This is why the many sociologists and anthropologists who thought all along that what they studied were moral sentiments never developed a separate theory of 'the moral'. At the birth of a truly modern sociology of morality, in Durkheim's late work, he argued that 'moral', 'practical', and otherwise 'social' judgements cannot be easily – or usefully – prised apart (Durkheim 1957). Bernard Williams later put this point to moral philosophers in his *Moral luck* (1981), which we cite, replacing his word 'philosophy' with the word 'anthropology':

Moral anthropology certainly needs the benefits of theory, but of theory in other parts of anthropology ... what it does not need is a theory of its own. There cannot be any interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is ... morality itself is problematical, not merely in content, but in its supposed existence as a dimension of practical thought or social evaluation at all (1981: x).

The return to virtue in Western moral philosophy has no doubt brought philosophers in closer reach of humanity. But if as anthropologists we are trying to set our eyes on our interlocutors' own moral horizons, then a pre-judged ethical subject is surely unhelpful.

Coda

Raj's elder son, Chhotu, is now 16, the age Raj was when he murdered the cutler. Chhotu is sweet, timid, and helps with work in the shop and the house. Not interested in beating about with staff-wielding boys outside the village, Chhotu is ill suited for a goonda's career. He likes school, not violence. Raj is not blind to the fact, and he sent Chhotu to the best private school he could afford. None the less, he still bought a shiny new staff for Chhotu. Just in case.

NOTES

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¹ We use diacritics for Hindi terms throughout, but *goonda* (and *goondagardi*) rather than *gunḍā* (and *gunḍāgardi*), following the standard Anglicized usage.

² See also the website for the Association for Democratic Reforms (<http://www.adrindia.org>). The actual incidence of political violence, and whether it has substantially risen in recent decades, cannot be gauged in any straightforward or accurate way from criminal records or public perception of political 'criminalization', both of which are heavily inflected by attitudes to law, concerns with transparency, and political uses of litigation. These issues are beyond the present essay's scope and purpose. What remains beyond doubt, however, is the conspicuous presence of strongmen in Indian politics.

³ Since 2003, all candidates to state and national legislative assemblies have been required by law to disclose their criminal histories, which are now freely available on the web (e.g. <http://www.myneta.info>); the Election Commission has appealed to political parties repeatedly to stop fielding candidates facing criminal charges; and in 2013 the Supreme Court banned inmates from contesting elections (although this decision was soon reversed).

⁴ The phrase '*goonda raj*' came into especially frequent use in the 1990s in reference to the violent politics of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but as a general term it was already in circulation in the 1920s (Das 1994; Goopu 2001) and probably earlier.

⁵ Studies of mafias and gangster politics outside India tend to treat them as amoral enterprises (Arlacchi 1983; esp. 31-3; Blok 1974; Friedrich 1986; Gambetta 1996; Roitman 2006; Vanderwood 1992; Volkov 2002). Hobsbawm's idea of 'social banditry' (1959; 1972) is a notable exception, but it was quickly dismissed as a 'myth' (Blok 1972). The work of Michael Gilson (1996) and Michael Herzfeld (1985), discussed in more detail further, stands out.

⁶ There are excellent accounts of the political economy of political goondaism in South Asia (e.g. Berenschot 2011; Sanchez 2010), but little concerted effort has gone into tracing its moral economy (but see Hansen 2000; 2001; 2005; Michelutti 2008; Price & Ruud 2010).

⁷ Anastasia has been conducting research in rural and urban Rajasthan, and occasionally in Delhi, since 2002; Tommaso conducted three years of research in rural Rajasthan before doing fieldwork in Ramkheri.

⁸ Political evaluations in contemporary India are no less contentious and heterogeneous than anywhere else. They include, among other views, the idea that goondaism is simply immoral or a sign of a 'degenerate age', *kālī yug* (Jeffrey 2002), and a vision of 'politics' as an altogether degenerate zone (e.g. Ruud 2001). Our study adds but one more dimension.

⁹ Classical Hinduism offers several other moral teleologies, including *dharma* (law), *punya* (spiritual merit), and *kāma* (pleasure or longing), among others. For a rich sampling of South Asian moral orientations, see Pandian and Ali's collection (2010). On the South Asian traditions of self, its qualities (*guṇas*) and inner states, see (for instance) Halliburton (2009) and Laidlaw (1995).

¹⁰ For a fuller account written helpfully for non-specialists, see Laidlaw (2013: chap. 2).

¹¹ See, for instance, Asad (2003), Faubion (2001), Hirschkind (2006), Laidlaw (2002; 2013), Lambek (2008; 2010), Mahmood (2005), Pandian (2009), Pandian & Ali (2010), Widlock (2004). For incisive criticisms, see Englund (2008), Mattingly (2012; 2014), Robbins (2007).

¹² But see Mattingly's (2012) counter-argument.

¹³ This is the Ramkheri which Adrian Mayer described over the decades (1958; 1960; 1996).

¹⁴ For an informative collection of writings on the stylistic variety of leadership in South Asia, see Price & Ruud (2010), and see Sbriccoli (2013) for an analysis of contrasting leadership styles in rural Rajasthan.

¹⁵ Nearly every household in Ramkheri owns at least one staff (*lāṭh*, *lāṭhī*) and many own rifles and swords. This is as true of vegetarian and 'non-violent' communities of Jains and Brahmins as of Rajputs and other 'martial castes' (*bahādur quom*).

¹⁶ The history of Indian peasants' martial alertness is well recorded (e.g. Kolff 1990). Military sports, like wrestling, *paṭā hilāna* (sword-fighting) and *rustam khānī* (stick-fighting), were part of everyday village life in colonial and pre-British India (Kolff 1990: 28; Sharar 1975: 109-15), and they remain an essential part of rural life today (Alter 1992; Michelutti 2010; Peabody 2009; Valiani 2011).

¹⁷ On South Asian communicative hierarchies, see Burghart (1996), Fuller (1992: 4), Osella & Osella (1998), Piliavsky (2011). On 'top-down' gifting, see Parry (1994), Piliavsky (2014a; 2015), and Raheja (1988).

¹⁸ This contrasts sharply with Arlacchi's analysis of Calabrian mafia, where he argues that hierarchies are established through violent competition, not vice versa (1983: 28).

¹⁹ On the great/little tradition contrast, see Marriott (1955) and Redfield (1956). This contrast is heuristic rather than descriptive as in practice the two 'traditions' mutually inform and overlap.

²⁰ While 'honour' has been subject to much debate in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern contexts (e.g. Peristiany 1966; Peristiany & Pitt-Rivers 1992), in South Asia it remains drastically under-studied and under-theorized (but see Mines 1994; Price 1996; 2007; 2013).

²¹ On the action-centred ideal of wifely honour among Jains, see Kelting (2009).

²² The hero-god *jhunjhār* is also said to have an 'excess of truth' (*sāt*), which means something more like an excess of life-force or potency (Harlan 1992: 197). In reference to objects, *sahī*, like the English 'true' can also mean 'whole', 'intact', 'working', or 'functional'.

²³ For a general discussion of this issue, see Geuss (2005), Williams (1981: esp. chap. 10; 1993; 2005), and Winch (1965).

²⁴ This vision evokes the Hindu theory of life stages (*āśramas*).

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Éthique de l'efficacité dans le *goonda raj* (les règles des durs à cuir) du Nord de l'Inde

Résumé

Cette étude des *goondas* (les bandits ou les durs à cuir) dans la politique du Nord de l'Inde, se veut un commentaire sur la méthode intellectuelle déployée par l'anthropologie des moralités. Plus précisément, elle porte un regard critique sur la récente adoption de la « vertu » comme coordonnée morale cardinale de la vie humaine. Sur la base de recherches de terrain dans tout le Nord de l'Inde, nous montrons que lorsque les gens célèbrent les *goondas* comme des meneurs d'hommes, ce n'est pas parce qu'ils voient en eux des hommes vertueux mais parce qu'ils les pensent capables de « faire ce qu'il faut faire ». Cette éthique de l'efficacité n'est pas simplement utilitaire, mais elle constitue pas non plus une énième variante de

l'éthique de la vertu. Au lieu de cela, elle propose une téléologie morale différente, orientée vers l'efficacité de l'action plutôt que vers l'excellence du caractère. Tout en remettant en question le virage autocentré que l'anthropologie de l'éthique a pris ces derniers temps, nous formulons aussi des remarques préliminaires sur le contraste entre jugement « moral » et « pratique » et sur les limites de « la morale » en tant que telle.

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