

**Sacred Trees, Sacred Deer, Sacred Duty to Protect:
Exploring Relationships between Humans and Nonhumans in the
Bishnoi Community**

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Abstract

This thesis explores relationships between humans and nonhumans in the Bishnoi community. The Bishnoi are a small Vaishnavite community most densely located in Rajasthan. They are well known in North-West India for defending and protecting the environment; sometimes even sacrificing their own lives to save trees or wild animals. This thesis is informed by the author's short-term ethnographic study in the winter of 2013. The author combines symbolic and interpretive anthropology with multispecies ethnography in order to explore issues of relatedness, exchange and embodied experience between humans and nonhumans in the Bishnoi community. This research elaborates on central themes that emerged from the fieldwork, including themes of embeddedness, duty, dharma, sacrifice, nonviolence, purity, impurity, and contemporary challenges. This research attempts to treat nonhumans as agents and participants in Bishnoi life, active in their physical and perceptual engagement with the world, and details the centrality of the nonhuman in the constitution of Bishnoi communities and identities.

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Introduction: Green Dharma

While studying Jainism in Mumbai in the summer of 2012 my professor showed me an article entitled “Green Dharma” in an English language newspaper. There was a large photo of a *sadhu*, dressed in orange, feeding a wild gazelle by hand, surrounded by animals and wide open desert. Inserted in the text was a second photo of a colorfully dressed woman breastfeeding her child, and offering her other breast to an orphaned fawn, who drinks alongside her adoptive human sibling. This article spoke of the Bishnoi, a small Vaishnavite community most densely located in Rajasthan, where they live in harmony with the trees and animals in the harsh desert climate. This article piqued my interest and occupied my mind for some time before finally becoming the topic of my thesis research. A year and a half after this article first captivated me, I returned to India for a short-term ethnographic stint with the intention of exploring relatedness, exchange and embodied experiences between humans and nonhumans through the experiences and lived traditions of people in the Bishnoi community.

One’s worldview is intimately connected to, and ultimately inseparable from one’s understanding of, and relationship to other species and the environment. This basic premise is fundamental to my study, and demands a style of research and analysis that transcends simplified models that divide the study of nature from the study of culture. Using the theoretical framework of Tim Ingold and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, I have attempted to collect and frame my findings in a way that moves beyond traditional anthropological methods which often treat nature as a backdrop for human affairs¹ - demonstrating that the nonhuman is vital for our sense of what it means to be human. The Bishnoi provide fertile ground for such a study as they have been recognized both in North India and abroad for their conservation efforts, their compassion towards the nonhuman, and their willingness to sacrifice their lives to save trees and wild animals. I spent approximately five weeks among the Bishnoi in the winter of 2013, living with

¹ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, Reissue (New York: Routledge, 2011), 20.

families, visiting temples, *sadhus*, and holy places, and conducting unstructured interviews with key informants in order to more deeply explore this community's relationship with the nonhuman.²

The Bishnoi are a distinct caste group who follow the teachings and rules of their 15th century guru, Guru Jambheshwar. They are primarily a rural agrarian community living in villages and hamlets in the North-West part of India. Since the literature on the Bishnoi is thin, this thesis aims to provide more depth and detail regarding Bishnoi worldviews, practices and lived religion generally. However, my particular questions pertain to how humans in this community imagine themselves in relation to other species, and how they negotiate their worldviews with their embodied experience of being-in-the-world with other living selves. I am concerned with how humans and nonhumans come together to shape Bishnoi communities and identities, and how Bishnois imagine, construct and experience both physical and conceptual relationships between humans and nonhumans in their communities. When referring to the community's beliefs and practices I will from this point on use the indigenous term *dharma* rather than religion because it encompasses all aspects of the social and spiritual world; *dharma* can be defined broadly as correct action, way of life, or cosmic order, based on concepts of both social and moral duty.

I will briefly outline my methods and my theoretical framework in this section before providing a review of the relevant literature in the first chapter. Since the Bishnoi are an understudied and little known community, the second chapter offers an overview of Bishnoi history, practices, and worldviews to provide the necessary context for my analysis of their relationships with nonhumans. The third chapter presents an in-depth description of the

² The term nonhuman is used to encompass a range of other-than-human subjectivities that make up the living environment, including but not limited to plants, animals, elements and features of the land.

environment, physical aspects of Bishnoi communities, and daily interactions and relationships with other species. The following chapter explores how these relationships are described and explained by community members themselves, touching on themes of duty, responsibility and intimacy. The fifth chapter delves into the fascinating and revealing practice of self-sacrifice for trees and wild animals, investigating how sacrifice and nonviolence are understood among the Bishnoi. The sixth chapter outlines the underlying ontological framework which dictates these relationships, supporting and motivating Bishnoi beliefs and actions. The final chapter offers some reflections on contemporary concerns and changes.

0.1 Methodology: Beyond the Human

Throughout, I have attempted to employ a kind of methodology that seeks to go beyond the mere description of the socio-economic and political parameters of the Bishnoi and their engagement with the nonhuman, and have rather strived to convey the nuanced, the aesthetic, and the experiential dimensions of this engagement. For it is primarily within the realm of the aesthetic and the experiential that humans encounter and negotiate both religion and nature- both our worldview, and our embodied relationships with other species.

I have attempted to employ two specific anthropological methods in my study. First, the symbolic and interpretive method, which uses richly detailed ethnography to examine the way people create and use symbolic systems to understand and relate to their surroundings, and how their interpretations form a shared system of meaning. Clifford Geertz is one of the fathers of symbolic-interpretive anthropology; his method of “thick description”, outlined in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, seeks to explain behaviour in the context of the broader worldview

that it fits into.³ Using this method has allowed me to explore the symbolic, religious and ideological imaginings of this community through unstructured interviews, casual conversations, and participant-observation. I have included a list of some of my interview questions in Appendix B. All of my data was recorded using hand-written notes, during or shortly after interviews, interactions, or events. I had formal interviews with approximately twenty people, but had casual conversations and interactions with dozens more. I visited Bishnois in four major cities and approximately twelve different villages in Rajasthan and Haryana. I spoke with people of various ages, in various occupations, and from a range of social and economic backgrounds. In addition to information gathered through participant-observation and interviews, members of the community provided me with primary sources: books, articles and speeches written by Bishnois on the subject of Bishnoi beliefs and practices. These works enhanced the depth of my understanding with regard to the symbolic/ interpretive, supplementing the first-hand material that I collected.

I attempted to combine this more traditional anthropological method with an emerging style called multispecies ethnography. Eduardo Kohn defines multispecies ethnography as an “anthropology of life... an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves”⁴. It is a method that treats nonhumans as agents and studies "contact zones" where encounters produce “mutual ecologies and coproduced niches”⁵. This presents an alternative to traditional anthropology, in which, as Linda Noske explains, nonhumans are frequently thought to be unworthy of

³ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

⁴ Eduardo Kohn, “How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transspecies Engagement,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007): 4.

⁵ Eben Kirsey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (November 2010): 546.

anthropological interest, because interactions between humans and nonhumans tend to be seen as subject-object relationships, and they are primarily concerned with subject-subject relationships. Nonhumans are therefore simply seen as part of human economic or symbolic systems in traditional anthropology.⁶ Multispecies ethnography guided me in observing both human and nonhuman behaviour and participation in the Bishnoi community, and served as a constant reminder that human communities are not created in isolation from other species. This involved taking careful notes on animal behaviour, plant life, details relating to habitat and geography, and the personal and collective interactions between human and nonhuman life. Using this method I was able to make concrete interactions with nonhumans part of the basis of my exploration of the community, along with symbolic and religious imaginings. Combining these two methods provided me with a unique lens through which to approach my project, allowing me to address questions of relatedness, exchange, and religious and social signification in this community. Using these methods in tandem allowed me to explore both physical and conceptual relationships between humans and nonhumans, acknowledging that human worldviews cannot be isolated from embodied experiences. My methods therefore attempt to recognize the writings of Tim Ingold, Thomas Berry, Paul Shepard, and others in the field of religion and ecology who have elaborated on this idea that human identities always already emerge through communion with nonhuman subjectivities and intelligences.⁷

Despite having a good understanding of the theoretical basis for my methodology, there were, of course, some practical challenges to my method. Language was the most significant

⁶ Barbara Noske, "Speciesism, Anthropocentrism, and Non-Western Cultures," *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals* 10, no. 4 (December 1997): 184.

⁷ Ingold, *Perception*; Thomas Berry, "Prologue: Loneliness and Presence," in *A Communion of Subjects*, eds. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, 5-10 (New-York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington: Island Press, 1996).

barrier to my research. Unfortunately my Hindi is extremely limited, so I was accompanied by an English-speaking Bishnoi person at all times. Fortunately many members of the community speak English, particularly the younger generation, so it was never difficult to find an interpreter. The community was extremely generous and helpful in providing guidance and interpretation whenever necessary throughout my fieldwork. Despite these efforts however, there were inevitable interpretation problems and my depth of understanding suffered as a result. Firstly, when you are depending on interpretation you miss critical conversations and details that happen in the in-between spaces, for example conversations between women, who often don't speak English, or comments exchanged between people that may seem insignificant to your interpreter. You miss telling details, because without a deep understanding of the language one can never quite grasp the *way* someone describes something or the *precise* words and details they use to tell their stories. Aside from these obvious difficulties I had more specific issues conveying my approach to some of my interpreters. One interpreter in particular, who was trained in geography, had difficulty negotiating between his own scientific, "fact-based" approach, and my humanities "experience-based" approach. I quickly realized that he was distorting stories to fit a scientific model of the world, leaving out details that "don't make sense," and "correcting" the stories of the "uneducated". This "science-ising" of Bishnoi dharma is actually quite common, and will be discussed at length in chapter 7. We had many long conversations about methodology and I encouraged direct interpretation, explaining that I want to understand what ordinary Bishnoi people believe, not necessarily the "facts". All this to say, that the opinions and the education of the interpreter can be a barrier to genuine understanding and interactions. For this reason, I double-checked much of my information with multiple sources and interpreters, and always asked follow-up questions during interviews and conversations in order to explore each topic

deeply. I have only included information in my thesis that I deemed to be reliable and which genuinely reflects Bishnoi worldviews.

0.2 Theoretical Framework: Beyond the Nature/ Culture Dichotomy

In the last few decades there have been significant theoretical innovations in the fields of animal studies and anthropology. Many of these theorists have focused on South American communities (Descola and Viveiros de Castro), or North American aboriginal communities (Ingold). These theoretical concepts regarding new animism, perspectivism and multinaturalism have shaken the nature/culture distinction widely held in the West by affirming a shared relational frame of interaction between humans and nonhumans. These theorists have stimulated debate and discussion regarding personhood, subjectivity, sociality and relationships between humans and nonhumans. In recent years these theories have been broadened to a general discussion of different ontologies, for example in Philippe Descola's influential book *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Tim Ingold's insightful *Perception of the Environment*, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*. These ontological approaches in anthropology have established that fundamental categories of thought and metaphysical notions of existence can differ significantly across cultures.

Fundamental to my study is the understanding that physical places and all manner of living beings are meaningful and endowed with subjectivities that are vital to the constitution of human communities and identities.⁸ Although the Bishnoi are not South American or aboriginal hunter-gatherers, I will make use of de Castro and Ingold's theories because as a rural agrarian

⁸ For elaborations on this notion see Ingold, *Perception*.; Keith H. Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," in *Senses of Place*, ed. K. H. Basso and S. Feld, 53–90 (1996).; Arturo Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization," *Political Geography* 20 no. 2 (2001): 139–174.; Shubhra Gururani, "Forests of Pleasure and Pain: Gendered Practices of Labor and Livelihood in the Forests of the Kumaon Himalayas, India," *Gender, Place and Culture* 9 no. 3 (2002): 229–243.

community they share many ontological similarities with the communities studied by these anthropologists. The following section will therefore outline some of the central themes and theories that will provide the subtext for my subsequent chapters.

Ingold's main focus is human engagement with the nonhuman. Based on his observations of hunter-gatherer communities in Canada, he presents the concept of an "ontology of dwelling," which he describes as "taking the human condition to be that of a being immersed from the start, like other creatures, in an active, practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world."⁹ He contrasts this worldview to a Western ontology which treats as ontologically given a nature-culture divide that is grounded in a division between the mind and the world, in which the mind must construct an intentional world prior to engaging with it.¹⁰ He calls this the "building perspective," in which humans *make* systems of meaning and impose them on an assumed-to-be neutral, external nature. Within this perspective nonhumans interact with things "as they are", leaving no room for agency or intentionality. Nature is often seen as being distinct from humanity and history; it is simply a backdrop for human events. Ingold argues against this perspective, insisting that it is in fact acts of dwelling that precede acts of world-making.¹¹ Central to his argument is the phenomenological insight that experience and intuitive understanding of the world always precede the rational and the ethical; embodied experience is therefore fundamental to all knowledge. In the West, the order of primacy is reversed, as the rational is held above the emotional and the experiential. Ingold suggests an alternative to the building perspective, based on engagement rather than detachment. He believes that those who are engaged with nonhuman animals in their day-to-day lives, most notably

⁹ Ingold, *Perception*, 42;

Ingold now uses the term "inhabiting" rather than "dwelling", to describe this way of being, *Perception*, xviii

¹⁰ The term "Western" is problematic; like Ingold and many other scholars in the field I use the term as a kind of shorthand to refer to a tradition of thought and science in which the nature/ culture dualism is deeply rooted.

¹¹ Ingold, *Perception*, 178.

hunters and herdsman, can offer us much insight into human-nonhuman relationships, and how these relationships might be improved in the West.

Ingold carefully deconstructs the Western approach to animals and nature. He explains that at one time it was the spirit that defined humans as distinct; when the notion of spirit became less commonplace it was thought to be the mind that made humans special. In more recent years the capacity for culture has been imagined as the source of human uniqueness in the West; in other words, the creation of symbolic worlds rather than natural/ instinctual ones. Ingold explains that “the consequence of this assumption is that whereas human actions are generally interpreted as the product of intentional design, the actions of other animals- even when ostensibly similar in their nature and consequences- are typically explained as the automatic output of a ‘wired-in’ behavioural programme.”¹² Ingold argues against these black-and-white distinctions, saying that we find symbolic systems (such as language) among animals, and instinct among humans. He argues that humans differ only slightly from other animal species, no more than they differ from each other.¹³ In many ways the Bishnoi embody this dwelling mode-of-being that Ingold identifies among hunter-gatherers by demonstrating more fluid conceptions of the categories of human and animal, which emphasise a sense of community and interdependence, and focus more on similarities than differences across life forms.

Both Ingold and de Castro explore how these Western divisions between mind and body, culture and nature, and human and animal are part of a system in which personhood is not open to nonhumans. It is understood that humans occupy two realms: social and organism-

¹² Tim Ingold, “Humanity and Animality,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold, 14-32 (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24.

¹³ Tim Ingold, “The Animal in the Study of Humanity,” in *What Is an Animal?*, ed. Tim Ingold, 84-99 (London: Routledge, 1988), 85.

Ingold does however admit that humans have a unique symbolic faculty that has had serious consequences for the world we inhabit.

environment, whereas animals are confined wholly to the latter realm.¹⁴ On the other hand, Ingold explains that for hunter-gatherers, “human persons are not set over and against a material context of inert nature, but rather are one species of person in a network of reciprocating persons.”¹⁵ Therefore, the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality, but rather humanity. Similarly de Castro describes this by saying “We must remember, above all, that if there is a virtually universal Amerindian notion, it is that of an original state of undifferentiation or “undifference” (don’t mistake this for “indifference” or “sameness”) between humans and animals, described in mythology”¹⁶. This model, which de Castro calls “perspectivism”, provides *all* animals with a perspective, and denies a subject-object relationship between humans and nonhumans. Alternative to the Western concept of relativism, it is a system in which there is one single “culture,” and multiple “natures”. De Castro explains that relativism supposes “a multiplicity of subjective and partial representations of an external and unified nature”, while perspectivism “proposes a subjective unity which is applied to an objective multiplicity, generated by bodily differences.”¹⁷ In Western models the subject makes representations, which are located in the mind; whereas de Castro describes a model in which the subject has a point of view, which is located in the body.¹⁸ It is for this reason, according to de Castro, that subjecthood or personhood can easily be extended to nonhuman animals within the framework of perspectivism.

I believe that Ingold’s theories and de Castro’s notion of perspectivism provide an excellent theoretical model for understanding the Bishnoi relationship to the nonhuman

¹⁴ Ingold, *Perception*, 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁶ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere,” *HAU: Masterclass Series* 1, no. 0 (April 20, 2012): 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

generally, and their notion of the soul in particular. Among the Bishnoi and many other Indian communities, perhaps most notably that of Jainism, it is understood that every living being has a soul, and all souls are equal despite bodily differences. This notion provides every living being with subjecthood. Whereas, for Ingold, the original common condition of humans and other animals is “humanity”, for the Bishnoi the original common condition is the soul- eternal and constantly striving for liberation, no matter the specific bodily incarnation. This important aspect of Bishnoi philosophy is one example of a system that, as de Castro put it, “proposes a subjective unity which is applied to an objective multiplicity, generated by bodily differences.”¹⁹ For this and other reasons that will be elaborated throughout, Bishnoi ways of understanding the world can be more deeply understood using Ingold’s concept of an “ontology of dwelling” and de Castro’s closely related concept of “perspectivism”. I also believe that these theoretical models provide productive and enlightening ways of thinking about the relationships between humans and nonhumans beyond the Bishnoi context. This thesis will therefore not only lend insight into Bishnoi worldviews, but will contribute greater knowledge and understanding to both academic discourses and popular controversies surrounding human conceptions and treatment of nonhumans.

¹⁹ Ibid.

1. Themes of Kinship, Karma, and Monism: Review of the Literature

The notion that one's ideology or worldview impacts the environment and one's relationship with other species is basic to environmental thought and to the field of religion and ecology. It seems impossible to engage with this topic without referring to Lynn White's famous article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis". White's aim was to critique Christianity for, among other things, promoting a hierarchical system in which humans are given dominion over animals and nature. He accuses it of being "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."²⁰ While some, like White, have focused on the destructive or negative impacts of certain religious ideologies, others have emphasised the healing properties of certain religions and religious voices, which have sought harmony between humans and other living beings. Many authors have explored ecology in relation to different world religions. Most prominently, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm edited *The Religions of the World and Ecology Book Series*, which includes 10 edited volumes focused on various world religions.²¹ A more limited literature exists within the specific field of Hinduism and ecology; the overwhelming tendency in this literature is toward the hopeful and constructive rather than the critical. While authors recognize that India is facing a severe environmental crisis, the aim of most authors is to look to Hinduism for teachings, practices and insights that could provide the foundations for a necessary shift in India toward environmentally sound practices and policies.

²⁰ Lynn White Jr., 30-37 "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: a Global Anthology*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, 30-37 (Reprint, Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 1967, 2003), 34.

²¹ Published by Harvard University Press, between 1997 and 2004.

1.1 Hinduism and Ecology: The Interconnectedness of Beings

There are several recurring themes that are commonly explored in the literature on Hinduism and ecology. Authors often cite the importance of the five elements in Hinduism (space, air, fire, water and earth), which constitute all life, and highlight the interconnectedness of human, nonhuman and divine energy and matter. Many authors focus on ecological themes in Vedic texts and epics, or the rich animal symbolism in Hindu texts and mythology.²² One of the central themes in this literature is the environmental implications of the idea that divinity is omnipresent and takes infinite forms. This concept has many names and manifests in many different ways amongst diverse Hindu groups, but the concept of earth as the body of the goddess or cosmic man, and the notion of the divine as all-pervasive is very common in Hinduism. For many authors it is this idea that provides the foundation for harmonious and environmentally sound teachings and relationships with other species.

Within this theological framework there are several important concepts that draw the attention of authors in the field of Hinduism and ecology; for example the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*), the concept of karma, nonviolence (*ahimsa*), compassion, non-dualism, and vegetarianism. These concepts have been extremely widespread since the Axial Age, particularly within shramanic philosophies.²³ While some argue that Hindu theology is antithetical to genuine

²² See for example Nelson, "Cows, Elephants, Dogs.,"; Philip Lutgendorf, "City, Forest, and Cosmos: Ecological Perspectives from the Sanskrit Epics," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 269-290 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).; Edwin Bryant, "Strategies of Vedic Subversion: The Emergence of Vegetarianism in Post-Vedic India," in *A Communion of Subjects*, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, 194-203 (New-York: Columbia University Press, 2006).; David Lee "The Natural History of the *Ramayana*," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 245-268 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²³ Shramanic schools of thought focus on achieving liberation through renunciation and ascetic practices. They are world-renouncing philosophies.

environmental protection and ethical treatment of nonhumans,²⁴ many scholars of these dharma traditions have argued that these and other concepts in Eastern religions provide valuable insight into sustainable and ethical attitudes toward the environment. I will briefly outline the relevance of these topics, which have been explored more extensively in relation to the environment by scholars such as Christopher Chapple, O.P. Dwivedi, Ann Grodzins Gold, Lance Nelson, Ranchor Prime, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, Vasudha Narayanan, and Pramod Parajuli, and in edited volumes such *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth Sky and Water*.

Many have argued that the notion of transmigration between species results in a deep sense of kinship among all earth's beings. This concept is central to all dharma traditions as an essential aspect of *samsara*- the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. In very simplified terms, through one's actions, good or bad karma is accrued, or burned off. The sum of one's karma at one's time of death determines one's rebirth as a human, a cow, a snail or any other living being, and it may take several lifetimes to work out certain karmic causes and effects. The concept of rebirth highlights the interconnectedness of life. Christopher Chapple, referring to Buddhism, explains that "in the long course of *samsara*, there is not one among living beings with form who has not been mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter, or some other relative. Being connected with the process of taking birth, one is kin to all wild and domestic animals, birds, and beings born from the womb."²⁵ He explains that because each soul has cycled through many bodies "animals are regarded to be none other than our very selves."²⁶ The concept of *vasudhaiv*

²⁴ See Nelson, "Cows, Elephants, Dogs."; Laurie Patton, "Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice."; John Passmore *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (London: Duckworth, 1980).; Lance Nelson, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance Nelson, 13–37 (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998).; J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁵ Christopher Key Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

kutumbakam in Hinduism also refers to this sense of kinship by way of multiple births; it means that all earth's beings are an extended family.²⁷

There are many examples within various Hindu traditions that demonstrate this sense of kinship between species. For example, Vijaya Nagarajan tells of a Hindu tradition in South India where humans sometimes marry trees. Nagarajan explains that marrying a tree is an auspicious event; if a person is suffering, this marriage can remove the sources of suffering and restore a sense of harmony between natural and cultural worlds. The person is then free to marry a human partner, having shed their hardships.²⁸ Others cite Gandhi's actions and philosophies as being founded on dharmic concepts of kinship and karma²⁹ - and others yet elaborate on widespread practices such as vegetarianism as evidence of this sense of interconnectedness and kinship.³⁰

The concepts of karma and *samsara* emerged sometime between 850 and 600 BCE in a series of late Vedic texts called the Upanishads. Hindu scholars like Laurie Patton have documented the change in focus from animal sacrifice and calculated rituals in the early Vedas, to an internalization of sacrifice through meditation, fasting and personal wisdom, with the goal of self-realization and liberation from the cycle of *samsara*.³¹ Concepts such as *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and vegetarianism gained traction in Classical Hinduism, likely influenced by

²⁷ O. P. Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology," in *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: a Global Anthology*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, 119-129 (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003), 123.

²⁸ Vijaya Nagarajan, "Rituals of Embedded Ecologies: Drawing *Kolams*, Marrying trees and Generating Auspiciousness," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 453-468 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 459.

²⁹ See Vinay Lal, "Too Deep for Deep Ecology," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 183-212 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).; and Larry D. Shinn, "The Inner Logic of Gandhian Ecology," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 213-241 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³⁰ See Bryant, "Strategies of Vedic Subversion.;" Dwivedi "Dharmic Ecology.;" Christopher Chapple, "Ecological Nonviolence and the Hindu Tradition," in *Perspectives on Nonviolence*, ed. V.K. Kool, 168-177. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990).

³¹ Laurie Patton, "Vedas and Upanishads," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thrusby, 37-51 (NY and London: Routledge Press, 2004).

Jainism and Buddhism and the deep sense of kinship and compassion inherent in these philosophies. These changes in philosophy and in the conception of sacrifice reflected a transformation in the understanding of the divine, and the understanding of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. While in the early Vedic period the divine was understood to be distinct from the self (*dvaita*), the Upanishads introduced *advaita* philosophies in which the divine was understood to be part of everything- in other words, *atman* (soul) is equal to *Brahman* (God).³² This sense of non-duality therefore goes beyond mere kinship.

According to this philosophy, every living being has a soul, all souls are divine, and all souls are equal. Souls are recycled through various bodily incarnations but all are created from the same divine seed, equal in potential and equal in value. The *Manu-smriti* (Laws of Manu) – traditionally the most authoritative text on Hindu dharma or code – declares that the true spiritual self or soul is identical across life forms, from the creator Brahma to a blade of grass.³³ This text affirms that even plants have consciousness and experience, pain and happiness.³⁴

Many therefore argue that *advaita* philosophies resulted in a sense of respect for all life through the attempt to see other beings not only as kin, but as fundamentally the same as oneself. One of the central ideas in The Bhagavad-Gita – the most famous section of the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata - is that the Supreme Being resides in everything; chapter 7 verse 19 states that “Krishna is all that is.” Although this text primarily demonstrates *dvaita* philosophies, Chapple believes that this simultaneous sense of “monism, or non-duality demonstrated in the Mahabharata offers a method for deconstructing the objectification of the other.”³⁵ This is also exemplified in the Karni Mata rat temple in Deshnoke Rajasthan, where devotees are encouraged

³² Ibid.

³³ *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1991), I.50.

³⁴ Ibid., I.49-50.

³⁵ Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self*, 111.

to see the presence of the divine in everything, even the rats. In this temple I saw a mother scold her young daughter for so much as flinching when a rat scurried over her foot; showing anything but the utmost respect for the rats is unacceptable. Dwivedi explains that according to *advaita* philosophy, everything in nature is seen as “appendages of god” and therefore fundamentally the same.³⁶ This is also demonstrated in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, which describes the sameness of man and tree:

As a tree of the forest,
Just so, surely, is man.
His hairs are leaves,
His skin the outer bark.
From his skin blood,
Sap from the bark flows forth.
From him when pierced there comes forth
A stream, as from the tree when struck.
His pieces of flesh are under-layers of wood.
The fibre is muscle-like, strong.
The bones are the wood within.
The marrow is made resembling pith.³⁷

These comparisons and philosophy are often used to encourage compassion toward other living beings; for example, the Gita states that “when one sees the pleasure and pain in all beings as the same in comparison with self...one is considered the highest *yogin*.”³⁸ It is important to note that many similar views and teachings are promoted within *dvaita* traditions. It is often problematic to make strict distinctions between the two, as both can reflect a worldview in which God manifests in earth; but the Hinduism and ecology literature has focused on *advaita Vedanta*.

³⁶ Dwivedi, *Dharmic Ecology*, 121.

³⁷ *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, trans. Robert Ernest Hume in *The Thirteen Principal Upanisads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), III: 9.28.

³⁸ *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (Reissue, New York: Random House, 1986, 2004), 6.32.

Many traditions, as will be demonstrated among the Bishnoi, draw on elements of both *dvaita* and *advaita* philosophies.

Though the focus of this literature tends to be positive, there is of course critical literature as well. Lance Nelson, among others, elaborates on some of the anthropocentric and hierarchical aspects of Hindu relationships with other species. Humans are thought to be the only species that have access to *moksa* (state of liberation); they alone have access to, and awareness of correct moral and ritual behaviour as revealed through the Vedas. Rebirth in an animal form is seen as karmic punishment; nonhuman animals are associated with ignorance, sensuality, greed, lack of reason, and atheism.³⁹ Humans and nonhumans are both part of a strict hierarchy; the nonhuman world is symbolically connected with the caste system according to this hierarchy. Wendy Doniger has noted that “the dog [is] to the cow in the world of beasts what the outcaste is to the Brahmin in the world of men.”⁴⁰ Nonhumans as well as humans are subject to this hierarchy, where cows and Brahmins are considered pure, superior incarnations, and dogs and outcastes are considered impure, inferior incarnations. Though they may seem incongruous, these hierarchies are in fact compatible with the other ideologies outlined in this chapter; for while bodily incarnations vary, the soul is the same in every living being. These themes will be explored and explained in more depth with specific regards to Bishnoi worldviews in subsequent sections, as these foundational Hindu teachings are central to Bishnoi beliefs and practices and will therefore provide important context for my discussion of Bishnoi relationships to the nonhuman.

³⁹ Lance Nelson. “Cows, Elephants, Dogs, and Other Lesser Embodiments of *Atman*: Reflections on Hindu Attitudes Toward Nonhuman Animals,” in *A Communion of Subjects*, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, 179-193 (New-York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 185.

⁴⁰ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 173.

1.2 The Bishnoi: A Gap in the Literature

While there is an active academic discourse on Hinduism and ecology, literature on the Bishnoi is much more scarce. Pankaj Jain is one of few authors to have done ethnographic work among the Bishnoi. Jain provides an excellent historical portrait of the community and discusses their commitment to the environment and the ecological implications of their actions, along with details of the lived religion. In his book *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, a third of which is devoted to the Bishnoi community, Jain comments on the gap in the literature, saying that “little is known about Bishnois’ religious and ecological life. Several prominent Indian ecologists have largely ignored Bishnois except [for a] few passing remarks.”⁴¹ Ann Grodzins Gold, who briefly mentions the Bishnoi in her book *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan*, also cites the lack of material on this intriguing community.⁴² Authors such as Dwivedi, Vandana Shiva, and Chapple have also briefly mentioned the Bishnoi in various works, but only to remark on their extreme commitment to the environment; none of these authors provide depth or detail about the community.⁴³ There is also a short write up by Vinay Lal in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*,⁴⁴ and an MA thesis written by Elizabeth Landry which does not address ecology or lived religion, but is rather a philological study of Guru Jambheshvara’s statements.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 52.

⁴² Gold and Gujjar, *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 249.

⁴³ See Dwivedi, *Dharmic Ecology*, 16; Vandana Shiva, “Women in the Forest,” in *Ethical Perspectives on Environmental Issues in India*, ed. George Alfred James (New Delhi: A.P.H Publishing Corporation, 1999); Christopher Key Chapple. “Religious Environmentalism: Thomas Berry, the Bishnoi, and Satish Kumar,” *Dialog* 50 (2011): 336–343.

⁴⁴ Vinay Lal, “Bishnoi,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London: Continuum, 2005).

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Landry, *An Introduction to the Fifteenth Century Rajasthani Saint Jambho and his Vani*. Master of Arts Thesis (University of Washington, 1990).

I was concerned with the lack of literature until I arrived in India and met two Bishnoi scholars who had recently published an edited volume called *Religion and Environment*, which includes several articles written by Bishnoi authors detailing Bishnoi religious life and environmentalism.⁴⁶ Though this is not a peer reviewed source, it has been an invaluable addition to my knowledge and understanding of the community.

Despite the lack of academic sources, there are numerous media reports, websites, Youtube videos, and nature documentaries that highlight the Bishnoi. Several Bishnoi-run websites, such as www.Bishnoism.com contain details on mythology, texts, and lived traditions. The Bishnoi have also been featured in the *New York Times*,⁴⁷ and on *Human Planet* in a short documentary that depicts a young Bishnoi boy rescuing an orphaned fawn and taking it home to his mother who breastfeeds the fawn until it is old enough to go back into the wild.⁴⁸

As for the primary sources, Jain has translated Guru Jambheshwar's statements and 29 rules. These are the only historical texts available because, like other medieval Saints, the biography of Guru Jambheshwar is based solely on the hagiographical accounts of his followers and other poets in the community. Neither he nor his followers appear in other historical writings until long after his death.⁴⁹ The contents of these primary sources will be elaborated in section 2.2, and the full list of the 29 rules is included in Appendix A.

Since the Bishnoi community is underrepresented in academic literature, this thesis will be an important contribution to the material on Bishnoism, and to the field of Hinduism and ecology. Despite the gap in the literature, many authors have identified the Bishnoi as an

⁴⁶ Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi eds., *Religion and Environment*. Vol-II. (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd, 2010).

⁴⁷ Sanjoy Hazarika, "Sect in India Guards Desert Wildlife," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1993.

⁴⁸ "Surviving the Urban Jungle," *Human Planet: Cities*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6r9TW0KT8II> (accessed May 7th, 2015).

⁴⁹ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 57.

exceptional community with regards to their commitment to trees and wild animals. It is a community that demonstrates Hindu ideals such as compassion, nonviolence, and kinship in their everyday lived tradition, and the positive impacts on the environment are not just appreciable, but remarkable.

1.3 Romantic Ecology

There is a tendency in both the academic literature, and media reports, to romanticise communities such as the Bishnoi; often this is done with good intentions of affirming harmonious worldviews and respect for nonhumans, which could contribute to constructive behaviours and perceptions of nature. Regardless, this can be misleading and often leaves out, or glosses over important details, painting incomplete portraits of complex communities and worldviews.

The Bishnoi have been gaining recognition around the world in recent years, and the most prominent example of this phenomenon is a 2012 book by photojournalist Franck Vogel. His book, *Bishnois: Environmentalists since the 15th Century*, is a collection of beautiful photographs and stories about the Bishnoi community and their efforts to protect trees and wild animals. His work has been featured in magazines and exhibitions all over the world, including exhibits in Paris metro stations. Several Bishnoi people told me that there has been an increased number of tourists from France since his book was published. Though these cross-cultural exchanges can be productive and transformative, they can also be problematic.

In Bikaner I stayed with a Bishnoi man who had read Vogel's book. When I asked him what he thought of it, he said, "it is romantic." He told me that although the stories in the book are all true, they are the exception, not the rule. On another occasion he told me that he thinks

that Bishnoi politicians and organizations are now appealing to the West by talking about planting trees and not using plastic. I have also found that current literature and media coverage of the Bishnoi tends to romanticise and appeal to a Western audience and to the environmental movement in general. The reader will recall for example the title of the news article that first brought my attention to the community: *Green Dharma*. Though not unfounded, this ‘greening’ of the community by both insiders and outsiders can sometimes be misleading; it leaves out critical details about their dharma, motivations, and lived religion, attempting to fit them into a modern, environmentalist framework. The community is often idealized and painted as a peaceful, utopian society that lives in harmony with nature, when in fact they suffer from many of the same difficulties as other rural Rajasthani peoples, are well-known for their aggression toward other groups, and accept and maintain often divisive hierarchies between species and between cultural groups. Complexities regarding these and other issues are often overlooked or simplified. These topics will be explored in more detail throughout this thesis, as I attempt to present the kind of balanced scholarship that Laurie Patton advocates for in the field of Hinduism and ecology. Patton argues against the rampant romanticising that occurs in this field. She contends that “ecologists and Indologists have resorted to ancient texts to describe Indian ideas about the cosmological workings of nature and to recover an understanding of balance and harmony within that world...both appeal to a kind of Romantic ideal of ‘nature in the abstract,’ which is in fact only part of the picture suggested by the ancient Indian milieu itself...I am defining Romanticism as the idea that there is an integral and harmonious connection between the human being and the natural world.”⁵⁰ Referring again to the analysis of ancient Hindu texts, Patton explains that authors tend to focus on the passages that sacralise nature, and ignore

⁵⁰ Laurie Patton, “Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice in Rgvedic Interpretation.” in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 39-58 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 40.

passages that are less in line with a harmonious or ecological ethos. She points out that in fact, it is often the case that passages which celebrate and glorify nature, or speak of the balance and beauty of the universe are “immediately followed by a mention of interruption or breakage, whether it be the onset of darkness, or, more dramatically of slaying, or of harm done to those who are outside the system.”⁵¹ She does not deny the power and importance of cosmological passages and teachings in Hinduism, but she does call for a more realistic, sophisticated, balanced, and less romantic analysis of ecological themes within Hinduism.⁵² I have done my best to convey an accurate portrait of the present-day community, captured through my small window into the Bishnoi world.

Because of my exposure to this romantic literature, and due to my own cultural biases about what ideal relationships between species should look like, I often found myself surprised during my fieldwork. Throughout my stay in India I came to the realization that I had an unspoken hypothesis that I would find a greater sense of intimacy between humans and nonhumans among the Bishnoi, and that that intimacy would manifest in physical contact between species. Reading stories in newspapers and on the internet about women breastfeeding fawns, people hugging trees, and priests feeding wild animals by hand, lead me to assume that this entire community demonstrates their connection with the nonhuman through acts of touching. Nearly all of the information on Bishnoi websites and in documentary videos

⁵¹ Ibid., 51.

⁵² One could embark on a lengthy critique of colonial themes of the essentialized, exotic, Indian; and the irony of my own participation in this phenomenon is not lost on me. However, such is the dilemma of every anthropologist studying traditional communities from an etic perspective, and this topic has certainly been exhausted elsewhere. See for example, Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Christopher Thacker, *The Wilderness Pleases: The Origins of Romanticism* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Carol Breckenridge, and Peter Van Der Veer eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

demonstrates this particular type of physical intimacy with nonhumans.⁵³ I realized very quickly upon my arrival that these were fairly rare and extreme examples; and while my hypothesis was not incorrect, intimacy and harmony in this community manifested in a very different way than I thought it would.

This underlying assumption of mine came in part from somewhat misleading and limited information, but I believe that my assumptions developed primarily from my own cultural biases about intimacy with nonhumans, particularly nonhuman animals, based on Animal Rights discourses and urban “dog culture”. In the field of animal studies Haraway’s work provides an excellent example of this specific bias toward certain physical expressions of intimacy. Haraway focuses on the sense of touch as the primary experience through which different species shape one another. She focuses on domestic animals such as horses and dogs, and promotes touch and communication through acts of training and breeding.⁵⁴ It is a given in certain cultures that petting is the correct way to interact with domestic animals such as horses, cats and dogs- one shows affection to nonhuman animals by holding, scratching, cuddling, kissing, and stroking.

Being overwhelmed with images of Bishnoi people holding and feeding animals, I unthinkingly (and mistakenly) imagined their interactions would look more like the interactions between humans and dogs that I am familiar with. I was surprised when I saw cows on extremely short leashes, and seeming indifference towards cats and dogs. Indian social and cultural relationships with nonhuman animals are very different from those in urban North America.⁵⁵ Short leashes are not considered cruel, and physical acts of touching or petting are not

⁵³ For examples see Human Planet “Surviving the Urban Jungle.”; “Les Bishnois,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKSsMOq_Hto (accessed, April 2, 2015).

⁵⁴ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵⁵ Other North American theorists exploring the animal question, such as Paul Shepard, take a very negative view of pet-keeping, arguing that it demonstrates disrespect for the autonomy of animals, and in large Indian cities like Mumbai some families are beginning to keep dogs as pets, so there is of course complexities and nuances to this cultural distinction. See, Shepard, “The Others.”

customary, and are actually confusing to many; one is almost always met with puzzled glances when petting a cow or a dog, and the Bishnoi are no exception to this cultural norm.

Physical and sensory interactions with other species are extremely important as foundational experiences which reflect and encourage a sense of reciprocity between humans and nonhumans in the community. I don't mean to imply that I did not observe a sense of intimacy between humans and nonhumans, but rather that intimacy is demonstrated and experienced differently by different cultural groups. So while theorists such as Haraway can help us understand certain larger themes concerning the interrelatedness of species, I believe that her theories are limited in their application here because of certain cultural biases. For this reason I am partial to broader theories of dwelling and engagement such as Ingold's, rather than theories that outline precisely how we should engage with other species based on particular cultural understandings of nonhumans.

After my initial surprise, I tried to wholeheartedly immerse myself in Bishnoi ways of life, and set my own biases and preconceptions aside. Despite the short-term nature of the project I have attempted to identify patterns and themes and have tried to understand and articulate how nonhuman animals, the environment, compassion, nonviolence, and sacrifice are conceptualised and experienced on their own terms.

2. Bishnoi Dharma: The Khejarli Massacre

In September of the year 1730, 363 Bishnoi women, men, and children, led by Amrita Devi, sacrificed their lives to protect the forest of khejari trees on their land. King Abhay Singh of Jodhpur sent his soldiers to chop down the forest for the construction of a new temple. When the soldiers approached, a woman from the village named Amrita Devi embraced a tree and said “*Sir Santhe rooke rahe to bhi sasto jaan*” meaning, “if a tree is saved from felling at the cost of one’s head, it should be considered a good deed.”⁵⁶ She was decapitated in front of her two daughters who stoically followed her example, clinging to the trees and meeting the same end.

Bishnois flocked from the villages and 363 people died before the King stopped his men and ordered a decree forever protecting Bishnoi land from hunting and deforestation.⁵⁷ Their land is still protected today, and because of their continued efforts one can go to prison for hunting or chopping down trees on Bishnoi land.

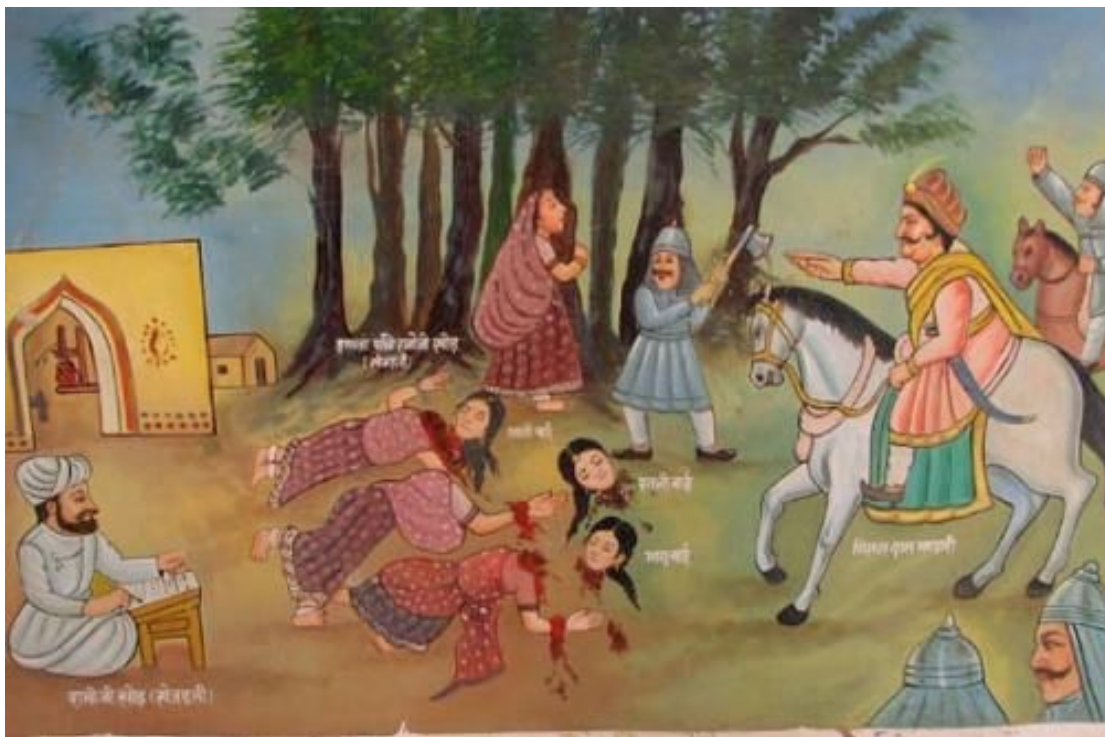


Figure 1 Painting at Khejadali Temple, artist unknown.

⁵⁶ Amrita Devi’s quote “*Sir santhe rooke rahe to bhi sasto jaan*“ has been translated in several ways, including “First my head, then the tree,” “A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree” and “If a tree is saved even at the cost of one’s head, it’s worth it.”

⁵⁷ Pankaj Jain. “The Bishnoi: An Eco-Theological ‘New Religious Movement’ in the Indian Desert,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19, no.1 (2010): 13.

This is the most famous Bishnoi story, and it acts as somewhat of a founding myth within the community. As a result of stories such as this, the Bishnoi have become well-known in North India and abroad for their fierce dedication to the environment. However, as the community is underrepresented in the literature, this chapter will provide a brief introduction to the history, and basic tenets of Bishnoi dharma, to provide some necessary context for the following discussion of their relationships with other species and their environment.

Bishnoi dharma is guided by a set of 29 rules that are to be followed by all community members. The name Bishnoi means 29 (*Bish* 20, and *Noi* 9), because they are the followers of the 29 rules laid down by Guru Jambheshwar. The population of Bishnois is under 1 million. Most live in Rajasthan, where the tradition began in the 15th century, but some have migrated to adjacent states such as Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. They can be identified by their distinctive style of dress. Traditionally, the men wear white and the women wear saris and veils with a particular pattern of red, or red and yellow with small circles. The women also have unique jewelry, the most distinctive being large, half-moon shaped nose rings that cover their mouths.

Most Bishnois live in rural areas, in villages and hamlets. Some have moved to cities to pursue a variety of jobs, but most work as farmers and agriculturalists. They are a fairly well-off community and are considered high caste due to their strict purity rules. Many are land owners and business owners; others hold diverse jobs such as political leaders and physicians.



Figure 2 Bishnoi Man, photo by Alexis Reichert



Figure 3 Bishnoi Woman, photo by Alexis Reichert

One of the most distinctive qualities of the Bishnoi, and the focus of this thesis, is their relationship to other species. Although not a formal tenet of the tradition, self-sacrifice for the protection of plant and animal life is foundational to Bishnoi dharma and has become emblematic of the community. They are particularly known for protecting endangered species, allowing species such as the blackbuck to flourish in their communities, when they are nearly extinct elsewhere.⁵⁸ The blackbuck antelope is a stunning animal with black and white fur, and long spiral horns that can grow up to 65cm in length. They can be found in herds near Bishnoi villages, and along with the smaller species of chinkara gazelle, and the khejari tree, they have become a symbol of the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan. These are considered to be the most

⁵⁸ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 75.

sacred species, and are the focus of Bishnoi devotion to trees and animals, as they are the most passionately protected and most loved.



Figure 4 Rajasthani Blackbuck, photo by Alexis Reichert

2.1 Guru Jambheshwar: The Tenth Incarnation of Vishnu

The foundations of this tradition were laid hundreds of years before the events of Khejarli, by Guru Jambheshwar, sometimes called “the Great Environmentalist of the 15th Century” by members of the community, and often referred to simply as Jambhoji. He was born in 1451 to a Rajput family in Peepsar village in Western Rajasthan. He is regarded by his followers as the

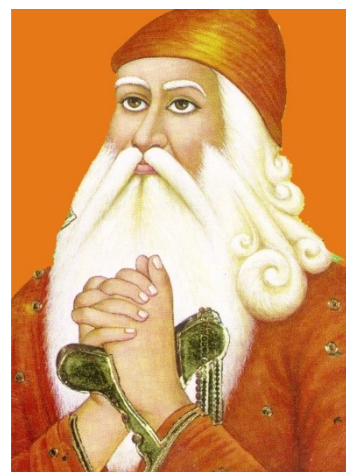


Figure 5 Popular devotional image of Guru Jambheshwar

10th incarnation of Vishnu; his followers therefore identify as Vaishnavites.⁵⁹ Devotees explain that during his lifetime nobody ever saw him eat, drink, or sleep, and his body did not cast a shadow. He remained celibate his whole life and gave away all of his money and possessions to live a life of renunciation, traveling and teaching in Rajasthan. He is often compared to other saints of the Bhakti era,⁶⁰ such as Guru Nanak and Kabir because he was an iconoclast who rejected the caste system and much common ritual practice, emphasising rather inclusivity, devotion, and the formless, omnipresence of God.⁶¹ The Bishnoi now situate themselves between *nirguna* (without form/qualities) and *saguna* (with form/qualities) theologies. Although the Guru's teachings emphasise the *nirguna* aspects of God, Bishnois still recognize the incarnations of Vishnu, and often use images of the guru and other gods in their worship.⁶² They believe in a single God who manifests in infinite ways; I heard many assertions regarding various manifestations of the divine, including "God is in the fire [*Havan*]", "God is in the image", "God is in the deer" and "God is in everything".

Jambhoji's specific teachings emerged while he lived through a severe 10-year drought in Rajasthan. He saw the land and animals being destroyed and stripped of resources during the drought. During this time he had a vision which prompted him to establish the 29 rules, which were meant to encourage a better relationship between humans and their environment, their God, and each other, in order to allow them to live harmoniously and prosperously in the harsh desert

⁵⁹ Vaishnavism is the largest branch of Hinduism. It encompasses extremely diverse traditions, but is often characterized by an emphasis on devotional practice (aligned with Upanishadic teachings), monotheism, and of course the worship of Vishnu as Supreme God and his 10 avatars.

⁶⁰ The Bhakti movement is a devotional movement that swept India in the medieval period. It emphasised a personal and devotional relationship with the divine as a way to achieve *moksha* (liberation). This continues to be one of the most popular forms of religious expression in India.

⁶¹ Banwari Lal Sahu, "Bahkti-Saints," in *Religion and Environment Vol-II*, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 269-291 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd, 2010), 271.

⁶² For more on the *nirguna* and *saguna* aspects of the divine in this tradition see, Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 58.

climate.⁶³ Many people would now label this as sustainability, leading some to describe the Bishnoi as “India’s first environmentalists”; however within the community it is simply understood to be their dharma.⁶⁴

2.2 Jambhoji’s Precepts: The 29 Rules and 120 Statements

The Bishnoi continue to live by Jambhoji’s 29 principles; these rules are central to their self-conception as a distinct and unique community. Seven of these principles provide guidelines for good social behaviour. For example the rules state that one must remain content, modest, and patient, and must not steal, lie, condemn or criticise. Ten of the rules address personal hygiene and health practices, for example the requirements to bathe daily in the morning, filter water, and to not smoke, drink alcohol or use drugs. Four rules provide instruction for worship, including daily prayer at sunrise and sunset, and monthly fasting. Finally, eight rules are related to conserving and protecting animals and trees, and encouraging good animal husbandry. These rules for example dictate that one must remain pure vegetarian, provide shelter for animals, be compassionate toward all living beings, and one must not cut green trees or sterilize oxen.⁶⁵

All rules, of course, are not given equal status in the lived tradition. The requirement to bathe every morning (before eating or worshiping), is very strictly followed. Although this is a common practice among many Indian communities, this rule was identified on numerous occasions as one of the most important and distinguishing features of the Bishnoi because it is stringently followed by all community members. The community is also extremely strict about not eating meat. As is evident from this chapter’s opening story, the Bishnoi take the commandment to not cut trees very seriously as well, although there seems to be some flexibility

⁶³ Chapple, “Religious Environmentalism,” 339.

⁶⁴ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 77.

⁶⁵ The full list can be found in Appendix A.

in the community, some saying that you can't cut a single branch, and others allowing for some pruning. There are some rules that are not strictly followed anymore, for example, there is a prohibition against wearing blue clothing⁶⁶ - but many Bishnois, particularly young people and city dwellers, wear blue jeans and other blue garments.

In addition to his 29 principles, Jambhoji wrote a set of 120 statements, or *sabdās*. These are written in a poetic form and elaborate his teachings and philosophy. These verses demonstrate his commitment to equality (among humans and nonhumans alike), modesty, worship, nonviolence, cleanliness, patience, love, and compassion. In these statements he expands on the nature of God; he encourages his devotees to see God in everything saying, "Seekers of moksha should regard creatures born of sweat, birds born of eggs, mammals born of womb, and plants born of sprouting, all of them as God."⁶⁷ The verses also include guidance on how to show devotion to God, and how to follow the pure and simple path to God through pureness of heart, truth, and devotion rather than ritual or sacrifice. The emphasis on devotion, liberation, and Krishna's grace in Jambhoji's *sabdās* situate him well within the *Bhakti* movement.

His *sabdās* also demonstrate that many of his teachings emerged from a strong rejection of other religious traditions, and animal sacrifice in particular, which was commonly practiced at the time. In this way his *sabdās* are powerfully reminiscent of the writings of Kabir and Nanak. Jain explains that in his writings, Jambhoji "criticised tantric yogic practitioners sacrificing the animals to *Bhairav*, *Yogini*, or other deities and asked them to understand the real meaning of yoga. Similarly he asked the Muslims to understand the real message of the Quran. In his tenth *sabda*, he reminded the Hindus that Rama never asked them to kill animals... In his sixteenth

⁶⁶ There are two common explanations for this rule. Some say that the process of extracting blue dye is particularly damaging to the plant that produces it; others say that blue attracts the sun, so it is too hot to wear in the desert.

⁶⁷ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 161.

sabda he chastised people who follow frauds as their guru and kill animals for their rituals.”⁶⁸ Jambhoji’s condemnation of ritual slaughter is fierce, and in contrast, his teachings elaborate an ethic of extreme nonviolence toward other species, not just in cases of animal sacrifice, but all harmful acts. One of the Guru’s verses asks “by whose sanction do butchers kill sheep and goats? Since even a prick of a thorn is extremely painful to human beings, is it proper to indulge in those killings? Therefore, these animals should be treated as own kith and kin and should not be harmed in any way.”⁶⁹ This ethic applies to all creatures, great and small. He teaches that dung and wood must be inspected for bugs before being burned - although this attention to small creatures and insects is now only observed once a month on *Amawas*, if at all.

The practice of self-sacrifice is not outlined in Jambhoji’s writings, but has become a sort of unofficial tenet within the community. Not the *act* of sacrifice, but the *willingness* to sacrifice has become an implicit expectation for all Bishnois. This willingness to sacrifice is a source of pride and distinctness; it has made its way into the Bishnoi canon through popular practice and lived tradition and is now deeply tied to their commitment to the 29 rules. This theme will be explored in depth in chapter 5.

2.3 Ritual and Devotional Practices

Jambhoji’s 120 statements are chanted every morning and every evening during a ceremony called a *havan*. *Havan* is the central form of ritual worship for Bishnois, and comes in many shapes and sizes. During this ritual, ghee is poured periodically over a central fire and community members, either alone in their homes, or together in temples, chant the *sabdas*, either in full or in part. During *havan* women and men sit separately on carpets on either side of the fire. Women and men can both pour ghee on the fire; they approach one at a time, taking the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 72.

long delicate spoon and splashing small spoonfuls of ghee on the flames with attention to the rhythm of the chanting. Most participants do not know all of the words; they hum along and clap to their own beat, then join in during the popular verses. The leaders chant all the verses, usually by heart. Apart from being conducted every morning and evening (at sunset and sunrise), elaborate *havans* are also performed at celebrations and festivals, such as marriages and birth ceremonies.



Figure 6 The *geina* washes his hands and prepares for *havan*, photo by Alexis Reichert

There are three types of holy people that can lead temple and community *havans*. A *geina* is called the “one who sings”, he is a householder who helps organize and conduct rituals. A *mehint* performs rituals and is more knowledgeable than a *geina*; he is usually still a householder but lives a life of partial renunciation. *Sadhus* are the highest ranked spiritual leaders. They are full renouncers and preachers and are highly respected by the community. Although the *sadhus*

are well respected, renunciation is not necessarily the ideal in this community; like many Hindu communities more focus is placed on being a successful householder early in life. I had many parents inform me that they respect the *sadhus* very much, but they would never want their son to become one!

Havan is the most frequent and formalized form of worship, but there are many other practices that make up the devotional routines of Bishnois. Regular temple visits and temple donations are an important part of most families' devotional practices, as they are in many Indian communities. The most commonly donated items are money, bird seed, and ghee (to be used in *havan*). All temples have areas where they spread food for birds daily, and many temples have enclosures where they take care of injured and orphaned animals until they are healthy enough to go back into the wild. Trees are watered in conjunction with many people's daily prayers, and trees are often planted around holy days. Sharing water with newly planted trees is particularly important because it is difficult for them to survive in the heat of the desert otherwise. It is evident that for many Bishnois, devotion and duty to God are demonstrated through their commitment to trees and nonhuman animals. Guru Jambheshwar also encouraged simple devotion through repetition of the holy name Vishnu; a subtle form of worship that can be heard by many devotees as they go about their daily routine. I stayed with a very generous Bishnoi family for several weeks that I reference often throughout this thesis. My key informant was the husband Ashok, but I also became very well acquainted with his wife, their son and his parents. During my stay in their home in Bikaner I became very accustomed to the frequent chanting of Ashok's mother who would sigh "Om, Vishnu, Vishnu, Vishnu" under her breath tirelessly throughout the day as she chopped vegetables, swept the floor or hung the laundry to dry. In the mornings I would wake to the sounds of Ashok's father performing *havan* on a small carpet in

the living room, using a low platform for the fire, and a stand to hold his book of *sabdās*. This repetition was a constant reminder of the devotion to God that is demonstrated, particularly among the older generation of Bishnois.

Another common form of worship is the practice of digging ponds. Many of the large temples have nearby ponds, and it is common at these sites to move sand from the edge of a pond to the top of a sand dune. In this way, ponds are constantly being maintained, and this act of digging ponds is considered very auspicious to practitioners. Women collect sand in their scarves and saris and men use handkerchiefs and blankets, or find large rocks to carry up the steep dunes. People will often make several trips, sometimes spending the entire day traveling up and down the dune if it is a holy day. I can attest that when the dune is steep, and hot sand is shifting under your feet, this is not an easy task! The site of Jambhoji's first teachings, a high dune called Samrathal, is one of the most popular locations to perform this action. While visiting this site several people told me the story of why the Bishnoi maintain this tradition of carrying sand up the dunes. They told the story like this: Over 500 years ago there was a heavy drought in the region and local people started migrating away for food and water. Guru Jambheshwar asked them why they were leaving; they said they were leaving for food and water, and that they could not live here. So he asked "If I give you food will you stay?" They said "we cannot take free food, we must work for it". "Okay" he said, "then take the sand from the bottom and carry it to the top," he explained that this way, ponds will be created at the bottom for water and God will give grains at the top of the dunes.



Figure 7 The edge of the pond and the well-trodden path up the dune at Samrathal, photo by Alexis Reichert

They have been doing this ever since and it is now a very auspicious action, which grants wishes or even liberation, depending on the location. They also told me that after that day, if ever anyone had more food than they needed, the extra would disappear so that they would never get greedy or have too much; every family had just what they needed, not more, not less.

Holy days are also an important part of Bishnoi worship. Like many Hindu communities *Amavas* is celebrated monthly on the new moon night when there is no moon. Many Bishnois fast from sunset to sunset, and use the day for rest and devotion. During these and other holy days, many people gather at Mukam in Bikaner district; this is the most sacred Bishnoi site because it holds the remains of Guru Jambheshwar.



Figure 8 Mukam at sunset, photo by Alexis Reichert

There is also an annual Tree Fair at the site of the Khejadali Massacre. Every year the events of Khejadali, along with dozens of other similar sacrifices, are commemorated as thousands gather at the site of Amritra Devi's death. The patch of earth where she sacrificed herself has been turned into a large monument, and there is an adjacent temple with depictions of the event and all the names of those who gave their lives. Most Bishnois also celebrate local and pan-Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Holi.

2.3 A Syncretic History

As I have indicated, the Bishnoi now identify as a Hindu caste, but their teachings and practices incorporate elements of many other religious traditions. Guru Jambheshwar did encourage worship of Vishnu, but he did not identify himself or his followers with one particular tradition, saying that he was above caste and sectarian divisions.⁷⁰ According to Meera Ahmad, his followers were made up primarily of Jats, but also included Rajputs, Brahmins, Banias, Kurmis, Ahirs, Suthars, Sunars, Gaynas, Kasbis, Beyhars, Nais, Meghwals and Muslims.⁷¹ Pankaj Jain suggests that this was a liminal group, drawing on both Muslim and Hindu influences, until the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan when the community was “Hinduized” and took on a strictly Hindu identity. He explains that in the 1891 Census of Marwar they were classified with Muslims, and they maintain many similarities with Islam, such as the practice of burying their dead rather than cremating them.⁷² There is also a prohibition on idol worship among Bishnoi, who use fire and pictures of the Guru in their stead, but do not perform *murti puja*.⁷³ Men and women also cover their heads in many Bishnoi temples, particularly Mukam. My informants as well as Pankaj Jain’s informants denied this Muslim influence; these practices are always explained in other ways that don’t acknowledge any association with Islam.⁷⁴ For example, they assert that they bury their dead because it does not require trees to be chopped down for wood. As previously stated, Guru Jambheshwar’s followers currently identify as Vaishnavites, and since my research is ethnographically informed and focuses on the current

⁷⁰ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 55.

⁷¹ Meera Ahmad, “Bishnoi Religion and Nature,” in *Religion and Environment Vol-II*, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 45-71 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., 2010), 47.

Some identify Jats as the “parent caste” of the Bishnoi, explaining that the predominance of Jat converts is evidenced by the fact that the Bishnoi sub-castes (*gotras*) are identical to those of the Jats.

⁷² Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 55.

⁷³ This is a common Hindu devotional practice that involves worshipping a *murti*- a statue that is understood to be the embodiment or living presence of a deity. Worship commonly involves oil lamps, incense, and food offerings.

⁷⁴ For a more thorough discussion of the liminality of the Bishnoi see chapter “Bishnoi Community: Hindu or Muslim?” in Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*.

lived tradition I will continue to identify them as such, situating them within the Hindu tradition, as they do themselves.

It is not my aim to provide a textual or historical analysis of this community, but rather to focus specifically on the lived tradition regarding relationships with the nonhuman. The life of the Guru, the 29 principles, and the texts and practices of the Bishnoi have therefore been described briefly in this chapter in order to situate my discussion of the Bishnoi, and provide the necessary background information for my observations and analysis.⁷⁵ I will elaborate and draw on these topics throughout the following discussion.

⁷⁵ For a more exhaustive look at the history, texts and principles of the Bishnoi, see *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities* by Pankaj Jain.

3. The View from Toki Temple: Co-produced Spaces in a More than Human World

Toki temple sits atop a sand dune just outside of Rotu village in the Nagaur district of Rajasthan. One afternoon I piled into a car with Ashok and six of his family members to climb the dune and circumambulate the temple. This temple is famous for being the site of a battle between Guru Jamheshwar and an evil ghost. The dune is the highest point for miles, and provides a far reaching view of the surrounding desert landscape. Rotu and the surrounding area are almost entirely populated by Bishnoi; it is one of the oldest Bishnoi villages, and they take the 29 rules very seriously, not allowing a single branch to be cut from a green tree. There are therefore large, lush, green trees and wild animals scattered around the dune for miles. As I climbed up and over the back side of the dune, I noticed that amid the dense green there was one perfect rectangle of land where the trees had been stripped of their branches. I asked Ashok about it, and with a sad and frustrated tone he replied that a non-Bishnoi person had moved there. It had become evident over the course of my roaming through Rajasthan that Bishnoi villages were more lush than other villages, but this was the first time that it was laid out so clearly, in a little box in front of me: Bishnoi dharma and the visible landscape are inextricably linked.



Figure 9 The view from Toki Temple, photo by Alexis Reichert

Experiences such as the one recounted above made a powerful impression on me. It became evident very quickly that Bishnoi dharma has a profound and positive impact on the physical environment they inhabit. Simultaneously, that physical environment informs their ethos and their ontological understanding of the world. In other words, their dharma and their environment are inseparable; one constitutes the other.

The Bishnoi are scattered throughout villages across Rajasthan and its surrounding states. Some villages have a higher density of Bishnois than others, and it is often immediately obvious when an area is highly populated by Bishnois. It is not only the pictures of Guru Jabheshwar above doorways and temples that give it away; the very organization of the villages, and the flora and fauna change drastically when you enter Bishnoi territory. As I approached Bishnoi villages I watched out the window, carefully noting the increased number of trees and wild animals; herds of chinkara gazelles, and blackbuck antelopes would pass by as trees began to fill the landscape. Jain recounts a similar first impression, saying,

As my driver drove on the state highway, I was suddenly struck by a huge number of deer freely grazing on both sides of the highway with the entire land protected by fences and notices placed by the department of forests. I later came to know that this was one of the famous sanctuaries for blackbucks, one of the animals traditionally protected by the Bishnois. Even as the biodiversity is increasingly endangered in other parts of India and the world, the biodiversity of the desert state of Rajasthan is managed not by human isolation but by active human participation, Bishnois being one of the prime examples of it.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 53; Bishnois work closely with the forest department in the area, and also have their own NGO devoted to environmental protection, called the *All India Jeev Raksha Bishnoi Sabha*.

Of course, not every Bishnoi person lives in such villages or conservation areas. Some live in villages with few Bishnois, and some have moved to cities. These more modern circumstances will be discussed at length in chapter 7, but the following chapter will focus on the physical environment of traditional Bishnoi villages and hamlets, which is where the majority of Bishnoi people continue to live.

3.1 Nonhuman Spaces: The Creation and Maintenance of *Orans* in Bishnoi Villages

Harmony and equality between humans and nonhumans is exemplified by, and built into the very composition of a Bishnoi community. Not only are Bishnois prohibited from cutting trees and killing animals, every Bishnoi community must include an *oran*. Mani Ram Bishnoi explains that “an Oran (the common land) is earmarked and preserved for plantation for trees and grazing of wild-life in every Bishnoi village.”⁷⁷ *Orans* are areas that are undeveloped by humans; open spaces for nonhuman animals alone, where there are no buildings or agricultural activities. They also include natural or man-made ponds that are dug and maintained by community members to provide water for the village and the wild animals in the area.

⁷⁷ Mani Ram Bishnoi, “Bishnois: Environmentalists by Creed,” in *Religion and Environment* Vol-II, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 151-193 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., 2010),193.



Figure 10 Central pond in the Chaudhariwali *oran*, photo by Alexis Reichert

The first Bishnoi village that I visited was Chaudhariwali, just outside of Hisar in the state of Haryana. Chaudhariwali has a population of 3000 (approximately 500 houses) and its *oran* covers an area of 300 hectares. This land is fiercely protected by the Bishnoi; it is considered part of their village, and the animals that roam on it are considered to be kin. A traditional Bishnoi community therefore must include agricultural land, homes and a temple for humans, and homes/ space for nonhumans. Open wilderness is equally important to houses and farmland in the creation of a balanced community; nonhuman space is considered and incorporated into the construction and maintenance of a village, and human and nonhuman spaces are in close proximity and overlap. The picture below was taken at the edge of an *oran* in Rudkali, Rajasthan, where a herd of blackbuck antelopes roams close to roads and houses.



Figure 11 A herd of blackbucks in Rudkali village, photo by Alexis Reichert

The concept of protecting natural spaces is certainly not unprecedented among religious communities in India.⁷⁸ There is a history of sacred groves, where trees and animals are protected, in almost every state in India. Anne Grodzins Gold has done extensive research on sacred groves in Rajasthan.⁷⁹ Gold and Gujar report having observed radical differences in the landscape around shrines in the Ajmer, Bhilwara, and Bundi districts of Rajasthan. They note that in these areas gods objected to having their trees cut; they enjoyed a lush environment with

⁷⁸ Though this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that this notion extends beyond Indian traditions; for example, the idea in Judaism of the sabbath year (every 7 years, called *shmita*) forbade all human utilitarian uses of animals and land for one year. While grounded in very different doctrines, and practiced to different degrees, the idea of preserving natural space is elaborated in some form in almost all religious traditions.

⁷⁹ For more information on this phenomenon in various other regions of India see: Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000.; M. Gadgil, and V. D. Vartak, "Sacred groves of Maharashtra : An Inventory," in *Glimpses of Ethnobotany*, ed. S.K. Jain, 279-294 (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1981).; M. Gadgil, and V.D. Vartak, "Sacred Groves of Western Ghats of India," *Economic Botany* 30 (1976): 152-160.; M. Gadgil, and V.D. Vartak, "Sacred Groves of India : A Plea for Continued Conservation." *Journal of Bombay Natural History Society* 72 (1975): 314-320.; D. Brandis, *Indian Forestry* (Poona: Oriental Institute. 1897). R. H.N. Chaudhuri, and D. C. Pal, "Plants in Folk Religion and Mythology," in *Glimpses of Indian Ethnobotany*, ed. S. K. Jain (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, 1981).

abundant shelter for birds and animals, and they almost always included a well-maintained water source.⁸⁰ They explain that “many castes had particular associations with species of trees they would never cut, and that the reason for this is often that certain trees are incarnations of certain gods.”⁸¹ Jambhoji is therefore not the only deity in the region to inspire what Gold calls “divine ecology,” or “divine conservation.”⁸² Apffel-Marglin has also done work on sacred groves, and she explains that “the network of sacred groves in such countries as India has since time immemorial been the locus and symbol of a way of life in which humans are embedded in nature...It stands for the integration of the human community in nature.”⁸³ These sacred spaces are visual maps and observable examples of the community’s embeddedness in nature, and proximity to nonhumans.

Although these lush, sacred spaces still exist among various Indian communities, including the Bishnoi, many of them have been destroyed in recent decades. Gadgil and Chartrand note that many species have been preserved in sacred groves historically, helping to maintain biological diversity in India. Although the remaining spaces are still important for preserving biodiversity and protecting endangered species, such as the blackbuck in Rajasthan⁸⁴ - there was far greater biodiversity during the pre-British period when natural resources were managed by communities, Bishnoi and non-Bishnoi alike.⁸⁵ Apffel-Marglin and Pramod Parajuli note that

⁸⁰ Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar, “Of Gods Trees and Boundaries: Divine Conservation in Rajasthan.” *Asian Folklore Studies* 48, no. 2 (1989): 211.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸³ Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Purna Chandra Mishra, “Sacred Groves: Regenerating the Body, the Land, the Community,” in *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs, 197-207 (London: Zed Books, 1993), 198.

⁸⁴ M. Zafar-ul Islam and Asad R. Rahmani carried out extensive research on blackbucks in this area, and found that the highest density of blackbucks were in towns and village largely inhabited by Bishnois such as Guda-Bishnoi, Dhava-Duli, and Tal Chhapar. Blackbuck are almost extinct in other areas such as Pakistan due to poaching, predation, habitat destruction and disease. See Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 75 for more details.

⁸⁵ Madhav Gadgil and Subash Chandran., “Sacred Groves,” *Indian International Centre Quarterly* 19, no. ½ (1992): 186.

sacred groves are pre-Vedic in origin and the destruction of these spaces, while having begun under the British system of forest management “has continued unabated and perhaps even accelerated since independence.”⁸⁶ The Bishnoi have maintained many of their *orans*, but they are still facing rapid land change in the region. These issues will be taken up in chapter 7. While there are many parallels between Bishnoi *orans* and other types of sacred groves in India, there are notable differences that make Bishnoi conservation unique; these points will be explored in chapter 5. For now, suffice it to say that there is indeed a precedent for Bishnoi *orans*, in Rajasthan, and elsewhere in India.

3.2 Temples, Shelters and Protests: Socio-Economic Dimensions

The dharmic values of the community are not only built into the physical construction of the village in the form of *orans*, but also the social and economic functioning of the village. For example, providing food to wild animals is built into the system as a kind of tax, as each Bishnoi family is required to give 10% of their grain to birds and other wild animals.⁸⁷ Narsi Ram Bishnoi explains that it is the basic philosophy of the Bishnoi that all living beings have a “right to survive and share all resources.”⁸⁸ Another example of this is that traditionally every Bishnoi village had a *that*. A *that* is a group of male goats that is cared for by one villager who is supported financially by the whole village. Jain explains that “following Holi festival, villagers participate in a public auction to take care of the Amar That for the next year”⁸⁹ Since many communities consider male goats useless, they often get abandoned or sent to slaughter. By

⁸⁶Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Pramod Parajuli, “‘Sacred Grove’ and Ecology: Ritual and Science,” in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, edited by Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 291-316 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 291.

⁸⁷ Interestingly this requirement is reminiscent of a tithe in Judaism and Christianity, or *zakat* in Islam. Considering the syncretic nature of Jambhoji’s teachings, it is quite possible that this mandate reflects influences from non-Hindu religions in the development of Bishnoism.

⁸⁸ Narsi Ram Bishnoi, “Religions’ Attitude towards Nature: an Overview,” in *Religion and Environment Vol-II*, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 25-44 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., 2010), 32.

⁸⁹ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 72.

giving one villager the responsibility of caring for the male goats, it ensures that they can die naturally. I was told that this tradition is no longer widespread however, and that many villages no longer protect their male goats according to this system. Like cows, many goats now end up either on the street, or in shelters, which are very common at Bishnoi temples – these shelters are newer additions to the community and are based on the idea of the *that*, which requires the provision of shelter and safe space for vulnerable animals.

Families donate to temples so that they can maintain animal shelters, and members of the community bring in injured or orphaned animals; these shelters are a community effort. Devotees, especially those with children, often visit the adjacent shelters when they go to visit temples, and most seem to derive great joy from watching the animals. The largest shelter is at Mukam. There are over 1000 cows along with gazelles, blackbucks, peacocks, dogs and other animals. They take care of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian animals, but they will only provide them with milk, never meat. They take in injured and orphaned animals, and the goal with wild animals is to care for them until they can be released back into the wild. The shelter at Mukam is a huge fenced complex with some animals roaming around and others in segregated cages. Most, but not all of the animals have quite a bit of space, and the shelter seems well-funded and well-run with animals receiving regular food, water and medical care. The animals are not completely comfortable with human contact, but are certainly more approachable than, for example, gazelles in the wild. The workers at the temple shelter, mostly young boys, seem to take much pride in their work.



Figure 12 The author visits the animal shelter in Mukam, photo by Kirpa Ram Bishnoi

Another famous temple shelter is in Jajiwalli village. The temple is surrounded by kankeri, kumta, pipal, and bordi trees. The temple grounds attract a large number of wild gazelles and peacocks because food and water are set out for them and replenished two or three times a day by villagers and by the *sadhu* who resides there. These wild animals spend a lot of time close to the temple because they know it is a safe space and that there is a constant supply of food and water, but they usually keep their distance from humans. Injured and sick animals are kept in a separate enclosure and given special attention.



Figure 13 Wild gazelles lounge under the shade of a table at Jajiwalli temple, photo by Alexis Reichert

Often rescue work is done at these temple shelters, but there are certain exceptional individuals within the community who have independently made it their life's work to protect and care for animals. Gurvindar Bishnoi is one such individual who founded an NGO called Community for Wildlife and Rural Development Society in Jodhpur. Jain explains that "his mission is to save and protect animals that are injured by accidents or by hunters... Whenever a deer or blackbuck or any other animal or bird is injured, people call Gurvindar Bishnoi for help. He rushes to the location, takes the injured animal to the hospital, and takes other legal action if necessary against the hunter."⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 71.

The Bishnoi community is in fact very legally active. In many villages they work closely with local police and forest authorities to create and uphold environmental laws. They have had great success in this regard. Jain provides several historical examples, saying that,

Bishnois also successfully influenced several ruling classes to declare prohibition against hunting and poaching. In 1752, Maharaja Anupsingh of Bikaner issued a notification to ban the cutting of green trees. In 1878, Maharaja Mansingh of Jodhpur issued a notification to ban the cutting of khejari trees. Also in 1900, Takhatsingh, King of Jodhpur, banned hunting in Bishnoi villages. Even the British Raj issued similar orders in Hissar and Ferozepur districts of Punjab in 1896 and 1898. Similarly, in 1901, the Bikaner king issued another such declaration.⁹¹

They continue to protest, and pursue court cases to further legal protection of trees and wild animals. I was told that in recent years for example a group of Bishnois protested a government atomic power station in the Fatehabad district of Haryana, and one man died in a hunger strike.

They have not only made progress in their own socio-ecological movements, but their actions have also inspired others. The Chipko movement is a successful non-violent socio-ecological movement in India that protects forests by hugging trees. Chipko leader Sunderlal Bahuguna and writers such as Vandana Shiva have speculated that Chipko derived its inspiration from the Bishnoi, and particularly the events at Khejarli in 1730.

⁹¹ Ibid., 72.

3.3 Reciprocity: Local Mythology and Village Life

Bishnoi will tell you that, due to their efforts, their land is not only richer in plant and animal life, but it is also more benevolent. Members of the community explain that the water on Bishnoi land is sweeter, the crops more plentiful, and the natural disasters less frequent because they maintain a good relationship with the land and animals. It is understood that humans and nonhumans alike will prosper and flourish if the 29 rules are followed. They understand their relationship with the environment as being a fundamentally reciprocal one.

In the village of Chaudhariwali I attended a morning *havan* at the local temple. It was mostly older men from the village that were gathered there for worship. This temple, and the worship that takes place there, play an important role in the community's relationship with their environment. I was told that there has not been a drought in Chaudhariwali since the temple was built 250 years ago, because they worship there and feed the animals. It was explained to me that both humans and nonhumans experience more harmonious relationships in their villages. As we walked through the clean narrow streets of Chaudhariwali I noticed that bowls of milk were left out for dogs. I was informed on multiple occasions that dogs do not bark at deer in Bishnoi villages; and in some villages they said that the dogs had become vegetarian. People also attested that wild animals don't run from Bishnois. Wild animals did seem comfortable roaming in and around the villages that I visited; it was clear that they did not see these villages or the humans within them as a threat, but I did observe that they would often run or move away from humans if they got too close. I was also told on many occasions that farmers will not harm deer or chase them away from their crops, even if the crops are being destroyed; I was told that they would starve before harming or scaring a deer. It is their responsibility to share their food with other

living beings. A Bishnoi website declares that “Bishnois themselves can be hungry & thirsty but they will never allow an animal or bird to die due to lack of fodder/food or water”⁹².

This dharmic relationship with the land and animals is also demonstrated in Bishnoi myths. When I was in Rotu village I was told a story about Jambhoji. Jambhoji came to Rotu to celebrate the engagement of a local woman, and camped at the edge of the village. When the villagers awoke in the morning they saw that he had planted 700 fully-grown trees overnight! At first the villagers were concerned and they complained that the trees would attract birds who would destroy their crops. The Guru told them that if they obeyed the 29 rules and never trimmed or cut down the trees, then they would never have any bird troubles. The Bishnoi of Rotu have followed the instructions of their Guru and, despite their lush green trees, I am told that none of the crops in Rotu have ever been disturbed by birds.⁹³ In fact many now praise the trees and birds for improving the quality of their crops, as the trees stabilize soil and the birds provide fertilization with their droppings. All of these examples demonstrate a deep sense of reciprocity between different species in this community. Bishnois are divinely ordained to follow the 29 rules and protect the environment, and in turn the land and animals protect and nourish them. As Jambhoji told them, if they follow the 29 rules and worship God in the correct way, there will be water in the ponds and grains on the dunes and everyone will have just what they need.

Most of the origin myths about Jambhoji and the development of the Bishnoi community emerge directly from their relationship with the land. The 29 rules themselves were a direct response to a devastating drought; they respond to the hardships of desert life and provide guidelines for how to live in harmony with other species in the rural Rajasthani desert. The rules

⁹² Rajender Kumar Bishnoi, “Bishnois, the First Environmentalists of India,” *Bishnoism*, <http://www.bishnoism.com/thefirst.php> (accessed April 22, 2015).

⁹³ A version of this story is also told in Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 61.

are born from the relationship between humans and other species in a specific time, location and ecosystem. Their dharma is contextualised by their environment and born of their relationship with the land.

3.4 Embedded Ecology: Examples from External Studies

This harmonious dynamic between humans and nonhumans has also been identified in a scientific study done on wolves in the area. Jhala and Giles did a study on wolves in Rajasthan and Gujarat and singled out certain Bishnoi villages as having far less human-wolf conflict than others in these areas. They explain that, “The religious sentiment of the Bishnoi community does not allow blackbuck and Indian gazelle to be hunted, which has allowed these species to become abundant. They could now provide a stable prey base for the wolf and reduce human-wolf conflict. This has happened in Velavadar, where wolves prey exclusively on wild game even though there are sheep and goats in surrounding villages.”⁹⁴

Karine Gagné also conducted a recent study in the region, exploring local knowledge of climate change and deforestation in the Thar Desert. Many of her informants were Bishnoi farmers, and she had the opportunity to observe and interview many Bishnois on the topic of environmental protection and change. Gagné also clearly articulates the connectedness of Bishnoi dharma and the physical environment. But while this chapter has focused on positive instances where “good dharma” translates into “good environment”, Gagné notes that the

⁹⁴ Yadvendradev Jhala and Robert H. Giles Jr., “The Status and Conservation of the Wolf in Gujarat and Rajasthan, India,” *Conservation Biology* 5, no. 4 (1991): 481.

opposite is also true. Her informants (Bishnois and non-Bishnois alike) often related recent deforestation and drought to a loss of good values.⁹⁵ She states that,

As I observed, it is in fact quite common for the farmers to blame themselves and acknowledge their role in creating environmental problems. “We only think of ourselves” and “we are not considering the full impact of what we are doing” were frequent comments when discussing the issue of deforestation. Thus, since they blame themselves for local deforestation, the inhabitants of the desert perceive meteorological changes as being closely connected with their own actions...When juxtaposed, the scientific and local accounts seem to tell a seemingly corresponding story: that rainfall deficits are a consequence of the loss of certain values, which has translated into a changed relationship with the environment. Indeed, local farmers frequently stated during our discussions that it had stopped raining not only because people had cut down all the trees but because they had done so, in their view, as a result of abandoning “good moral values.”⁹⁶

It is clear that the actions and dharma of the Bishnoi are profoundly entangled with the nature and behaviour of other species and the land. Many scholars in the field of religion and ecology argue that this connection between human morality and environmental consequences is fundamental to nearly all traditional societies and religions. Many have shown, for example, that this was the way in which pre-modern Jews and Christians understood the natural world, as

⁹⁵ Gagné indicates that the majority of her informants are Bishnois, but does not indicate precisely when she is quoting Bishnois or other castes throughout the text. So her statements are representative primarily of Bishnois, but include a variety of voices in rural Rajasthan.

⁹⁶ Karine Gagné, “Gone with the Trees: Deciphering the Thar Desert’s Recurring Droughts,” *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 4 (2013): 506.

natural disasters such as droughts and floods were understood to be a consequence of immorality. Martin Yaffe calls this “reciprocal justice” and says that “in the Bible, all moral and immoral deeds have positive or negative impacts on the land on which they are perpetrated, and the land responds accordingly.”⁹⁷ So the Bishnoi, though unique in their understanding and expression of this phenomenon, are just one example of a very widespread notion that human morality has material consequences.

3.5 “To be One is Always to Become with Many”: Humans and Nonhumans Constitute each Other

All of the examples in this chapter serve to demonstrate that humans and nonhumans alike are actors and participants in the Bishnoi world, and they are in a constant process of shaping one another. Many scholars have elaborated on this idea, and many have focused on the question of the nonhuman in relation to human identity construction.⁹⁸ Pramod Parajuli states it simply, saying that “nature does not stand apart from who we are.”⁹⁹ Gold has also remarked upon this entanglement in her own fieldwork in Rajasthan, saying that:

In my own earlier work on environmental concepts in Rajathani folklore and collective rituals, I observed a number of strong patterns or messages. Foremost among these was that the environment is responsive to and participates in human identities, states of mind, and moral enterprises...as the visible landscape and the

⁹⁷ Kay, Jeanne, “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Martin Yaffe, 86-104 (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2001), 96.

⁹⁸ See Basso “Wisdom Sits in Places.”; Escobar “Culture Sits in Places.”; Ingold *Perception.*; Leslie Main Johnson, *Trail of Story, Traveler’s Path: Reflections on Ethnoecology and Landscape* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010).; Hugh Raffles, “‘Local Theory’: Nature and the Making of an Amazonian Place,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14 no. 3 (1999): 323–360.

⁹⁹ Pramod Parajuli, “No Nature Apart: Adivasi Cosmivision and Ecological Discourses in Jharkhand, India,” in *Sacred Landscapes and Cultural Politics: Planting a Tree*, ed. Phil Arnold and Ann Gold, 78-108 (London: Ashgate Publishers, 2001), quoted in Ann Grodzins Gold, “‘If You Cut a Branch You Cut My Finger’: Court, Forest, and Environmental Ethics in Rajasthan,” in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, 317-336 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 329.

built environment are altered, so – people tell me- are interior realms of conscience and morality; interpersonal relations or affection and courtesy; religious experiences both ritual and emotional.¹⁰⁰

To understand the impact of the nonhuman in the constitution of Bishnoi identities more deeply, it is therefore important to consider the embodied experience of living in a rural community that is rich in plant and animal life. The sounds of the birds are often overwhelming in Bishnoi villages, particularly around temples. The trees provide cool shade in the heat of the desert, and one constantly encounters the gaze of peacocks, gazelles, cows and dogs. Houses and hamlets often have open courtyards where cows or buffalo live. Bishnoi in traditional villages spend their days outside in the fields, working the land and tending to the animals, getting water from the pond, and cooking on an open outdoor fire. Haraway, an important voice in the field of Critical Animal Studies, focuses on the sensory experience of interacting with other species as a way that living creatures inherit each other's histories. She explains that when species meet they do not come together as fixed units, rather all participants are *becoming with* each other in “a subject- and object- shaping dance of encounters.”¹⁰¹ Like Ingold and de Castro, she therefore argues against human exceptionalism, saying that we are just another thread in the web of interspecies dependencies. She uses the term “companion species” to describe this, and to convey that *all* beings are deeply entangled, living in and through one another's bodies.¹⁰² In this way she challenges humanism by reminding us that we are all constituted in relating, and that “to be one is always to become with many.”¹⁰³ These ideas reflect an epistemological and

¹⁰⁰ Gold, “If you Cut a Branch,” 319.

¹⁰¹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 4.

ontological position that recognizes nonhumans as agents, active in our physical and perceptual engagement with the world.

David Abrams is another author who is concerned with questions of embodied engagement with other species. He uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights to argue that direct sensory engagement is fundamental to human and nonhuman experience, explaining that we can never suspend participation with the world around us. Merleau-Ponty argued that perception is not a passive act; it is inherently participatory, involving a very active interplay between the perceived and the perceiving.¹⁰⁴ Starting with this notion, Abrams outlines a theory that is closely aligned with de Castro's theory of perspectivism, arguing that perception is not unidirectional; it is not simply human subjects that perceive nonhuman objects. Perception is therefore not the domain of humans alone; the nature of direct perception is reciprocal. Abrams insists "that to touch is also to feel oneself being touched, that to see is also to feel oneself seen."¹⁰⁵ Like the other theorists discussed above, Abrams believes that this type of reciprocity is acknowledged much more often by Asian and Aboriginal traditions than Western traditions. Recall that Ingold noted that among the Cree, "human persons are not set over and against a material context of inert nature, but rather are one species of person in a network of reciprocating persons."¹⁰⁶ This same sense of reciprocity described among the Cree is clearly evidenced in the composition of Bishnoi communities, their daily interactions with other species, the 29 rules, their social and economic functioning, and their history and mythology.

Aldo Leopold, a pioneer of ecological thought, made the observation that the scope of one's ethics is determined by the inclusiveness of the community with which one identifies

¹⁰⁴David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 57.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 69.

¹⁰⁶Ingold, *Perception*, 49.

oneself.¹⁰⁷ This is a simple way to think about the moral, ethical and religious implications of a community that includes *orans*, and animal shelters, and which mandates the care and inclusion of other species in their basic regulations and social and economic functions. Nearly all of the founding myths in this community involve ponds, khejari trees, drought, deer, peacocks, or oxen. Their mythology and history is rooted in the land and is location specific. Everywhere you go people will tell you Jambhoji camped here, found water here, or planted trees here. They will show you the patch of earth where Amrita Devi sacrificed her life for the trees. They will show you where they feed the birds and the dogs and tell you how important it is to share food and water with animals and young trees because resources are scarce in the desert. The embodied interactions with other species as well as religious acts of worship or storytelling are ways of dwelling with other species, they are rooted in specific locations and environmental conditions and they shape the dharma of the community.

The cardinal role of the environment in the constitution of Bishnoi dharma and identity was expressed most clearly to me by Ashok's parents. They moved to Bikaner with Ashok in their later years, but spent most of their lives in a small village. In individual interviews they each expressed the disconnectedness that they feel in the city. They both talked longingly and nostalgically about their relationship to nature in the village. Ashok's mother told me that they used to always share food with the animals in the village, but in the city it is much harder to do so, though some continue to feed the birds and dogs. There is less sharing between humans and nonhumans alike; she said it is much more individualistic and materialistic in the city and there is not a sense of community. She also said there is less love and compassion in the city; people are less willing to sacrifice for animals. She explained that cow shelters are a recent phenomenon

¹⁰⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (London: Oxford University Press), 1949.

because people used to take care of the animals in the villages, but now they are put out on the street and people with mercy take them in and care for them. What she seemed to miss the most was milking the buffalo every morning. They cannot have buffalo in the city and instead they have milk delivered from a dairy farmer twice a day. Ashok's father told me that in the villages, humans, animals, and nature are more connected. Like his wife, he expressed that there is less love in the city and that the city is less social. In the villages it is customary for Bishnois to all eat together from one plate, but in the city they eat at tables and everyone has their own plate. He spends much of his time in his home village and only stays with his family in the city occasionally. It was very clearly expressed by each of them that the 29 rules cannot all be followed in the city, and that one therefore cannot be what they call a "true Bishnoi" outside of the village context; in other words they cannot live according to their dharma.

4. “If Tree is Cut, we are Cut”: Bishnoi Dharma and Motivations

After visiting the site of the famous Khejarli Massacre my guide brought me to the local Khejarli hospital which is run by a Bishnoi doctor. He was an extremely proud Bishnoi man who enthusiastically told me about the sacrifices that took place in his village nearly 300 years ago, explaining that Bishnoi people have protected trees and animals in this area for hundreds of years. He told me that just four or five days before my visit, one of the villagers brought a peacock to the hospital because it had been injured by a dog. The doctor gave it antibiotics and cared for it; he told me that he always helps injured animals, just as he would humans. He explained that his community feels deeply connected to nonhuman life, and responsible for its protection, saying, “if animal is injured, we feel we are injured, if tree is cut, we are cut.”

There was a deep sense of connectedness demonstrated by this doctor and many other Bishnois when they explained their interactions with nonhumans. There was a relatedness and reciprocity expressed in the doctor’s statements as he spoke of the relationship between him and other living beings, and the pain he feels at the suffering of animals and trees. He and many others conveyed that they feel a strong sense of responsibility and duty toward trees and nonhuman animals based on the teachings of their Guru and the dharma of their community. This chapter will explore some central themes that emerged from the language and explanations that were used by my informants to describe relationships between humans and nonhumans among the Bishnoi.

4.1 Expressions of Duty and Dharma: Protection of Nature as “Highest Duty”

It struck me that when the doctor told me this story he spoke very little about the peacock itself, or his interaction with it. He focused rather on his spiritual connection with the animal, and his community’s beliefs and practices regarding nonhuman lives. He expressed his connection with nonhuman animals first in terms of broader themes and beliefs such as compassion, duty,

and the 29 rules, and secondarily in terms of physical interactions with an individual animal. This was common among all of my informants: relationships were not described or observed in terms of affection or emotional attachment— animals are not cute, they are not friends, they are not to be petted. Rather, they are described as sacred and vulnerable; they are in need of protection and it is humanity's responsibility to protect them.

The primary way that community members expressed their commitment to nonhumans therefore, was through the concept of dharma, which encompasses religious, moral and social duties. Duty and dharma are central concepts in Hinduism which refer especially to a person's responsibilities according to their *varna* (class), and *ashrama* (stage of life), and this is called *varnashrama-dharma*.¹⁰⁸ As a distinct caste group, Bishnois have their own set of duties and responsibilities, and each member within the community has duties based on their age, gender, and social status. This is understood as an integral aspect of how society- and the entire cosmos- functions, and how different beings are conceptualized in relation to each other. It is not only humans that are guided by their dharma; different beings have different responsibilities and duties based on their particular bodily incarnation. According to this philosophy everything exists for its own sake; every being from the awesome whale, to the crawling ant, to the ancient tree, has its own path, its own purpose, its own dharma. Many authors have contrasted this philosophy with Western ways of thinking about the world which espouse the notion that everything exists for humans. This is a hotly debated topic in the field of religion and ecology; scholars like White have argued that Western ways of understanding the world are detrimental to nature, preventing humans from acting responsibly and ethically towards other species because

¹⁰⁸ For more on the concept of duty/ dharma in the South Asian context see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and J. Duncan M. Derrett, eds., *The Concept of Duty in South Asia* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies), 1978.

they are understood to have value only for human use, rather than their own inherent value and purpose. Influential evolutionary philosopher Thomas Berry believed that “the difficulty in our relation with the animals comes from the sense of *use* as our primary relationship with the world about us.”¹⁰⁹ Some have refuted these claims, but many have turned to Eastern traditions, such as Hinduism, for positive and contrasting examples of ontological systems in which living beings have value and purpose of their own. Many believe that this orientation toward the world offers the potential to deconstruct the objectification of nonhuman others.¹¹⁰ In a utilitarian, human-centric system a doctor would likely be discouraged (or prohibited) from spending time and hospital resources treating a wild bird; whereas the Bishnoi doctor implied that the inherent value of the peacock is the same as that of his human patients.

Within this system, it is considered the duty and responsibility of the more powerful to protect the more vulnerable. Kishna Ram Bishnoi explains that, “on this earth, man is the most intelligent being and it is in his interest to ensure the safety of both mankind and the nature.”¹¹¹ This idea that humans have greater responsibility because of their particular physical and mental capacities is not unique to the Bishnoi; this theme is identified in many traditions.¹¹² Dwivedi, remarks that in Hinduism, “human beings have no special privilege or authority over other creatures; on the other hand, they have more obligations and duties.”¹¹³ He explains that there is

¹⁰⁹ Berry, “Loneliness and Presence,” 8.

¹¹⁰ This example has been used to demonstrate the positive aspects of dharmic systems. It is important to note that many scholars have criticised and debated the way that concepts of duty and dharma are used in Indian traditions to create and reinforce caste divisions, preventing people from changing their social reality, and confining them to very limited roles based on the duties assigned to their particular caste or gender.

¹¹¹ Kishna Ram Bishnoi, “Nature Conservation: The Essence of Jambhuni,” in *Religion and Environment Vol-II*, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 102-106 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., 2010), 106.

¹¹² For example, this has also been identified as a dominant theme in Biblical traditions. Humans are understood as image bearers who have a greater responsibility to act as caretakers of the earth.

¹¹³ O. P. Dwivedi and B. N. Tiwari, “Dharmic Ecology: A Foundation for the Environmental Sustainability,” in *Religion and Environment Vol-II*, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 1-24 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd, 2010), 9.

a common Hindu concept called *Loka Sangrahamevapi*, which means “to secure welfare for all by one’s deeds.”¹¹⁴

This sense of human responsibility for nonhuman animals and trees is widespread in India; in another article Dwivedi explains that, “for Hindus, the planting of a tree is still a religious duty.... The Hindu worship of trees and plants has been based partly on utility, but mostly on religious duty and mythology. Hindu ancestors considered it their duty to save trees; and in order to do that they attached to every tree a religious sanctity.”¹¹⁵ This passage is reminiscent of the teachings of Jambhoji who once said to his disciple Nathoji, “Do not fell a green tree, that is the aim of everyone, always be ready to save (trees); this is the duty of everyone.”¹¹⁶ So it is not only Bishnois whose dharma guides them toward the protection of trees and other nonhuman life. They are part of a broader Hindu tradition which imagines humans as being responsible for the protection of other life forms. Gold identified similar themes in her study of environmental protection in Rajasthan. Some of the terms that she identified as most-used when Rajasthani people talked about gods and nature were protection (*suraksa*) and responsible authority (*zimedari*).¹¹⁷

I was told in several interviews that Bishnoi actions are a matter of duty and a commitment to the 29 rules and the teachings of Jambhoji. One day when I asked Ashok about the centrality of the deer in Bishnoism, he told me that the Bishnoi do not have a special or emotional relationship with deer; they focus on deer because they are particularly vulnerable and require protection from hunters, so it is an important duty to protect them. He said that Bishnoi do this

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁵ O. P Dwivedi, “Satyagraha for Conservation: Awakening the Spirit of Hinduism,” in *The Sacred Earth: religion, nature, environment*, ed. R. S. Gottlieb, 145–157 (London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

¹¹⁶ Kishna Ram Bishnoi, “Nature Conservation,” 102.

¹¹⁷ Gold, “Of Gods Trees and Boundaries,” 215.

because Jambhoji commanded it. He now lives in the city, but as a boy he remembered the men of the village regularly going out in the night to scare off hunters; he told me that this was one of the responsibilities of the men, to protect the local animals from hunters. I was often told that the protection of the environment is their “highest duty”, and that it is a “religious duty to sacrifice”. In fact, the terms “religious duty” and “sacred duty” were some of the most frequent phrases used to describe Bishnoi commitment to the nonhuman in interviews, articles, and on websites. An article by Mani Ram Bishnoi on Bishnoi environmentalism states that “it is a tradition amongst Bishnois since the very day of the foundation of their Sect that they consider it their religious duty to be compassionate towards all living beings and provide water, grain and fodder to wild-life and birds of every species during summer and dry periods.”¹¹⁸ Compassion toward nonhumans is one of the 29 rules and therefore one of the fundamental duties of everyone in the community; performing these duties is a way of demonstrating commitment to God and to Jambhoji’s rules and teachings. Those who feed and protect nonhuman animals and trees embody a Bishnoi ethos, they are true Bishnoi, and they are living according to their dharma.

4.2 Expressions of Intimacy: Earth as Manifestation of God

The language and actions of the Bishnoi were often reminiscent of the opening pages of Peter Singer’s famous *Animal Liberation*, in which he explains that he does not care much for the company of animals and does not care for petting or cuddling; he launched the Animal Rights movement on the basis of justice. Likewise, among the Bishnoi devotion to nonhumans is based on a commitment to the 29 rules, and a profound sense of duty and responsibility to protect and share the environment. Most Bishnois for example do not like dogs or other animals that they consider dirty, and they only spend time in the company of animals if there is a distinct purpose,

¹¹⁸ Mani Ram Bishnoi, “Environmentalists by Creed,” 188.

such as putting out food for them, or milking them. But protection and compassion are mandated and strictly observed because this is the only correct and just way of interacting with nonhuman animals and trees by the laws of man and God.

Despite duty being the primary expression of connectedness with nonhumans, we cannot ignore the many examples of extreme physical intimacy. For example stories of women breastfeeding fawns, people hugging trees or animals to save them from loggers or poachers, or *sadhus* caring for sick or injured animals at temple sanctuaries. These instances are however much more rare than current literature and media suggest, and are in fact usually a last resort performed out of necessity. For example in the case of breastfeeding deer, I was told that if an orphaned fawn is found, first they will try to find another mother deer to adopt the fawn, if that is unsuccessful they will try to bottle feed the deer, and if the deer rejects the bottle, only then will a woman take the deer into her home and nurse it. These acts are a matter of necessity and duty based on social and spiritual responsibility and correct dharma; they are not common practices, and are not done out of a desire to cuddle or coddle nonhumans.

Ashok's mother told me that despite not liking certain animals she still has a responsibility to take care of them. She explained that Guru Jambheshwar told his people to feed and give water to animals. She said that she does not like dogs, they are dirty, and she won't let them near the house, but when she was living in the village her family would still always go outside and give the dogs the first roti of every meal. Now her son, Ashok and her grandson go out to give the dogs in the city roti. During the time that I stayed with them there was a new litter of street puppies that had been born a few blocks away. Ashok and his young son went out several times a week to feed them (at the constant urging and pestering of the little boy). One day when we went to feed them, we heard whimpering. One of the puppies was stuck in the gutter at

the side of the road. Ashok's son was quite dismayed, but Ashok quickly came to the rescue, digging the puppy out of the sludge, and after a dirty, wet shake, he sent him on his way. So while this family is unable to continue many of their traditions in the city, and the opportunities are much more limited, they still make efforts to feed and protect nonhuman animals outside the village context.

There are many examples such as this – either small everyday interactions, or monumental sacrifices and extreme acts of kindness – that show that despite the lack of emotional attachment demonstrated or verbally elaborated by my informants, the sensual, material world and physical interactions with nonhumans are still extremely important. In her book *Darśan*, Diana Eck beautifully elaborates the centrality of the visual and sensual world in India. The book focuses on the practice of *darśan*, which refers to the exchange of vision between humans and the divine in the Hindu ritual tradition. Eck illustrates that sensory experiences are related to truth and genuine understanding, as the sacred is thought to be present in the visible world. She asserts that the only way to know India, is to see India¹¹⁹ - indeed, the sights, colours and sounds of India swirl together in an indescribable way; coloured fabrics, flowers, roadside shrines, sacred images, statues, temples, and decorated cows assault the senses on Rajasthani streets. The divine is seen in deer, peacocks, rats, trees, temples, images of Jambhoji, Krishna, Ganesh and Hanuman displayed prominently in homes, vehicles and shops – one sees the divine everywhere. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching are active experiences that allow one to perceive, know, and connect with the world and with the divine. Hindus emphasize vision because of the affirmation of the visible, material world as a manifestation of God. The whole sensorium is seen as an important access to the sacred.

¹¹⁹ Diana Eck. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Reissue (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998, 2007), 11.

This relates to broader Hindu notions about the interrelatedness of beings. Guru Jambheshwar promoted compassion based on the idea that all beings are divine and essentially the same. In his 10th *sabda* he states that “if you remember that the divinity residing in your heart also resides in animals, you will surely achieve bahist, heaven.”¹²⁰ So while the Bishnoi tend not to demonstrate affection or emotional attachment, there is an intimacy and relatedness expressed by the Bishnoi regarding the nonhuman. This connection is primarily articulated through a sense of duty and responsibility toward other beings and the 29 rules. They feel it is their dharma to protect nonhuman animals and trees according to the teachings of their Guru. But while this sense of duty and metaphysical connectedness is paramount, the sensory is also essential because the material is a manifestation of the divine, and they therefore have a responsibility to engage with it and protect it, otherwise they are not true Bishnois. This is experienced so deeply that it is not uncommon for humans to go to great lengths, sometimes sacrificing their own lives for the sake of their nonhuman kin.

¹²⁰ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 60.

5. Principles worth Killing for, Principles worth Dying for: Notions of Nonviolence and Sacrifice among the Bishnoi

In 2002 a Bishnoi author collected and published an article documenting 128 accounts of Bishnoi protection and sacrifice for wildlife, and 5 accounts of sacrifices for trees. These are just two examples from his series:

#1

“Mr. Nihal Chand (30) son of Mr. Hanumanji Dharania Bishnoi of village Sanwatsar, Churu, Rajasthan made the supreme sacrifice of his life on 3-10-1996 following his great Guru’s commandment: “Save all beings even at own’s life”. Bawari poachers of the nearby village Badnu were poaching the black bucks. On hearing the gun shot Mr. Nihal Chand single handed and unarmed reached at the spot when the poachers were collecting the dead bodies of the black buck. He engaged them when one of the poachers fired at him and murdered him...Government of Rajasthan awarded him posthumously, Amrita Devi Smariti Puruskar on 28-8-97”¹²¹

#2

“A Nephew of the Nawab of Bahawalpur (now in Pakistan) planned for poaching antelopes in the fields of Mr. Kahna Ramji Bishnoi in the revenue estate Of Muharwali during night time so that the Bishnois may not be able to see them. Somehow, the scheme was leaked out to a Bishnoi of that village. He immediately conveyed this information to other Bishnois of the village. A large number of them gathered with fire arms or other indigenous arms available to them, marched to the field located at about 3 kilometers away from the locality in advance. The poaching party when arrived at the spot at about 9 p.m., were warned by the Bishnoi that they were fully armed and prepared to retaliate if a single shot is fired at any antelope. Seeing the violent mood of the Bishnois, the poaching party returned empty handed. This incident took place in 1945”¹²²

Though Bishnois are well known for their willingness to sacrifice, current literature and media does not always emphasise their equal willingness to fight, or even kill, in the name of protecting trees and wild animals.

¹²¹ Mani Ram Bishnoi, “Environmentalists by Creed,” 173.

¹²² Ibid., 158.

I heard countless stories of Bishnoi people beating up hunters; the stories in Mani Ram Bishnoi's collection tell of Bishnoi people "thrashing" Muslims for fishing on their land, or "beating" British men for hunting deer. In almost every village I went to, Bishnois proudly told me that non-Bishnoi people are too scared to hunt or cut trees on Bishnoi land; they have a reputation for defending their land violently. There are even stories of women committing violent acts in the name of protecting trees and wild animals. One of Mani Ram Bishnoi's stories tells that: "Miss Sharda Bishnoi of village Mehrana (Mehrajpur) Ferozepur, Punjab forced two poachers not to hunt in her field. She even injured one of them with her sickle, brought him in the village and produced him before the village gathering."¹²³

On several occasions I was informed about an incident that took place in 1998, when famous Bollywood actor Salman Khan hunted and killed two blackbucks and several chinkara gazelles on Bishnoi land. This has become a big news story in India and the Bishnoi have fought strongly to have Khan convicted.¹²⁴ When people told this story they were visibly upset, most notably a *sadhu* – a holy man – who told me that no Bishnoi would ever watch a Salman Khan movie, and that if he ever saw Salman Khan he would kill him. I was taken aback by these statements at first. Jambhoji's *sabdās* and the 29 rules discuss and mandate *ahimsa* (nonviolence) towards humans and nonhumans alike, and demonstrate the same themes of *ahimsa* found in Jain, Buddhist and Upanishadic texts. I quickly had to re-examine just what this concept meant to the Bishnoi in the context of self-sacrifice and protection of other beings.

¹²³ Ibid., 166.

¹²⁴ For more details on the case see Maseeh Rahman, "Bollywood Actors Charged in Poaching Case," *The Guardian* (March 24th, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/mar/24/bollywood-actors-charged-poaching>.

5.1 Radical Inversion: Notions of Sacrifice

It is important to contextualise these acts of self-sacrifice and violence. The concept of sacrifice, in all its different expressions and interpretations, is central to Indian traditions. Many scholars of religion believe that theories of sacrifice are at the heart of theories of religion itself, as it demonstrates human efforts to connect with, or construct, some kind of sacred reality, and understand the interplay of life and death.¹²⁵ A particular group's notion and practice of sacrifice can tell us a great deal about their worldview generally, and their conceptualization of the relationships between humans and nonhumans more specifically. The broad concept of sacrifice is a fruitful area in which to examine both the physical and conceptual relationships between humans and nonhumans, particularly in India where sacrificial language dominates the religious scene.

Sacrifice is central to Bishnoi worldviews and religious self-conception. Not ritual sacrifice in the traditional sense of the term, but rather, their commitment to self-sacrifice in the service of protecting other species. The heading of a Bishnoi website reads "Bishnoism: An Eco Dharma of the people who are ready to sacrifice their lives to save trees and wild animals."¹²⁶ This theme is emphasised throughout Bishnoi literature and mythology; they call events of sacrifice, such as those at Khejarli, *khadana*. This willingness to die for trees and nonhuman animals has become a hallmark of their tradition, used by insiders and outsiders alike to define the Bishnoi as a distinctive group. Interestingly, this custom is not just an ideal, or a practice from myth and legend; it is relatively commonplace and has happened dozens of times in the past

¹²⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, "General Introduction," in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*. ed. Jeffrey Carter (Continuum: New York, 2003), 1.

¹²⁶ Rajender Bishnoi, "Bishnois, the First Environmentalists of India."

few centuries.¹²⁷ I was told by my informants that it is the duty of the Bishnoi to sacrifice their lives for trees or wild animals, and 95% of Bishnoi people would do so if they had to.¹²⁸ It makes up an essential part of the lived tradition. I have not come across a single story of someone giving their life for another human; the focus is entirely on the willingness to sacrifice oneself for *nonhuman* others. These actions evidently demonstrate something profound about the understanding of human and nonhuman roles and relationships among the Bishnoi.

This practice which has so influenced their self-conception as a distinctive community has, of course, emerged out of a very specific historical context. Many Bishnoi practices and teachings developed out of a rejection of animal sacrifice, which was commonly practiced in other religious traditions in India during the time that Jambhoji lived and taught. Jambhoji's 45th *sabda* expresses that yogis performing animal sacrifices are misguided: "O yogi! You pierce your ears and torture your body but this is mere fraud, not yoga. You grow your hair and practice animal violence; this is fraud, not yoga at all."¹²⁹ In *sabdas* 12 and 13 Jambhoji criticises animal sacrifice in Islam saying:

Hey! Why do you kill innocent animals? God will ask for the account of your actions! You know how to ply knife on them but do not know their pain. You just read *namāz* blindly. A beast that grazes upon the forest grass and provides milk to you, only its milk is pure and to be consumed, why do you ply knife on its throat?... O ignorant! If you do not identify your moral duties, you will certainly be put in the hell. O qāzi! Do not quote Mohammad to support your animal-violence. His thoughts were quite complex and

¹²⁷ For examples see Mani Ram Bishnoi, "Environmentalists by Creed," 152-192. and Jain, *Dharma and Ecology* 64-71.

¹²⁸ I was told that the other 5% have either been influenced by other religions, or substance abuse (alcohol, opium etc.).

¹²⁹ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 146.

different from yours. His was the sword of knowledge that removed the sins of his people, not the iron sword!¹³⁰

Jambhoji was certainly not the first to react against animal sacrifice in India, these criticisms are reminiscent of much earlier Indian texts. For example the Hindu epic the Mahabharata, expresses a similar sentiment, stating that “Rishis told the Gods that according to the Vedas and Shruties, the sacrificial offering should be of grain. The term, “Aj” does not mean animal or goat as you denote, the term means only grain or seed. Thus an animal must not be sacrificed. Further, that cannot be a true Dharma of a moral people which sanctions the killing of any animal.”¹³¹

Despite these types of criticism of animal sacrifice, the concept of sacrifice has remained central in Hinduism. Jambhoji was part of a broader movement which began seven centuries before his time; these centuries saw a transition from the early Vedic period that focused on ritual animal sacrifice, to Classical Hindu ideals of internal sacrifice through fasting and meditation elaborated in the Upanishads. In the early Vedic period *yajna* rituals were performed by the Brahmins according to strict rules. These animal sacrifices were not considered to be violent and they were understood as being necessary in order to sustain the universe, as death brings forth life. Laurie Patton explains that “sacrifice of an animal into the fire was part of the ecological balance in the ancient Vedic world; the killing and distribution of the animal was part of a larger understanding of human harmony with natural forces.”¹³² The Laws of Manu declare that animals were created for sacrifice; this text asserts that violence ordained by the Vedas is really nonviolence, stating that “killing in sacrifice is not killing”.¹³³ It proclaims that animals

¹³⁰ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 138.

¹³¹ *Shantiparva, Moksha-dharma parva*, chapter 337, verses 4 and 5.

¹³² Patton, “Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice,” 43.

¹³³ *Laws of Manu*, 5.42.

and plants that are sacrificed are in fact benefited spiritually, being reborn in the “highest level of existence.”¹³⁴

Suchitra Samanta, in describing modern day animal sacrifice to the goddess Kali, explains that there is often an identification made between the animal and the negative aspects of the sacrificer. Within this view, sacrifice therefore represents the destruction of the animal/ demonic quality of the practitioner.¹³⁵ This is reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian concept of the scapegoat and many other similar examples from different religious traditions. This practice can evidently tell us a great deal about the relationship between nonhumans and humans (particularly their evil/ demonic/ sinful aspects). There is certainly a sense of identification between human and nonhuman animals, but it seems to manifest strictly in negative terms. The human is seen as the superior being, whose well-being and survival is worth more than that of the victim. Though the animal is often thought to benefit, animal sacrifice is primarily done for the benefit of the human sacrificer. Bishnoi philosophy, emerging out of a strict rejection of animal sacrifice, in many ways represents the opposite approach to sacrifice. Rather than giving the other in order to save the self, the Bishnoi ideal is to give the self in order to save the other. While it’s still a substitution of sorts, the roles are inverted.

Another common feature of animal sacrifice seems to be the concept of the voluntary victim. For example, Samanta explains that the animal is understood to go willingly, and express a desire to be reborn as a man.¹³⁶ The Bishnoi reject this notion, teaching that all nonhumans suffer and want to live. A Bishnoi website explains that “every living creature have right to

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵Suchitra Samanta, “The ‘Self-Animal’ and Divine Digestion: Goat Sacrifice to the Goddess Kali in Bengal,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 (1994): 793.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

live... all living creature feels pain when hurt [*sic*].”¹³⁷ Like other Indian traditions, the Bishnoi believe that humans are the only species capable of recognizing their state in *samsara*; they are therefore logically the only species capable of truly being willing victims. Ashok told me that Bishnoi say you should sacrifice yourself or your child if you truly believe in sacrifice; animal sacrifice is cowardly. This *human* willingness to sacrifice is celebrated among the Bishnoi and demonstrated in their stories. For example in the version of the Khejadali story told on a Bishnoi website, Amritra Devi’s daughters are said to have unflinchingly followed in their mother’s footsteps after they saw her murdered; it reads “her three young daughters were not scared and offered their heads too.”¹³⁸

The historical practice of animal sacrifice evidently had a huge impact on Bishnoism and many other dharma traditions that emerged out of India. It seems as though the practice of self-sacrifice among the Bishnoi is not just a rejection of animal sacrifice, but a radical inversion of it, where the human becomes the willing victim, and the animal is saved. This makes them quite distinct from other traditions that emphasise *ahimsa* such as Jains or other vegetarian Vaishnavite groups. It could be however that the same mechanism is at work with self-sacrifice as with animal sacrifice; the same understanding and celebration of a sacrificial world in which death maintains life. In any case, this practice allows Bishnoi people to connect with nonhumans on a more intimate level both physically and conceptually. I was told that children are taught from a young age that it is one’s duty to sacrifice oneself for trees or wild animals if necessary. Children grow up watching their fathers go out at night to chase hunters, watching their mothers give grain to birds and wild animals, and hearing about or experiencing the death or injury of a community member in the name of wildlife protection. They are taught that nonhumans,

¹³⁷ Jeta Ram Sohu. *All India Jeev Raksha Bishnoi Sabha*. <http://jeevraksha.com/> (accessed May 5, 2015).

¹³⁸ Rajender Bishnoi, “Bishnois, the First Environmentalists of India.”

particularly trees and deer, are sacred, innocent and vulnerable, and that they are in need of protection. People who have sacrificed themselves are seen as heroes within the community. The mythology and lived experiences around sacrifice go a long way in creating and maintaining a specific set of dharmic principles that guide relationships between humans and nonhumans. This is part of a greater system in which nonhumans are understood to have a soul, a dharma, and are inherently valuable. From a young age one internalizes a sense of duty and a moral framework that implies, not only that nonhumans have value beyond material value, but that they have value beyond *human* value. Acts of self-sacrifice reinforce these ideas because they are felt, celebrated, mourned and remembered by the entire community. Events of sacrifice are celebrated annually at the Tree Fair, monuments are built to memorialize those who sacrifice, and animals that are killed by hunters are given a ceremonial burial.¹³⁹ This practice has evidently had a profound effect on human self-conception and the conception of nonhumans in the community, as these physical acts inform, and are informed by their conceptual understanding of the world and their place in it.

5.2 Soldiers of God: Notions of *Ahimsa*

Jambhoji's teachings elaborate an ethic of extreme nonviolence toward other species, not just in cases of ritual slaughter, but in all harmful acts. Jambhoji mandated that bugs be removed from wood and dung before being burned. As quoted above, one of the Guru's verses asks "by whose sanction do butchers kill sheep and goats? Since even a prick of a thorn is extremely painful to human beings, is it proper to indulge in those killings? Therefore, these animals should be treated as own kith and kin and should not be harmed in any way."¹⁴⁰ This orientation toward

¹³⁹ Nonhuman animals that die naturally are not memorialized or buried. This treatment is reserved only for those who are killed by hunters, struck by cars, or otherwise die in an unnatural way.

¹⁴⁰ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 72.

other beings is not uncommon in India. Jainism is another Indian tradition renowned for the emphasis it places on *ahimsa*, and therefore offers some context and interesting comparisons to Bishnoi practices of self-sacrifice and protection of nonhumans.

Jainism embodies many concepts about *samsara*, karma, and *ahimsa* that also form the foundations of the Bishnoi understanding of the nonhuman. In fact, in many ways the two traditions are quite similar. One could easily engage in a lengthy comparison between the two, but I would like to focus on the Jain practice of *sallekhana* because I think it offers the most interesting and relevant comparison to self-sacrifice among the Bishnoi.

Sallekhana is a fast to death, which represents the ideal death for a Jain because they die in a state of non-consuming, and therefore nonviolence. It is a nonresistant death, void of passion or desire, in which all worldly ties are severed. This is the ideal death for a Jain because they understand everything in the world to have a soul, including food and water, and they believe that nonviolence to other beings is of utmost importance on the road to liberation. It is therefore noble to let the body go, rather than kill other living beings in order to survive. If this vow is taken it is usually at the end of one's life, when sickness or old age begin to overwhelm the body.

The Bishnoi orientation toward the nonhuman and their ethic of nonviolence, are therefore in line with many Jain teachings. The centrality of *ahimsa* in both traditions expresses respect for individual living beings as subjects who are equal and have the capacity to feel pain. Being human is a privilege because of one's awareness of *samsara*, but it does not imply greater moral worth. Like Bishnoism, Jainism therefore provides a challenge to traditional hierarchies, envisioning a more intimate connection with other living beings. The central Jain text, the *Acaranga Sutra*, explains that no being wishes to suffer or die, and each being should be allowed

to live and evolve without interference.¹⁴¹ The nonhuman is therefore absolutely central to the construction of the ethical self in both of these traditions. Anne Valley explains that for Jains, moral worth and enlightenment can only be attained through our embodied experience and interactions with the nonhuman.¹⁴² She states that “nature is the moral theatre within which one’s ethical being is established.”¹⁴³ This statement is made in reference to Jainism specifically, but it could certainly be extended to include Bishnoism as well. We find the practice of *sallekhana* in Jainism, and self-sacrifice in Bishnoism precisely because one can only progress towards liberation and fulfill one’s dharma by deeply engaging with the nonhuman. For both, these are considered good deaths worth celebrating because they demonstrate the correct engagement with the nonhuman according to each respective dharma. As James Laidlaw explains, these practices are not understood to be in tension with the ethic of nonviolence, but rather in harmony with it.¹⁴⁴

Though there is evidently a deep connection between these two practices, there are also some significant differences. The Jain practice of *sallekhana* requires a complete lack of passion; it is expressed as a path of non-action. The focus of the practice is self-effort and the goal is self-realization. It is an individual, soul-focused and inward-looking path that requires patience and withdrawal from the world. A common name for the practice of *sallekhana* is *samadhi-maran*, which means “death while in meditation.”¹⁴⁵ The Bishnoi practice of self-sacrifice on the other

¹⁴¹ Michael Tobias, “Jainism and Ecology,” in *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm, 138-147 (Philadelphia: Bucknell Press, 1993), 145.

¹⁴² Anne Valley, “Being Sentiently with Others: The Shared Existential Trajectory Among Humans and Nonhumans in Jainism,” in *Asian Perspectives on Animal Ethics: Rethinking the Nonhuman*, edited by Neil Dalal, 38-55 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 40.

¹⁴³ Anne Valley, “From Liberation to Ecology: Ethical Discourses among Orthodox and Diaspora Jains,” in *Jainism and Ecology: Nonviolence in the Web of Life*, ed. Christopher Chapple, 193-216 (Cambridge: for the Study of World Religions, 2002), 213.

¹⁴⁴ James Laidlaw, “A Life Worth Leaving: Fasting to Death as Telos of a Jain Religious Life,” *Economy and Society* 4, no. 2 (2005): 181.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

hand is often explained in very passionate and active terms, as was demonstrated above. These acts are often fervent and spontaneous, far from the meditative, renunciatory ideal of the Jains. Both Jains and Bishnoi are willing to die to uphold their ideals of nonviolence, but they each have a different understanding of what that interaction should look like, and how to achieve *ahimsa*. For Jains the answer is withdrawal, while for the Bishnoi the answer is active engagement.

There are of course examples of active engagement in the name of *ahimsa* within the Jain community, such as their *panjrapoles* (animal shelters), which are popular in India. This engagement is only demonstrated among the householders however, and does not embody the ideal of renunciation, or the spirit of *sallekhana*. For Jains this ideal moral state can *only* be attained through disengagement and isolation from the world.¹⁴⁶ Jains reject the idea of a sacrificial world in which death brings forth life; believing that the cycle is ultimately meaningless. However as Hindus, the Bishnoi are more accepting of a sacrificial understanding of the world, and encouraging of active engagement in the world, contrary to the Jain ethic of non-interference and renunciation.

There are however examples of passive, nonviolent resistance within the Bishnoi community as well. One of Mani Ram Bishnoi's stories tells that "Maharaja Takhat Singh, the then ruler of Marwar (Jodhpur) went to village Hingoli, Jodhpur, Rajasthan for hunting the black bucks. The Bishnoi of that village prayed *en mass* for saving of the wild-life. Fortunately, no black buck was hit by the Maharaja's bullets whereupon hunting was forbidden by him in Bishnoi villages of his State. This incident took place in 1843 A.D."¹⁴⁷ More recently there are several stories that tell of Bishnoi people sitting in protest; for example when "Ban Bawari

¹⁴⁶ Valley, "From Liberation to Ecology," 203.

¹⁴⁷ Mani Ram Bishnoi, "Environmentalists by Creed," 153.

poachers had poached 40 black bucks and 4 peacocks in the territories of village Sanwatsar, Churu, Rajasthan on 27-10-1999. As no action was taken against the poachers by the administration, therefore, a large number of Bishnois and animal lovers sat in protest at Mahatma Gandhi Samadhi in the National Capital.”¹⁴⁸ While examples of active engagement exist in the Jain community, and examples of passive resistance exist in the Bishnoi community, these are not the dominant discourses or frameworks that guide their understanding of, and engagement with nonhumans. Each community has a different approach to achieving correct and nonviolent relationships with other beings.

So, although *ahimsa* has had an important historical role in the development of Bishnoi dharma and practices through the rejection of animal sacrifice, the teachings of Jambhoji, and the influence of shramanic traditions and the Upanishads, we still have many examples of aggressive incidents and attitudes within the community. The 29 rules encourage patience and forgiveness; they dictate that one must crush anger, and “not waste time on argument”.¹⁴⁹ However, when other rules are being threatened- such as the commandment to not cut green trees or to remain pure vegetarian - aggression is encouraged. Ashok informed me that the specific concept of *ahimsa* is not present in popular teachings or discourses at all. He said that within the community sacrifice for trees and wild animals is not talked about in terms of *ahimsa*, rather, it is taught and talked about in terms of duty, responsibility, and following the 29 rules. They sometimes speak in terms of compassion, but *only* regarding nonhumans. He told me that these beings are vulnerable and need human protection; he said that humans do not need compassion or protection because they are not vulnerable. Another Bishnoi man in Rudkali village told me that if people kill nonhuman animals, Bishnoi people will kill them. He told me that a Bishnoi would

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 175.

¹⁴⁹ Appendix A.

be proud to kill a hunter, in fact God orders hunters to be killed. In this way they seem to fully inhabit a Kshatriya ethos.¹⁵⁰ Though the community is made up of many different religious and caste groups, Jambhoji was a Rajput, and the community still seems to possess this Rajput spirit. The Rajput of Rajasthan are renowned for their martial valour; their emphasis on courage, honour and valour is also why we find the practice of sati among Rajput women.¹⁵¹ Among this group it is understood that there are principles worth dying for – even killing for –, and that it is their duty, or their dharma, to uphold these principles and maintain order. In this way, they consider themselves soldiers of God.

5.3 Violence as Nonviolence in the Bhagavad-Gita

These duties are not considered to be violent. Like sacrifice in the Vedas, these destructive acts are understood as being necessary to achieve *ahimsa* and harmony. These duties are done out of devotion to God. The Bhagavad-Gita demonstrates this ethos perfectly through the story of Krishna and Arjuna. In this famous and influential story, Pandava prince and warrior Arjuna rides to battle against his Kaurava cousins. The Gita takes the form of a dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna. Arjuna expresses doubt about going to war, saying “I see omens of chaos, Krishna; I see no good in killing my kinsmen in battle.”¹⁵² He questions the violence of the war, and his role in it, saying “honor forbids us to kill our cousins, Dhritarashtra’s sons; how can we know happiness if we kill our own kinsmen?”¹⁵³ Krishna challenges Arjuna, saying that he must fight. He confronts him by saying “Don’t yield to impotence! It is unnatural

¹⁵⁰ Kshatriyas are one of the four main caste groups. Traditionally the Kshatriyas were responsible for both governance and the military. They are rulers and warriors.

¹⁵¹ Sati refers to a practice in which a widowed woman commits suicide by throwing herself on her husband’s funeral pyre.

¹⁵² *The Bhagavad-Gita*, 1:31.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1:37.

in you! Banish this petty weakness from your heart. Rise to the fight, Arjuna!”¹⁵⁴ For the next 17 chapters Krishna goes on to explain why Arjuna must fight and how he must perform his duties without anger or attachment, and out of devotion to God. Krishna explains that as a Kshatriya it is Arjuna’s duty and dharma to fight in this war. Krishna asks of him, “Look to your own duty; do not tremble before it; nothing is better for a warrior than a battle of sacred duty.”¹⁵⁵ Every being must do its part to sustain the cycle- death brings forth life and, though nonviolence is valued highly, certain acts of destruction are necessary. Krishna says to Arjuna “Death is certain for anyone born, and birth is certain for the dead; since the cycle is inevitable, you have no cause to grieve!”¹⁵⁶ The Gita is in fact understood as a text of nonviolence, Arjuna is not called to violence, he is called to eradicate evil and fulfill his dharma. Harming or killing another to uphold your sacred duties, or declaring that God orders hunters to be killed, are both consistent with these broader ideas about destruction and nonviolence in Hinduism that are elaborated in the Gita.

In her analysis of nature romanticism in interpretations of Rgvedic texts, Patton explains this broad Vedic theme saying that it is “an ecological commonplace to claim that, as inherent processes in nature, decay and violence are necessary for nourishment, and that creativity requires a movement between life and death.”¹⁵⁷ She goes on to assert that this theme is largely ignored in the literature on Hinduism and ecology, saying, “However, in our ecological readings of the ancient worlds we very rarely incorporate these insights and cautions from ancient sacrificial processes into our ecological sensibilities of the twentieth and twenty-first

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 2:3.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 2:31.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 2:27.

¹⁵⁷ Patton, “Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice,” 43.

centuries.”¹⁵⁸ Destruction is a central theme in Hinduism, and must be understood in tandem with themes of *ahimsa*. Patton acknowledges the importance of academic work that explores themes of nonviolence¹⁵⁹ - but she urges scholars not to romanticise Vedic texts, believing that “our responsibility is to a holistic reading that realistically takes in both harmonious and disharmonious, creative and destructive accounts of ecology.”¹⁶⁰

While there is space in the Hindu worldview for this duty-driven, necessary destruction, Arjuna’s initial rejection of war is adversely celebrated by Jains as a moment of *samyak darshan*, which means right belief, faith or intuition into the fundamental truth of *ahimsa*. Therefore while notions of *ahimsa* in Jainism and Hinduism are rooted in similar teachings, there are fundamental differences. For Jains there is no such thing as necessary violence or destruction. This further explains the differences between the active and aggressive approach to protection and self-sacrifice taken by the Bishnoi, as opposed to the passive, renunciatory practice of *sallekhana* for Jains. While concepts of *ahimsa* are fundamental to both practices, the way these concepts are imagined and realized are very different in each tradition. It is for this reason that it is so important to contextualise one’s concept of violence- there is not a universal understanding of the term, even among Indian traditions that draw on much of the same history and teachings.

5.4 *Ahimsa* in Practice: Something Unique

Buddhism is another tradition that encourages nonviolence, emerging out of the same historical and philosophical lineage as Jainism and Upanishadic Hinduism. One Buddhist story offers both interesting points of comparison, and opportunities to expand on the uniqueness of Bishnoi practices. Chapple explains that “in the Jataka Mala, the Suvarnaprabhasa, and the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Such as Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self*.

¹⁶⁰ Patton, “Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice,” 43.

Avadana-kalpalata a story is told in which a Buddhist throws himself before a hungry tigress so that she may feed her cubs.¹⁶¹



Figure 14 The Starving Tigress, artist unknown. Jataka Tale. Buryatia, 1800–1899. Ground mineral pigment on cotton. Collection of Buryat Historical Museum.

Versions of this story are recounted in several Buddhist texts; the tale is reminiscent of Bishnoi events of self-sacrifice, and their frequent declarations that they would starve before letting an animal go hungry. However, the story of the tigress makes up part of Buddhist mythology, not their lived tradition as it does with the Bishnoi. Hundreds of Bishnoi people have died or been injured in these types of events. Many Bishnois regularly put themselves in danger to uphold their duty to protect trees and nonhuman animals, and children are taught from a young age that this is an essential responsibility as a human being. These acts make up a fundamental part of their self-conception as humans, and their identity as a community. I am not aware of any Buddhist communities that act on the teachings represented in the story of the hungry tigress,

¹⁶¹ Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self*, 24.

regularly sacrificing themselves to feed or protect nonhuman animals. I would propose therefore that while the teachings, the philosophy and the conceptual relationships between humans and nonhumans may be similar in all dharma traditions, including Bishnoism, the concrete interactions between the Bishnoi and nonhumans, and their specific sense of personal duty may offer something unique. Certain Bishnoi philosophies and everyday interactions between species may look similar to other Indian communities; but the widespread willingness to sacrifice, and the profound sense of duty and responsibility for nonhuman others in this community is unlike any other of which I am aware. The members of this community see the protection of nonhumans, not just as an ideal or philosophy, but as an essential part of their daily life and dharma.

The uniqueness of the Bishnoi sense of personal responsibility and willingness to sacrifice can also be demonstrated by comparing their actions to accounts of environmental protection among other communities in Rajasthan. Gold has collected stories of environmental protection, and tree protection in particular, all over Rajasthan.¹⁶² Of the stories in her extensive collection, most tell of divine intervention and protection, rather than human intervention and protection. She observed that in many communities sacred groves and shrines were places of natural beauty and lush greenery in the otherwise barren desert landscape. This inspired her to collect stories about the green spaces where these divinities live. She soon learned that many Gods objected to their trees being cut; the Gods had strictly defined boundaries around their shrines where humans refrained from exploiting the environment. She says that “environmental deterioration within any divinity’s boundary would surely be displeasing to that divinity... any persons who violated a potent deity’s proscriptions, by accident or deliberately, were likely to receive *parcya* or “proofs.” This term may refer to any god’s tangible manifestations, whether as

¹⁶² Gold, “Of Gods Trees and Boundaries.”

grace or chastisement, but is used in shrine-violation accounts specifically for punishments.”¹⁶³

She recounts stories of Gods protecting their land fiercely; people attempting to cut trees fall ill, become blind, their machines or tools break and occasionally they even die. She explains that these are examples of “a god’s swift response to boundary-violation in the form of “proofs”.

The Bishnoi have stories like this too. One Bishnoi man brought me to a beautiful pond surrounded by green trees just outside of his village in order to show me the location of a similar story of divine protection. He told me that in the time of Jambhoji there was a sadhu poet named Surjudass who worshipped and did *havan* at this pond. After his death, hunters came to this place and died of heart attacks when the spirit of the sadhu appeared to them. This is now a protected holy place, the water in the pond is very sweet, and there is a certain type of tree that only grows in this area. The Bishnoi planted 120 additional trees around the pond: the same number of the Guru’s *sabd*s.



Figure 15 Surjudassji’s pond, photo by Alexis Reichert

¹⁶³ Gold and Gujar, “Of Gods Tress and Boundaries,” 212.

This story fits the style of many of the stories that were collected by Gold. Gold identifies deities as the primary sources of protection and preservation of green spaces in Rajasthan. Her analysis and assessment of the stories that she collected all across the state is as follows: “These stories are representative of many similar ones in currency all over Rajasthan and beyond. Taken together they express a cultural conviction that deities can and will protect the purity and integrity of their domains...Divine affinity for an intact natural environment is understood and appreciated by devotees who pass on these stories, and who for the most part – out of fear and respect- refrain from violating divine interdictions on exploiting the land within shrine boundaries.”¹⁶⁴

Though this kind of story does exist among the Bishnoi, it is not common; in fact the only story of divine protection that I heard was that of the *sadhu* poet. Every other story that I was told was one of *human* protection and intervention. Non-Bishnoi people are afraid of the Bishnoi, not any divinity; they do not hunt or cut trees on Bishnoi land because of Bishnoi wrath, not divine wrath. Though they do it out of devotion to God, it is the Bishnoi themselves who can and will protect the purity and integrity of their domains, not divinities.

Gold’s collection of stories comes from communities all over Rajasthan, and one of the stories recounted happens to be from the Bishnoi community; it is, of course, the famous story of the Khejarli Massacre. In her analysis she remarks on their uniqueness very briefly, mentioning that while the story of Khejarli has the theme of tree protection in common with other stories “it is otherwise unlike them. It is a tale of divinely inspired human heroics, of awesome but not mythologically unprecedented self-sacrifice. While other protection stories show gods defending

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 222.

nature, here humans defend nature because it embodies divinity.”¹⁶⁵ Gold does not elaborate on this any further, as her analysis is devoted to exploring and uncovering the dominant theme of divine protection, not deviances from this dominant framework. However, when focusing on the Bishnoi specifically, this inconsistency becomes very interesting and telling. Gold’s quote points to both of the unique characteristics that I have identified in this section. She remarks first on the distinctiveness of extreme human intervention, but she also, perhaps more subtly, remarks on my first point about the story of the hungry tigress. Gold states that these acts of self-sacrifice are “not mythologically unprecedented”, implying that there are no precedents in the lived tradition. Although there is a theoretical and mythological context for the actions of the Bishnoi, it is much more difficult to find concrete examples to contextualise this willingness to sacrifice for nonhumans.

The Bishnoi are willing to sacrifice because they see these acts as a personal responsibility; it is not just an ethical or mythological ideal that nonhumans be protected, but the personal duty of each member of the community to ensure that not a single tree or animal dies if it could have been prevented. As discussed in the previous chapter, themes of duty, dharma and the 29 rules dominate Bishnoi teachings and discourses. Nature embodies divinity and the Bishnoi are called to protect it, this is how they demonstrate devotion to God; this is the correct way to engage with the nonhuman. This chapter has elaborated on what this sense of dharma means in the context of Bishnoi attitudes towards sacrifice and *ahimsa*. Aggression or destruction in the name of protection is justified; it is a necessary form of violence used to uphold one’s duties and maintain harmony and *ahimsa*. Self-sacrifice and active engagement are correct actions that are in line with personal dharma and the dharma of the community as a whole. A father expresses this poignantly saying “My son was killed by poachers, when he tried

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

to save a deer from them. I grieve for him, but I am happy, he became a martyr, while protecting the Bishnoi faith.”¹⁶⁶

This chapter has also demonstrated that these themes and practices are both in line with, and distinct from other dharma traditions. Bishnoi relationships with the nonhuman, while at home in the Indian/ Rajasthani context, are at once unique in their own right.

I often asked if those who sacrificed their lives attained liberation through their actions, for surely such a commitment to one’s duties is karmically rewarded. A few said “yes”, however most of my informants told me that they did not know; they said nobody knows. I was told that these actions are not talked about in terms of karma or liberation; one does not sacrifice for the benefit of one’s own soul, but rather for the safekeeping of the other, a commitment to the 29 rules and to one’s duties as a Bishnoi and a human. These people are heroes, but they are not talked about as liberated souls; they are talked about as “true Bishnois” or “pure Bishnois”.

¹⁶⁶ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 69.

6. Pigs Lie in Filth, Deer Clean their Spot Before they Lie Down: Ontological Structures of Purity and Impurity

Stories of Bishnoi sacrifice and commitment to animals almost always feature deer, peacocks, or khejeri trees. In trying to understand what it is about these species, above others, that inspires such devotion I asked many questions regarding the nature of different living beings. At first when I inquired about the differences between species I was told that “all living beings are equal”. When I asked about the difference between a khejari tree and the crops that people grow for example, I was told that “God gave some green plants for food, it is okay to cut those plants, but all souls are equal, one is not superior to the other.” Khejari trees are however often talked about as being very sacred, and in practice I saw that they were loved and revered much more than other plants; hundreds of Bishnois have died for this tree, but no one has sacrificed themselves for say, a mustard plant. The deer is also highly revered within the community, but I remarked that there was little love or respect for the pig. So approximately five days into my stay, while in Rudkali village, I asked a group of young Bishnoi men what turned out to be a key question: “What is the difference between the deer and the pig?” This question was not taken lightly; it provoked dismissive laughs from some, and anger from others. I was at once told to “forget this type of question in Bishnoi community.” I was told that pigs are unclean; they are impure animals that lie in filth, “Bishnois hate pigs” they said. Deer live in clean areas, they clean their spot in the field before they lie down, “*Bhagwan* [God] lives in the body of the deer” said one younger boy. The fact that I did not understand this distinction - the fact that I would even have to ask this question - provoked anger and frustration among them. I subsequently asked about equality and one man explained that all animals are equal, but only deer and blackbuck are like family. He said that species like deer and khejari trees are the most important for the desert environment; they signal pure places, whereas pigs are kept by non-vegetarians and impure people. This heated discussion became a key moment in bringing to light what I came to know as the dominant categorical framework for all living beings, humans and nonhumans alike: the difference is that some are pure and some are impure. The duty to maintain and protect this purity is what provokes such extreme acts of devotion and sacrifice among the Bishnoi.

I certainly found among the Bishnoi more fluid conceptions of the categories of human and animal, which emphasise a sense of community and interdependence, and focus more on similarities than differences across life forms. Categories are however indispensable to human cognition. There may be a sense of fundamental or original undifferentiation between all living beings, but as de Castro warns, we must not mistake this for “indifference” or “sameness”.¹⁶⁷ While souls may be the same among all living beings, bodies are not, and it is therefore

¹⁶⁷ de Castro, *Perspectivism*, 55. Refer to section 0.2

imperative to understand some of the fundamental categories used to differentiate species. One's understanding of the nonhuman fits into one's greater understanding of the order of things, the divine, the universe - and everyone's place in it. The distinction between purity and impurity is at the foundation of these Bishnoi worldviews and ontological categories, determining where both humans and nonhumans are situated within the hierarchy of living beings.

Some may find the more divisive and hierarchical notions in this chapter to be at odds with concepts of equality, kinship, interdependence and *ahimsa* discussed in previous chapters. However within the community, and in many Indian communities, these ideas are completely compatible. This seeming discrepancy is explained primarily by the distinction between body and soul. All living beings have a soul and souls are equal; bodies however, are not. So the idea of profound equality and connectedness, and these deeply rooted hierarchies based on purity, exist synchronously in the teachings and lived dharma of Bishnoi people.

Bishnois who follow the 29 rules are considered "pure Bishnois" or "true Bishnois" because all rules, whether pertaining to worship, personal health/ hygiene, or environmental protection, are figured, at their core, in terms of purity. A brief quote from a Bishnoi informational booklet on Jambhoji captures and articulates this perfectly: "The religion and purity are synonymous. Guru Jambho Ji has prescribed the religious duty to his followers to preserve external and internal purity... external purity is preserved by bathing daily. Internal purity is preserved by cherishing feeling[s] of compassion and mercy towards nature and all living beings."¹⁶⁸ Purity is the core guiding principle of Bishnoi dharma. As the quotation indicates, it is every individual's duty to uphold purity through the maintenance and defence of

¹⁶⁸ Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, *Guru Jambheshwarji Maharaj: The Great Environmentalist of 15th Century- A Brief Profile*. Informational Booklet. (Hisar: Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, 2013).

the 29 rules, the protection of trees and animals, and personal devotion and cleanliness. In other words, it is one's duty to maintain the purity of the self, the community, and the environment. This purity is so sacred and vital, and this duty to protect it so powerful, that one should be willing to fight and die to uphold it.

6.1 Purity and Pollution in Hinduism

The concept of purity is central in many traditions. In her groundbreaking book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues that concerns for purity are in fact at the heart of every society, serving as a fundamental explanation for religious and social behaviour.¹⁶⁹ In the Indian context specifically, purity and pollution might be said to be one of the most central themes in Hinduism since the Upanishads. The book *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society* edited by John Carman and Apffel-Marglin explores this topic in detail and gets at the complexities of these categories. In this section I will briefly outline some of the major themes to provide context for Bishnoi notions of purity and impurity.

Purity is a very broad topic in Hinduism; different notions of purity concern either the individual or the group and purity is both a ritual goal, and a moral ideal. States of purity or impurity can be temporary or permanent, and locations, objects, people, animals and actions are all subject to strict categories and rules based on purity.

Experts in this field such as Apffel-Marglin, Srinivas and Stevenson have written extensively on purity and pollution, and there seems to be a consensus that the core principle that

¹⁶⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis on Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

underlies the entire caste system is that of purity and pollution.¹⁷⁰ Notions of purity dictate this hierarchy and establish each individual and group's relation to one another. Stevenson explains that these beliefs concerning purity and pollution are ancient and relate to Hindu cosmology, theology and philosophy more generally through the concepts of dharma and karma. It is one's dharma to follow the behavioural guidelines of the caste that one is born into, and an individual's adherence to those behaviours dictates their ensuing rebirth. Stevenson concludes therefore that, "birth, ritual status, and group patterns of behaviour are interwoven with ideas about...purity and pollution"¹⁷¹ To demonstrate a sense of the scope and influence of principles of purity, I will quote Stevenson who provides an extensive list of the nature and impacts of purity and pollution in Hinduism:

It is the degree of permanent purity or pollution, which fixes group ritual status, that orders inter-group behaviour and attitudes; that ordains who may marry whom; who may cook for or eat with whom; who may work for whom, or work with whom, or worship with whom. It is an attribute of various parts of the body -the parts above the navel being of a higher state of ritual purity (with reservations concerning the left hand) than the lower portions, a fact which governs the nail-paring activities of barbers. It is an attribute of material objects -for example silk has a higher ritual purity than cotton, gold a higher ritual purity than silver, or brass, or iron, or earthenware - and in this sense it governs, inter alia, the ritual status of metal workers, and the conventions regarding the utensils, ornaments, and apparel appropriate to high and low castes and to ritual and secular

¹⁷⁰ Mysore N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Kodagu: Asia Publishing House, 1952), 26.; Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, "Introduction," in *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, ed. John Braisted Carman, and Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, 1-10 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 3.; H. N. C. Stevenson, "Status Evaluation in the Hindu Caste System," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 84, no. 1/2 (1954): 46.

¹⁷¹ Stevenson, "Status Evaluation in the Hindu Caste System," 46.

occasions. It is an attribute of the vegetable world, certain classes of trees such as fig-trees and banyans or plants such as tulasi (sweet basil or *Ocimum sanctum*) being of especially high ritual status and, therefore, suitable - in the case of trees - as cult centres or -in the case of plants -for use on sacred occasions. It is an attribute of the animal and reptilian world -the cow, the cobra, and certain monkeys, for example, have a high ritual status, while at the other end of the scale the domestic fowl and domestic pig occupy the lowest status, with scaled and unscaled fishes coming in between - and in this sense it gives diet its powerful influence on group ritual status. It is an attribute of all forms of human emissions - whether it be breath, spittle, nasal mucus, semen, menses, urine, faeces, sweat, or body grease, including even the glance or shadow of some low castes - and thus delimits the ritual status of scavenging, washing, barbering, and certain other endogamous groups concerned with personal service. Finally it is an attribute of death and decay - all who come in contact with death are deeply polluted - and in this sense it fixes as untouchable the ritual status of knackers, and of the 'undertaking' groups, this rule applying even to the Brahmans (known ironically as Mahabrahmans or 'great Brahmans') who officiate at mortuary rites.¹⁷²

As this passage indicates nearly everything in the Hindu world is classified within this purity-based system. The natural world and food in particular are a central focus of purity rules. The food you eat, who makes it, and who you are allowed to eat with are all very important in Hinduism. As a rule, vegetarian castes are usually seen as being more pure than non-vegetarian castes, and typically people of high caste will not eat with people of lower castes.¹⁷³ Different species of plant and animal are seen as being more or less pure than others, and this dictates diet

¹⁷² Ibid., 51.

¹⁷³ Pamela Goyan Kittler, Kathryn Sucher, and Marcia Nelms, *Food and Culture* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2011), 445.

and animal husbandry. For example higher castes would own cows or buffalos, and consume products made with cow or buffalo milk, whereas lower castes would own goats and therefore consume products made with goat's milk. This classification of animals based on purity will be particularly relevant to the following discussion of Bishnoi notions of purity. It is important to note that this is not unique to Hinduism, and has been explored extensively in other traditions. For example Douglas expands on this concept in Jewish kosher rules which prohibit pork and the mixing of milk and meat. She demonstrates that the Levites divided "pure" animals like deer, cattle, sheep, and goats from those considered "mixed" such as pigs, rabbits, and woodchucks.¹⁷⁴

In Hinduism these categories are examples of permanent states of pollution or purity, certain groups, objects or species have a fixed position in the hierarchy. Certain states of purity and pollution can however also be temporary. For example the pure water of the Ganges can wash away sins, and the consumption of meat or alcohol, or contact with an impure object can cause temporary impurity. In most cases pollution overpowers purity. Stevenson provides the example of a Brahmin who touches an untouchable; it is the Brahmin who becomes temporarily impure, not the untouchable who becomes pure. This maintains distance and separation between groups because mixing is usually seen as negative.¹⁷⁵ Purification rituals can however often reverse these temporary states of impurity.

Some concepts about purity, such as those regarding the caste system, the purity of the Ganges, or the impurity of human waste are widespread among various Hindu groups. Whereas others are subject to local variation, for example specific dress or decoration, worship, or eating certain types of meat such as fish. Different communities may also put more emphasis on either internal or external purity. External purity involves rules about bathing, eating, and ritual

¹⁷⁴ Chapter "Abominations of Leviticus," in Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

¹⁷⁵ Stevenson, "Status Evaluation in the Hindu Caste System," 50.

behaviour, whereas internal states of purity are achieved through correct knowledge, meditation, and the exclusion of sinful thoughts. Apffel-Marglin explains that internal purity is often associated with renunciation and the pursuit of liberation.¹⁷⁶ This concern for internal, individual purity is emphasised within certain Hindu communities who have been highly influenced by shramanic traditions. As world-renouncing paths, concepts of purity in shramanic traditions are often limited to only internal purity. Apffel-Marglin explains this contrast, asserting that

Both Jains and Theravada Buddhists reject the notion of purity *in this world*. For Jains and Buddhists purity exists only in the sphere of the monk, the one who has left this world, society, and family, for the pursuit of enlightenment. In both the Jain and the Buddhist case, explicit contrasts are made with the Hindu tradition in which purity resides in the brahmin who is in and of this world, a householder, and not a renouncer...it is precisely the presence of purity other than that leading to salvation and other-worldliness which differentiates Hinduism from both Jainism and Buddhism.¹⁷⁷

Notions of purity and pollution are fundamental to Hindu worldviews and ontological systems. States of purity and pollution can be either temporary or permanent, and they can be experienced by an individual or the community as whole. These categories dictate social relations, food and diet, actions and behaviours, and the nature of different objects. There exists an important link between physical purity and the purity of the soul. These foundational concepts provide essential context for the following exploration of how notions of purity manifest in the Bishnoi community specifically, and how this relates to the way that Bishnoi understand, experience and relate to human and nonhuman others.

¹⁷⁶ Apffel-Marglin, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

6.1 Structures of Purity and Impurity: Examples in the Bishnoi Imagination and Lived Tradition

The concept of purity is demonstrated in a variety of ways in the Bishnoi community. In the harsh desert climate, it is no wonder that the trees are one of the foremost symbols of purity. In Chaudhariwali, the first Bishnoi village that I visited, we stopped in front of this young khejari tree for a long time, and I was told by a local man that khejari trees are considered to be very pure and sacred because their roots are 90m deep, so they access the purest water. I was told that their purpose is to purify the environment; the air, water, animals, and earth are all made purer by this tree. The dropped or trimmed leaves of this tree make excellent food for camels and cattle, and at the top of the tree a legume is produced that is high in protein and used in Rajasthani cooking. Trees of all kinds provide valuable fertilizer from the droppings of birds who live in them. They provide shade, stabilize the shifting sand dunes, and their dead branches provide timber and firewood. Another tree mentioned often in Bishnoi literature is the kankeri tree. Jambhoji states in one of his *sabd*s that “*Kankedaa* tree covered with greenery is my temple and my dwelling”¹⁷⁸.



Figure 16 Young khejari tree, photo by Alexis Reichert

¹⁷⁸ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 156.

Water is also considered very pure; like trees, water is scarce and sacred in the desert. Jambhoji famously found water and dug ponds all over Rajasthan. During his lifetime Jambhoji built many rain-water storage tanks called *kunds*. Many ponds and *kunds* are associated with specific events in Jambhoji's life. These are places of purity and many have become Bishnoi pilgrimage sites because of their sacred history and because the water at these sites is considered very sweet and auspicious to bathe in. As is common in India, washing is mandatory before entering a temple, so there is always a pond or tap outside of a temple. As stated, taking a morning bath was often cited as one of the most important of the 29 rules. It was talked about as a source of purity and pride, and as one of the most important and distinguishing features of the Bishnoi. It is not only bodies that must be washed, but clothing as well. I was told by one man that the reason Bishnoi men wear white is that it is a pure colour- you can't hide dirt and it must be washed often.

Jambhoji made many references to purity in his *sabdās*, and often emphasised the importance of bathing in achieving that purity. In his 32nd *sabda* he addresses those who do not bathe daily saying, "For purity sake, why do not you take bath? For welfare of jive- ātmā [soul], one should take bath. Ones who do not do that, they will wander like ghosts. Impure jiva will suffer in the abode of Yama."¹⁷⁹ Jambhoji saw bathing as being vital to the purity of the body and soul. The first three principles that he mandated for his community, often considered to be the most important of the 29, were the daily ritual of bathing, vegetarianism, and a ban on intoxicants. I was told on many occasions that some Bishnoi men drink wine or take other intoxicants, but they are not "true Bishnois". Many Bishnois also spoke of the importance of vegetarianism and some said that they hate non-vegetarian people and animals. While meat and

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 144.

intoxicants are considered impure foods to be avoided, other foods such as dairy products (particularly ghee) are thought to be strong, clean foods that keep the body healthy and pure. Meera Ahmad discusses these three fundamental rules regarding diet and cleanliness in her article *Bishnoi Religion and Nature*, saying that the “conjunction of these three principles reinforces external and internal purity which Jambhoji annunciated as extremely significant for attaining salvation.”¹⁸⁰

Many other rules also emphasise purity. Rule number six is straightforward, commanding Bishnois to “maintain purity and cleanliness”; and rule eleven requires them to “speak pure words in all sincerity”. The first and second rules mandate that women who are in a state of ritual impurity (*sutak*) immediately following birth (for 30 days) and during menstruation (for 5 days) must avoid household activities, including cooking and cleaning.¹⁸¹

Rule 21 is also important in this regard. This rule stipulates that one should eat home-cooked food, and should not eat food kept in impure conditions. Bishnoi families almost always cook their own food. When they are away from home they will try to eat in the home of another Bishnoi friend or family member. They may also look for a business run by Bishnois. If these attempts fail, some may eat at a vegetarian restaurant run by another vegetarian caste, but some say they prefer to remain hungry if the food is not cooked by a Bishnoi. Ahmad explains that this rule “implies commensal [*sic*] separation as a means to preserve the purity and integrity of the sect and its principles”¹⁸² As stated above, concepts of purity and impurity around food are particularly important in India; the Bishnoi take these regulations and restrictions very seriously

¹⁸⁰ Ahmad, “Bishnoi Religion and Nature,” 64.

¹⁸¹ This practice is very widespread, ranging from approximately 10-40 days in different Indian traditions. Many variations of this also exist in other religious traditions, for more information see: Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: a cultural history of menstruation* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988). William E. Phipps, “The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 19, no. 4 (1980): 298-303.

¹⁸² Ahmad, “Bishnoi Religion and Nature,” 57.

in order to maintain the purity of the individual and the community, and to avoid contamination with impure foods or people. Ashok explained to me that, like other high-caste Hindus, Bishnois would not eat with lower castes or Muslims, in fact they wouldn't even talk to them. He said that Bishnois even try to avoid business dealings with other castes whenever possible, preferring to interact with others in their own community as often as they can. I was accepted into the community and they shared food with me only because Caucasians are seen as pure, and guests are regarded very highly.

Rules regarding bathing and food are taken very seriously within the community. The purity of the community and the environment begins with the purity of the individual body. Vinay Kumar Srivastava explains that “the twenty nine principles advise the individual to live truthfully according to the principles that are divinely ordained. The emphasis is on the purification of the individual. If the individual is purified, he will be in a position to purify others, his or her community [*sic*]. In this way would [*sic*] result in a ‘community of pure people’, who stick to a set of principles, correct and infallible.”¹⁸³ This is similar to the way in which an individual khejari tree purifies its surrounding environment. Likewise, Ahmad explains, any impure actions can afflict the entire community. She states that the “Bishnois refer to their community as a *panth* which is a community adhering to one single path defined by their Guru and bounded by the twenty nine dharma. Violation of a principle is believed to defile the entire sect and the individual violating it cannot be called a Bishnoi”¹⁸⁴. Ashok explained to me that Bishnois are very concerned with purity; he said that they rarely talk about other goals, such as liberation; their main goal and central concern is whether one is a pure Bishnoi and whether one is following the 29 rules.

¹⁸³ Vinay Kumar Srivastava, “Religion and Environment: Some Thoughts,” in *Religion and Environment Vol-II*, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 236-249 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd, 2010), 247.

¹⁸⁴ Ahmad, “Bishnoi Religion and Nature,” 47.

6.2 Moral Hierarchy: Pure and Impure Bodies

It is clear that the principle of purity is applied to humans and nonhumans alike. Concepts of purity and impurity dictate Bishnoi's broader understanding of how different beings relate to one another, and are the primary indicator of each being's superiority or inferiority in relation to other beings.

Although Jambhoji advocated against the caste system, caste distinctions are still observed and promoted within the community. One Bishnoi man told me that other castes, and Muslims in particular, are not allowed in Bishnoi homes or temples. If an impure person enters a Bishnoi home or temple it has to be purified immediately by a *sadhu*. This Bishnoi adherence to the caste system was one of Ashok's biggest qualms. He told me once that he draws inspiration from the writings of Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Jambhoji equally. He works with people in his community to produce and sell *khadi* (hand spun cloth) and often spends many hours a day at his loom, having been inspired by Gandhi's movement of Indian self-sufficiency, symbolized by the *charkha* (spinning wheel). Although Ashok is from a wealthy Bishnoi family, most of the other people who do this kind of work are Dalits (untouchables). He works with them, eats with them, and spends time in their homes and with their children. To him, this breaking down of caste barriers makes up part of his spiritual practice and he often quotes the words of Gandhi when speaking of his work and his relationships. He told me once that his parents are extremely disapproving but they keep these interactions a secret. He told me that if Bishnois knew about this he would no longer be accepted in the community, and it would cause serious problems for his family.

Jambhoji's teachings are clearly anti-caste; he explains that one does not become pure by birth or caste, but by one's actions.¹⁸⁵ In his 26th *sabda* he states that "Just by getting birth in high-class family, one does not become superior; superiority comes by practicing fine qualities."¹⁸⁶ Like many other saints and gurus of the *bhakti* movement, he accepted people of any creed and rejected the caste system. In current daily life and lived religion however, the caste system seems to provide a simple way to identify those who are pure, and "practice fine qualities", and those who are not, or don't. I asked one of the *sadhus* in Rudkali village about Jambhoji's teachings regarding caste divisions. He reiterated these ideas, explaining that superiority depends on "good work and good habits"; he used vegetarianism as an example. Muslims, for example are not vegetarian, so they are considered impure and are highly disliked by the Bishnoi community. The *sadhu* said that he would not even speak to an impure person such as this. Likewise, other castes may eat meat, not bathe as often, consume intoxicants or smoke, or perform other less than pure actions. So while in theory the caste system is not advocated for, in practice it is employed and abided by. Concepts of purity keep the caste system in place in daily life, and maintain strict social divisions. The Bishnoi now consider themselves to be a very high caste, and historically, according to Ahmad, these strict purity rules have allowed for social advancement. She explains that, "the overwhelming majority of Bishnoi, who were initially Jats or belonged to the middle and lower order of the caste system, after becoming Bishnoi consider themselves superior even to the high caste Brahmins, in level of purity, owing to their way of life in accordance with religious principles. It enabled upward mobility."¹⁸⁷

Among humans, purity dictates one's position in the caste system, but on a larger scale it also dictates one's movement within *samsara*. This was demonstrated most prominently in a

¹⁸⁵ Ahmad, "Bishnoi Religion and Nature," 47.

¹⁸⁶ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 26.

¹⁸⁷ Ahmad, "Bishnoi Religion and Nature," 63.

story I was told at Jambha pond. Jambha, is second only to Mukam in importance for the Bishnoi. It is a beautiful pond with a temple, surrounded by high dunes. This is the most famous location to dig and carry dirt up the dunes — ones wishes are fulfilled and some even say that one achieves liberation just by displacing the smallest pinch of clay here. The water at Jambha is very pure and it is very auspicious to bathe in it. The *sadhus* at Jambha temple told me many stories of different people who have dug there, and the rewards that they have reaped. One story told of a veiled woman who was digging there. Devotees of Jambhoji asked “Why is she digging? Who is she?” Jambhoji told them that she was a Queen of Mathura in a previous life. She took taxes from the devotees of Lord Krishna in Mathura, and because of this sin she was reborn as a donkey in a village 30km from Jambha, in the house of a clay maker. As a donkey, she used to carry clay from the pond to the house of the clay maker, and used to bring water from the pond to travellers. Because of this good work she was reborn as a woman. As a woman she continued to dig and enlarge the pond until she achieved moksha.



Figure 17 Jambha, Rajasthan, photo by Alexis Reichert

Purity is synonymous with Bishnoi dharma, or correct action. Actions either in accordance or against one's dharma result in karmic consequences and determine one's status in relation to other beings. It is considered negative to be reborn as a nonhuman animal. Like the story of the Queen from Mathura demonstrates, being born as a nonhuman is a punishment for actions that are not in line with one's dharma. Only humans can achieve liberation, so being born human is a privilege, and is superior to any nonhuman birth. One of the *sabdās* states that, "who does not chant Vishnu, will be born as sheep in the villages, pigs in the cities, and weight-pulling donkeys. They will attain the body of that bird that remains silent in the night but has to open his beak in the garbage in the morning to search for food."¹⁸⁸ Nonhuman animals are sometimes talked about as being inferior, or impure because they are incapable of religion and act on base

¹⁸⁸ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 138.

emotions and instinct.¹⁸⁹ When describing this kind of negative rebirth in texts and stories it is always, in my experience, a beast of burden, or an impure animal, for example a donkey, a pig, or, as the above *sabda* suggests, a garbage-picking bird. Jambhoji's 32nd *sabda* states that the "Human body is like a jewel but one kept uttering evil words like a pig and [sic] will become pig."¹⁹⁰ This is a common and ancient notion in Hinduism. Humans alone have access to the Vedas, so rebirth as a nonhuman is nearly always seen as a karmic punishment. This punishment is almost always threatened using examples of impure animals that are low on the hierarchy. More than 1000 years before the emergence of Bishnoism the *Chandogya Upanishad* promised rebirth as a dog or pig to those whose conduct has been evil.¹⁹¹ These ideas are therefore very ancient, and very widespread among Hindus and various other Indian religious groups.

The distinction between human and nonhuman, though important, is only one aspect of this hierarchy. One of Jambhoji's *sabdas* states that "a donkey is better than an ignorant person who is without dharma."¹⁹² So while a human birth is superior to a nonhuman birth, a human is not necessarily superior to a nonhuman. Superiority is defined by one's actions and whether they are considered pure and in line with one's dharma. Among the Bishnoi, deer and khejari trees are considered more pure, and therefore superior to a human who hunts, eats meat, or does not bathe daily. It is for this reason that it is considered noble to kill a hunter in order to save a deer. The hunter is considered to be evil and impure, therefore in doing so one is ridding evil and protecting purity and innocence. Purity is synonymous with dharma; one is considered more pure if one is living in accordance with their dharma. The concept of purity is therefore the primary way of categorizing beings and determining their status and relationship to one another.

¹⁸⁹ Ahmad, "Bishnoi Religion and Nature," 69.

¹⁹⁰ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 144.

¹⁹¹ *Chandogya Upanisad* 5.10.7-8.

¹⁹² Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 155.

While these hierarchies are fairly stable across communities, lived religion is always messy, and different individuals and groups focus on different relational aspects based on cultural, social, environmental, and individual diversity. For example, when discussing pigs in different villages I encountered a range of responses that tended more toward either the egalitarian, or the divisive elements of Bishnoi ontology. In Rudkali village I was met with anger as they expressed disgust for the pig and reverence for the deer. One *sadhu* in the village said that it was inconceivable that a Bishnoi person would sacrifice their life to save a pig, saying dismissively “pig is unclean”. A Bishnoi woman from Rotu similarly told me that pigs are dirty and that Bishnois would not sacrifice for them; she said they only sacrifice for the most holy, most innocent and most pure beings, such as deer, peacocks, and khejari trees. She said that they would however encourage people not to kill pigs, explaining that all animals deserve mercy and acknowledging that God is in everything. On the other hand, I spoke with an Acharya at Mukam who did not flinch at my pig question.¹⁹³ He did not make any reference to their uncleanliness and spoke only of the equality of all beings. He told me that Bishnoi people focus on deer because they are vulnerable; there are many of them in the area and they are targeted by hunters. He said there are far fewer pigs, but they would also be protected if necessary.

Though it was made clear that any nonhuman rebirth is considered negative, the overwhelming tendency was to focus on pure beings such as deer, peacocks, cows and khejari trees when speaking of the sanctity of life, responsibility, love and kinship; and to focus on impure beings such as pigs, donkeys, or non-vegetarians when speaking of karmic punishments, or when providing examples of negative or impure behaviour. It is widely accepted that the soul is eternal, and fundamentally the same in every being, but differences emerge because different

¹⁹³ An Acharya is the highest level teacher and spiritual leader in the community. I was told that there are four Bishnoi Acharyas currently living. The Acharya at Mukam became a *sadhu* at the age of 8, and is highly educated.

beings and bodily incarnations have different duties. Certain animals, such as donkeys, are meant to bear burden and live a hard life, while certain plants are meant for food, and it is the duty of certain castes to do unclean work. Certain beings are meant to purify the environment, such as water, deer and khejari trees. A Bishnoi professor told me that humans have intellect, so it is their duty to do mantras and to protect more vulnerable beings. Animals are innocent and without religion he said, each being plays their part in the cycle and must adhere to their particular duties. Some bodies and some duties are superior to others however, which is what dictates one's relation to other beings and one's movement within *samsara*.

In this way all beings are part of the same moral system. Moral law or dharma, figured in terms of purity, maintains the order of the universe, and the actions of all living beings are bound by this law. D. M. Datta explains that, "with the exception of Charvaka, or allied schools of materialism, any systematic account of which is not available, all Indian schools conceive nature as the stage for moral beings, constituted and guided by moral needs. This holds good not only of the theistic schools but also of the atheistic ones like the Buddha, the Jaina and the Mimamsaka."¹⁹⁴ Datta believes that because all beings can be found on the same trajectory, bound by the same laws, and because the concept of an individual being in this system is not limited to "the *homo sapiens*", this is an ontological system that is not anthropocentric, but rather acknowledges the subjectivity of all living beings.¹⁹⁵

This is interesting in light of the theories of Ingold and de Castro, which question the ontological categories through which we understand and experience the world. Humans and nonhumans are all components of a shared moral and relational order; they share an experience of "being in the world" in Ingold's terms. It is important to recall de Castro's concept of

¹⁹⁴ D. M. Datta, "The Moral Conception of Nature in Indian Philosophy," *International Journal of Ethics* 46 no.2 (1936): 223.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

perspectivism here, in which every living being is accorded a point of view because of its unique and individual physical incarnation. According to this system, the nature/ culture dichotomy is inverted; Halbmayer explains succinctly that this is a system “whereby culture (soul or interiority) is common to potentially all beings, who differ only in terms of nature (body or physicality). From this perspective, animism is therefore characterized by a mono-culture and multi-naturalism... While their common interiority unites beings across inter-species borders, their physicality and affects divide them.”¹⁹⁶

Likewise, in Bishnoi ontologies, the soul unites beings across borders, but they are simultaneously divided, and placed in sometimes factious hierarchies, according to their actions and their physical bodies. A sense of interconnectedness and kinship is maintained on the basis of shared space, resources and experiences, a common trajectory, a common system of moral law, and the possibility of reincarnation- of veritably *becoming* the Other. Strict hierarchies and categories are however maintained on the basis of the purity of one’s actions and one’s physical body. It is not a simple matter of extending culture or soul to nonhumans; there are various forms and degrees of agency, subjectivity, duties, and physical bodies among living beings. To quote Halbmayer again, “physicality or multiple natures are not the only aspects of being that function as differentiators in animic ontologies.”¹⁹⁷ While certain distinctions are made along species lines, one’s actions are also a considerable factor in distinguishing and differentiating one’s status and relationship to other beings. Categories are indispensable to human cognition. The Bishnoi have a highly developed sense of community and interdependence, which is focused more on similarities than differences across life forms. Nevertheless, it is clear that the concept of purity plays a central role in differentiating between individual beings and between species.

¹⁹⁶ Ernst Halbmayer, “Debating Animism, Perspectivism and the Construction of Ontologies,” *Indiana* 29 (2012): 12-13.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

Lush green spaces, water, and herds of deer signal pure places. Likewise the 29 rules indicate internal and external purity in keeping with pure and correct dharma. It is the divinely ordained duty and responsibility of Bishnoi people not only to follow, but to preserve and protect that purity - that dharma. In this way, many Bishnoi people see themselves as soldiers of God; acts of self-sacrifice are understood as fulfilling one's duty, preserving the purity of the environment and the community, and becoming a "true" or "pure" Bishnoi.

7. Generations Divided: The Contemporary Moment

One day I was interviewing Ashok's father, whose English is very limited, so Ashok was interpreting most of the conversation. Ashok's father grew up in the village of Rotu, a famous Bishnoi village and pilgrimage site. He now spends most of his days reading Bishnoi literature and traveling between his family in the city and his home village. His views therefore represent those of a man born and raised in a traditional Bishnoi village, but also a man educated in Bishnoi philosophy and theology. I was asking him about the Bishnoi perspective on reincarnation; about karma, rebirth and liberation, and how individual souls can move from one body to the next. At one point in the conversation he said to me, in English, "now I am a man, after death I could be a tree." Ashok began laughing, and his laughter drew his sister into the room. Ashok relayed his father's statement to his sister and she laughed, asking me "he said that?" Even though this concept is clearly articulated in Bishnoi texts, teachings and mythology, it seemed absurd to them. I asked them why they laughed, but no one wanted to tell me, no one wanted to openly express doubt, but the opinion of the younger generation could be read on their faces and in their tone. These siblings who have been educated in English medium schools, and removed from the village context, no longer ascribe to their father's understanding of *samsara* and the transmigration of souls. Their environment, lifestyle and philosophy are drastically different than their parents' was. Rural India is changing so rapidly that the Bishnoism I encountered in 2013 is certainly drastically different than the Bishnoism of Ashok's parents' youth, and likewise, it is difficult to say what it will look like in the coming decades. The influence of Western media and consumerism, and the scientific revolution has drastically changed Bishnoi ways of life and religious discourses, not to mention the rapid environmental changes in the region that are no doubt having an influence on Bishnoi ways of life and lived religion.

India is going through a period of rapid change. Rajasthan in particular is seeing devastating environmental transformations, a rapid increase in literacy and education, and a shift toward city living over rural, agrarian ways of life. The older generation, particularly those who have moved to cities like Ashok's parents, speak nostalgically of village life, explaining that they feel isolated and disconnected, and that the 29 rules cannot all be followed successfully or performed adequately in the city. Other older farmers and people from the villages told of the environmental difficulties of farming in the desert, and how, because of environmental challenges, many Bishnoi people are moving to cities or to more fertile, lush provinces such as Haryana.

7.1 Desertification and Deforestation: Environmental Changes in Rajasthan

The rapid environmental change in Rajasthan has not been a focus of this thesis, as I have concerned myself more with current lived religion and relationships with the nonhuman, but it is important to note that climate change, desertification, deforestation and extreme weather conditions have affected this area greatly in the last few decades.¹⁹⁸ S. S. Dhabriya reports a decline of 47.12% in forest cover for the state of Rajasthan between 1972 and 1982.¹⁹⁹ Karine Gagné explains that farmers in the region attribute this to the introduction of the tractor to the Thar Desert in the 1970s. She states that “many farmers told me— with a palpable measure of guilt—that they had often removed trees to facilitate tractor movement and to increase the acreage of their farmlands.”²⁰⁰ This practice contributes to soil erosion and negatively impacts soil fertility in this arid zone where soil is already lacking in organic matter.²⁰¹ Plowing strips the land of protective mulch and plants. The removal of trees, which provide wind protection and

¹⁹⁸ For an extensive exploration of these climatic changes and their effect on the agrarian community in the area see, Gagné “Gone with the Trees.”; Gold and Gujar, “In the Time of Trees and Sorrows.”; Ann Grodzins Gold, and Bhoju Ram Gujar. “Wild Pigs and Kings: Remembered Landscapes in Rajasthan,” *American Anthropologist* 99 no. 1 (1997):70–84.; Narpal S. Jodha, “Population Growth and the Decline of Common Property Resources in Rajasthan, India,” *Population and Development Review* 11 no. 2 (1985):247–264.; Richards, John E. Richards, Edward S. Haynes, and James R. Hagen, “Changes in the Land and Human Productivity in Northern India, 1870–1970,” *Agricultural History* 59 no.4 (1985): 523–548.; S. S. Dhabriya, “The Expanding Indian Desert and its Impact on Desert Life,” in *Development of Underdeveloped Regions (a Case of Arid Regions)*, ed. S. K. Lal and U. R. Nahar, 52–68. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1991.

¹⁹⁹ Dhabriya, “The Expanding Indian Desert,” 64.

²⁰⁰ Gagné, “Gone with the Trees,” 502;

As noted above, Gagné indicates that the majority of her informants are Bishnois, but does not indicate precisely when she is quoting Bishnois or other castes throughout the text. So her statements are representative primarily of Bishnois, but include a variety of voices in rural Rajasthan.

²⁰¹Narpal S. Jodha, “A Case of the Process of Tractorisation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 9 no.52 (1974):A111-A118.;Narpal S. Jodha, “Trends in Tree Management in Arid Land use in Western Rajasthan,” in *Farms, Trees and Farmers: Responses to Agricultural Intensification*, edited by J. E. M. Arnold and P. A. Dewees, 43–64 (London: Earthscan Publications 1997).

soil stability, intensifies wind erosion and causes sand to shift, forming dunes and sometimes leading to dust storms.²⁰²

In many Rajasthani communities the inhabitants attribute increasing numbers of droughts to human activity and irresponsible management of resources.²⁰³ Most of Gagné's research was conducted in Bishnoi communities in the Marwari region of Rajasthan, and their communities were certainly not immune from these circumstances. The reader will remember Gagné's quote in Chapter 2, which elaborated on the sense of responsibility accepted for these climatic changes, and explained that "inhabitants of the desert perceive meteorological changes as being closely connected with their own actions", noting that individuals perceived the mismanagement of the land and trees as being a result of the loss of "good moral values."²⁰⁴ So while many Bishnois boast of the tree cover and high populations of wild animals in Bishnoi villages, many also acknowledge that the 29 rules have sometimes come second to personal agricultural needs and conveniences, and that this has had very negative results for the environment. Both Gold and Gagné have studied the remembered past through individual's accounts in Rajasthan, and both scholars note that, while not all accounts of the past are idealized, there does seem to be a clear consensus on the deteriorating state of the landscape in Rajasthan. Gagné recounts that, "accounts of the past expressed by individuals at the lower reaches of the social hierarchy emphasized a state of servitude, while upper-caste people stressed the past as a time of plenty in natural resources, fertile lands, and abundant food. In accounts of environmental changes, however, there was a striking similarity, notwithstanding gender, caste, and class lines. The usual

²⁰² Pratap Narain et al., *Strategy to Combat Drought and Famine in the Indian Arid Zone* (Jodhpur: Central Arid Zone Research Institute, 2000), 1-4.

²⁰³ Gagné, "Gone with the Trees," 503.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 506.

lines of division appeared to vanish, producing a relatively consistent account of forest depletion and land change.”²⁰⁵

It has been established throughout this thesis that Bishnoi dharma and worldviews are deeply connected to, and ultimately inseparable from other species and their environment. Their livelihood and identities are tied to the land; their understanding of themselves, their dharma, and their Guru are framed in relation to the trees, animals and desert landscape that surround them. Other living beings not only contextualise, but participate in the dharma and the teachings of the community. It is therefore impossible to predict, but interesting to reflect on the impact that these dramatic environmental changes are having, and will have, on dharma, lived traditions and concrete actions and interactions between species in the community.

During my research I came across Glenn Albrecht’s striking neologism “solastalgia” which describes the distress that people feel when their home environment is dramatically altered. Unlike the nostalgia of Ashok’s parents who left their village for the city, solastalgia is the homesickness felt when an individual or community has remained at home, but the physical landscape has changed around them. In reference to communities in the Amazon, Wolfgang Kapfhammer argues that many indigenous peoples suffer from solastalgia; he attributes this to their exposure to “Western environmental pathology.”²⁰⁶ The views of Kapfhammer and Albrecht represent the emergent discipline of ecopsychology, which considers the interconnectedness of human bodies and minds with their environment. It aims at “placing human psychology into ecological context.”²⁰⁷ This field takes as its premise, as Kapfhammer puts it, “that the mind is not separate from the natural world but an aspect of the larger psyche of

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 497.

²⁰⁶ Wolfgang Kapfhammer, “Amazonian Pain. Indigenous Ontologies and Western Eco-Spirituality,” *Indiana* 29 (2012): 148.

²⁰⁷ Andy Fisher, “Ecopsychology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by Bron Taylor, 557-560. (London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 557.

nature...psychological wellbeing involves establishing mature, reciprocal relationships with the natural world.”²⁰⁸ Ecopsychology considers the repercussions of environmental change and destruction on these relationships. This topic is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper; I wish only to encourage more inquiry into these avenues, among the Bishnoi and among other traditional communities suffering under the weight of a global environmental crisis. While the notion of solastalgia is heartbreaking and sombre, I also find it powerful and provocative to consider the spiritual and psychological crises that may accompany an environmental crisis.

7.2 Education Boom and the Emergence of Scientific Discourses

As I alluded to in the opening story, another element of rural Rajasthani life that is changing rapidly is education. Many young Bishnoi girls and boys are no longer being taught the trades or traditional languages of their parents. Many of them are going to school and learning science, math, reading, writing and English. I found the intersection of traditional Bishnoi religious discourse with more modern scientific and environmental discourses very interesting; educated Bishnois talked about Bishnoi teachings and practices very differently than uneducated Bishnois. Whereas uneducated Bishnois spoke of following the 29 rules in terms of duty and devotion to God, educated Bishnois are now discussing these teachings in terms of sustainability and scientific validity.

There has also been a boom in literacy in recent years, with a consequent loss of oral culture. One striking example of this was with regards to traditional songs. Bishnoi women have songs for everything; many sing traditional songs individually as they go about their daily tasks, and the women always sing when people come together for meals or events. After a few

²⁰⁸ Kapfhammer, “Amazonian Pain,” 148.

encounters with these songs I began to notice that none of the younger girls ever sang. At the time I was at an engagement party; all the men were in the house talking, and the women were gathered in an open-air room singing together while women got up, one at a time, to dance in the middle of the group. I asked Poonam, one of the younger girls, “Why don’t the young women sing?” She replied that the younger generation, herself included, do not even know the language that their mothers and grandmothers are singing in. This generation of school-going girls learns Hindi and English, but they no longer learn the Rajasthani dialects of their parents and grandparents. They wear Western clothes and are, in many ways, disconnected from the traditions of their mothers. Within a couple of decades, these beautiful and ancient songs will be lost to modernity. It is not difficult to imagine that other integral aspects of their traditions will be forgotten with these songs, and that the future of traditional village life will scarcely resemble the past. Young people of about 20 years and under have focused almost exclusively on Hindi and English, concentrating on reading and writing. In 1991 the literacy rate in Rajasthan was 38.55% (54.99% male and 20.44% female). The 2011 Census demonstrated that in just 20 years literacy had soared to 67.06% (80.51% male and 52.66% female), and it has surely increased further since then.²⁰⁹

Theories about the differences between oral and literate cultures abound; influential novelist, phenomenologist and cultural ecologist David Abram explores and summarizes the differences between oral and written language well in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*. He insightfully illustrates that “writing, like human language, is engendered not only within the human community but between the human community and the animate landscape, born of the

²⁰⁹ Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, “Population Enumerations- 2011 Data,” *Directorate of Census Operations Rajasthan*, http://www.rajcensus.gov.in/Pe_DATA.html (accessed March 1, 2015).

interplay and contact between the human and more-than-human world.”²¹⁰ He notes a disconnect between human and nonhuman worlds in modern writing (as opposed to oral cultures or symbolic writing systems), stating that “human utterances are now elicited, directly, by human-made signs; *the larger, more-than-human life-world is no longer a part of the semiotic, no longer a necessary part of the system.*”²¹¹ Abram uses Greek history to demonstrate this idea, citing that Greece became a truly literate culture during Plato’s lifetime.²¹² Abram theorizes that “Plato, or rather the association between the literate Plato and his mostly non-literate teacher Socrates (469?-399 B.C.E.), may be recognized as the hinge on which the sensuous, mimetic, profoundly embodied style of consciousness proper to orality gave way to the more detached, abstract mode of thinking engendered by alphabetic literacy.”²¹³ It is interesting to consider the consequences of this rapid change in linguistic systems and what might be lost or gained from this transition; it will no doubt have a profound effect on the way people think, act and interact in their world.

It is not only reading and writing that are being taught in schools, but science and math. As stated above, uneducated Bishnois from rural areas spoke of the 29 rules in terms of duty, dharma, and devotion to God; but educated Bishnois are now using scientific and environmental rhetoric to support the teachings of the Guru. Several people told me that Jambhoji had great foresight; that he was ahead of his time and he predicted all of the environmental issues that the West and the global scientific community are only now beginning to understand. In an interview with a highly-educated Bishnoi man, I was told that Guru Jambheshwar taught that plants had consciousness over 500 years ago and that science is only now catching up. In *Religion and*

²¹⁰ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 95.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 108.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 109.

Environment, R. S. Bishnoi states that, “I must underline that what may appear to be commonplace to the readers today, has been realized by the modern scientists merely five decades ago! – but it was known to Jambhoji and insisted upon by him over five hundred years ago!”²¹⁴ In the same article he goes on to describe how science and religion are one and the same. He begins by saying, “Though seemingly different entities, which even appear to be at loggerheads with each other, science and religion are verily one and the same, complementing and supplementing each other. And beneath this nexus between the two, runs the immutable writ of the Lord.”²¹⁵ This fascinating piece goes into topics like electricity, gravity, Vedic teachings, energy, consciousness, and Hindu astronomy, comparing for example Vedanta and modern physics. He shows for instance that the law of karma is the same as Newton’s Third Law of Motion, which states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This insistence that Jambhoji’s teachings are not only compatible with, but one and the same as science is evident throughout modern Bishnoi literature and popular discourse. One of my informants told me that in recent years the rhetoric at the Annual Tree Fair in Khejarli has shifted. Leaders in the community now speak of science and sustainability, and boast about how famous they are becoming in the West for their environmentalism. Scientific and environmental discourses are merging with Bishnoi teachings in new and interesting ways, creating new discourses and shaping the way that they understand their dharma, their Guru, and their relationship with other species. It will be interesting to observe this trend in the coming years and decades, and to consider how this is affecting and will continue to affect Bishnoi dharma and ways of life, as well as interreligious dialogue and global environmental discourses.

²¹⁴ R. S. Bishnoi, “The Single Thread in the Complex Garland,” in *Religion and Environment* Vol-II, ed. Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, 25-44 (New Delhi: Arihant Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., 2010), 122.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

In their book *Ecology and Equity*, Gadgil and Guha have tried to categorize Indian communities from an ecological point of view in order to speculate on the environmental future of India. They theorize that three distinct styles of community have emerged in India from the ecological viewpoint: omnivores, ecological refugees, and ecosystem people. The Bishnoi would fall into the third category, “ecosystem peoples,” which the authors define as those who depend on their local natural environment to meet most of their material needs. They live close to the natural resources on which they depend, for example, growing their own food and collecting wood or dung to cook. Their environmentalism is rooted in their dharma and way of life. Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli argue that such peoples should be theorized within the ecological field as practicing “moral ecology” rather than ecology as practiced by scientists.²¹⁶ They propose that scientific ecology and moral ecology are radically different. Within the scientific model nature is wholly separate from humans; this model is rooted in an individualistic form of knowledge, where conservation happens outside the rhythm of daily life (for example the National Park model). Whereas moral ecologies, they argue, are embedded in collective knowledge and actions, and these collectivities include nonhuman ones.²¹⁷ Meera Baindur also criticises the scientific concept of “conservation”, explaining that Indian notions of protection, trusteeship, and dharma promote and acknowledge responsibility and harmony rather than separation, control and exploitation.²¹⁸ Many in the field of religion and ecology refer to this as “Dharmic Ecology”.²¹⁹ These theories are of course reminiscent of Ingold’s distinctions between hunter-gatherer and Western ontologies, and all of these authors argue that these embedded, moral ecologies,

²¹⁶ Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli, “‘Sacred Groves’ and Ecology,” 296.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

²¹⁸ Meera Baindur and Sundar Sarukkai, “The Possibility of Conservation: Some Philosophical Questions,” *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism* 3 (2010): 19.

²¹⁹ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology*, 76.

dharmic ecologies, or ontologies of dwelling are more productive and more harmonious than those engendered by often divisive scientific ontologies.

So what happens now when scientific and moral ecologies collide in an ever more globalizing world? I don't think one ontological system can erase the other; this would deny the agency of the Bishnoi community and their own deeply-rooted sense of dharmic ecology. Bishnoi people are accepting scientific ways of knowing with open arms; they are integrating and adapting them to support and understand the teachings of their Guru. They understand science within their own theological and ontological framework, ever shifting as it may be. This process is transformative and reciprocal; this was demonstrated often throughout my field work, but is also apparent throughout the book *Religion and Environment* in several examples which attempt to demonstrate the relationship between science and religion. R. S. Bishnoi, for example, tells of the following scientific study:

On 29 May 1988, an 85 years old retired school principal. Pandit Har Prasad Sharma conducted a three-day *yajna* in Mathura (UP) to bring rains. At 19.30 hrs on 1 June 1988, a blinding duststorm was followed by a shower resulting in 1.6mm of rainfall. There was rainfall both in the target area as well as in the adjacent control areas. Earlier, in 1975, three foreigners Dr Asko Parpola from Finland, Dr Ikari from Japan and Prof Frits Staal from the USA organized a *Vrishti yajna* at Panjal in Kerala for three days and surely, it was followed by rain! But the so-called rationalists brand the success through observance of rituals as achieved merely by chance. It may be mentioned here that the '*Vishti Sukta*'

(i.e. verses pertaining to rains) of the *Atharva Veda* has 16 rain-making *mantras* in Chapter 4/15/1-16. The *Rig Veda* also mentions rain-making.²²⁰

It is evident that embedded theological, moral, and dharmic concepts form the basis of these scientific evaluations. So perhaps there is room for a third category (or many more) between scientific and moral ecologies, where science and traditional values and practices merge and create new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world.

²²⁰ R.S. Bishnoi, "The Single Thread," 108-109.

Conclusions

Approximately one month after returning home from India, Ashok sent me a photograph of a news article in the Times of India. The title of the article was “Bishnoi Youth Dies Protecting Chinkaras in Jodhpur”. The article told of 25-year-old Shaitanaram Bishnoi who was shot in the head by a poacher in Manu village on January 28th, 2014. The article quotes a villager who explains that, “Manu being a nearly-deserted village there aren't too many vehicles that cross it at night. Therefore, when Shaitanaram Bishnoi heard the noise of a motorbike racing down at midnight he immediately guessed the reason and rushed out along with some other villagers on his Bolero”. The police chief explained that “He followed the bike with other villagers in a Bolero but their vehicle got stuck in the thick sand. However, Shaitanaram jumped off the vehicle and rushed towards the poachers, who were also struggling for maneuvering their motorcycle in the sand and caught one of them. However, in order to rescue the poacher, his colleague fired at Bishnoi with his double barrel 12 bore gun straight on his head, leaving him dead on the spot.” The poachers fled the horrid scene and the gazelles were saved, but the Bishnoi community now grieves the death of yet another martyr.²²¹

Despite Bishnoi efforts to enforce legal prohibitions on hunting and deforestation, their lush green villages still sometimes attract dangerous individuals in search of deer or trees. Stories of Bishnoi sacrifice are not ancient or mythological they are strikingly commonplace and make up an essential part of the lived tradition. In an email, Ashok told me that the morning after this tragic event more than 2000 Bishnoi people gathered at the spot where Shaitanaram was killed. Bishnois from all over Rajasthan and surrounding states have been petitioning police and the government to arrest the poachers, and strangers have been coming from hundreds of miles away to offer condolences to the family. The loss of this young Bishnoi man has been felt by the entire community.

The Bishnoi commitment to the protection of trees and wild animals is unique among religious groups. It is clear that within this community one can only fulfil one's duties and live

²²¹ “Bishnoi Youth Dies Protecting Chinkaras in Jodhpur,” *The Times of India*.
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/Bishnoi-youth-dies-protecting-chinkaras-in-Jodhpur/articleshow/29571618.cms> (accessed May 20, 2015).

according to one's dharma by deeply engaging with the nonhuman. The nonhuman, and one's engagement with it therefore make up an essential part of what it means to be human and what it means to live correctly.

Though I was initially surprised at the seeming lack of emotional attachment or affection towards animals, the aggressive nature of the Bishnoi, and the strict caste and species hierarchies that are observed within the community, I began to understand Bishnoi motivations, actions and worldviews on their own terms. Bishnoi dharma and the 29 rules emerged from a specific location and relationship with the land and animals during a period of drought. As I demonstrate in the third chapter, the physical composition of Bishnoi communities and *orans*, and the daily social and economic functioning of the villages reflect their entanglements with the nonhuman. Humans and nonhumans directly constitute each other; the environment enters into Bishnoi dharma and self-conception, and in turn Bishnois shape and transform their environment. Their lives and living selves are entangled; nonhumans are agents and participants in Bishnoi life, active in their physical and perceptual engagement with the world. This relationship is understood as a fundamentally reciprocal one, as the land is understood to be more benevolent when the 29 rules are followed; both humans and nonhumans will prosper and flourish if they live according to their dharma. Human and nonhuman lives are also deeply entangled through the notion of kinship and the transmigration of souls – souls are common and equal among humans and nonhumans, and they share a common condition and a common trajectory. The Bishnoi therefore embody important aspects of Ingold's dwelling mode-of-being, and de Castro's notion of perspectivism – they demonstrate that human communities are not created in isolation from other species, and one therefore cannot be a true Bishnoi and cannot live according to one's dharma outside of the rural Rajasthani context.

Most of the origin myths about Jambhoji and the development of the Bishnoi community emerge directly from their relationship with the land. The 29 rules themselves were a direct response to a devastating drought; they respond to the hardships of desert life and provide guidelines for how to live in harmony with other species in the rural Rajasthani desert. The rules are born from the relationship between humans and other species in a specific time, location and ecosystem. Their dharma is contextualised by their environment and born from their relationship with the land and animals.

As I established in the fourth chapter, the central discourses used to verbally express this connection and commitment to nature, were those of duty, dharma, responsibility, and the 29 rules. Bishnois see the protection of trees and wild animals as a personal and communal duty. Following one's dharma and performing one's duties demonstrates devotion to God. Earth is seen as a manifestation of God, and all beings are understood to be divine and essentially the same; every Bishnoi therefore has a duty to engage with nature and protect it. This sense of duty is so powerful that Bishnois are willing to fight, kill and even die to protect a tree or wild animal. As was demonstrated in chapter five, this willingness to sacrifice is central to Bishnoi dharma and emerges from a strict rejection of animal sacrifice in other Indian traditions. It seems as though the practice of self-sacrifice among the Bishnoi is not just a rejection of animal sacrifice however, but a radical inversion of it, where the human becomes the willing victim and the animal is saved. Within this model aggression and destruction can be seen as nonviolence if they are in the service of God and the maintenance of the 29 rules. Like Arjuna they are called to fight and eradicate evil; they are soldiers of God and it is their dharma to uphold the 29 rules and maintain harmony by whatever means necessary.

Beliefs regarding, pigs, deer, food and khejri tress revealed the centrality of the concept of purity to the relationships between living beings. Chapter six outlines concepts of purity and impurity that provide the underlying ontological structures through which all aspects of Bishnoi life and the natural world are understood. Purity is both an embodied experience and a moral state. This framework allows for strict hierarchies among humans and nonhumans alike. The soul may be equal across all life forms, but bodily incarnations are not. Both one's physical incarnation and one's actions throughout the course of a lifetime can determine one's place in the hierarchy. This is why Bishnois see themselves as being superior to other castes, and also why the protection of certain species is emphasised over others, as some species are understood to symbolize purity, innocence, and vulnerability. Every individual's goal is to follow the 29 rules in order to achieve purity and live according to their dharma as a true Bishnoi. To be a true Bishnoi is to uphold one's duty to protect and maintain the purity and harmony of the community and the environment.

Many different discourses, histories, and embodied experiences beyond what I have outlined in this thesis come together to shape Bishnoi understandings of themselves, and their relationships with nonhumans; one must consider socio-economic, cultural and political experiences, different layers of religious texts and teachings (including those of other religious groups), experiential dimensions, and the influence of modern scientific, environmental and animal rights discourses. While certain themes that I have outlined throughout this thesis play a fundamental role in Bishnoi relationships with the nonhuman, changes to the environment, education, and globalization are having profound effects on the community, and we cannot expect them to remain stagnant. The contemporary moment is indeed one of rapid transformation. Some would argue that the loss of oral culture and the rise of scientific and

consumerist discourses may lead to a less embedded way of life. While I think that there may be room for new forms of embeddedness, the notion expressed by my older informants that one cannot be a true Bishnoi in the city is a very powerful one and may have serious implications for the Bishnoi community as they continue to modernize.

While the Bishnoi are adopting and integrating scientific and environmental discourses into their own dharma, they are also sharing their traditional messages and teachings widely and continuing their environmental activism within India. The Bishnoi are beginning to gain public recognition in India and abroad for their dharma, lifestyle and commitment to trees and wild animals. I hope that this thesis will be an honest and useful contribution to the limited literature on the Bishnoi, and a unique and inspiring addition to the field of religion and ecology. This work aims to contribute to a growing number of academic and popular voices attempting to reshape public understandings of the relationship between humans and nonhumans and, in turn, contributing in positive and productive ways to the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves.

Appendix A

The 29 Rules

1. Observe 30 days state of *sutak* (state of ritual impurity) after birth and keep mother and child away from household activities
2. During menstrual period, keep woman away from household activities for 5 days
3. Take a bath daily in the morning
4. Maintain modesty
5. Maintain good character, be content and patient
6. Maintain purity and cleanliness
7. Pray two times a day (morning and evening)
8. Eulogise God, The Lord Vishnu in evening hours (*Aarti*)
9. Perform *Yajna* (*Havan*) every morning with feelings of welfare, devotion and love
10. Filter water, milk and firewood
11. Speak pure words in all sincerity
12. Practice forgiveness, pardon, and absolution from the heart
13. Do not steal
14. Do not condemn or criticize
15. Do not lie
16. Do not waste the time on argument
17. Fast on *Amawas* (last day of the dark half of a month) and offer prayers to Lord Vishnu
18. Have pity on all living beings and love them
19. Do not cut the green trees, save environment
20. Crush lust, anger, greed and attachment
21. Eat home cooked food/ don't eat food cooked or kept in impure conditions
22. Provide shelter for animals so they can complete their life with dignity and don't get slaughtered
23. Don't sterilise the ox
24. Don't use opium
25. Don't smoke and use tobacco
26. Don't take bhang or hemp
27. Don't take wine or any type of liquor
28. Don't eat meat, remain pure vegetarian
29. Never use blue clothes or blue colour extracted from green indigo plant

*There are many different translations of these rules; this list is compiled from several different sources

Appendix B

My fieldwork involved unstructured interviews, casual conversations and participant observation. The following is a sample of the types of questions that I asked, but given the nature of the work this list is by no means comprehensive.

1. What do you/ your family's daily interactions with animals look like? Do your interactions differ depending on the species of the animal (gazelles, herbivores, carnivores)? Your location (temple, home, 'wild')? Your social role (priest, mother, father, child, dairy farmer etc)?
2. What happens when someone treats an animal badly or eats an animal (both socially, and with regards to individual karma)? What happens when an animal harms or kills another animal?
3. Do animals participate in Bishnoi religion? If so, in what ways?
4. Do you communicate with animals? Do animals communicate with you? If so, are they more or less inclined to communicate with adults/children, men/women etc. Do they communicate more easily with the Bishnoi than with people of other religious groups?
5. Do animals have souls? If so, are they the same as human souls? What is the relationship between different kinds of souls?
6. What is the nature of the karma that you have to incur to be reborn as an animal? Do human ancestors ever return as animals? If so, would this be negative? Why or why not?
7. Can animals attain liberation, or do they need to be reborn as a human first, as is common in Jainism and Hinduism?
8. I have heard that the Bishnoi are known for sacrificing their own lives to save animals, can you tell me more about this?
9. Are we in a Kali Yug? Will human-animal relations improve? Get worse?
10. What is the difference between the pig and the deer?

Appendix C

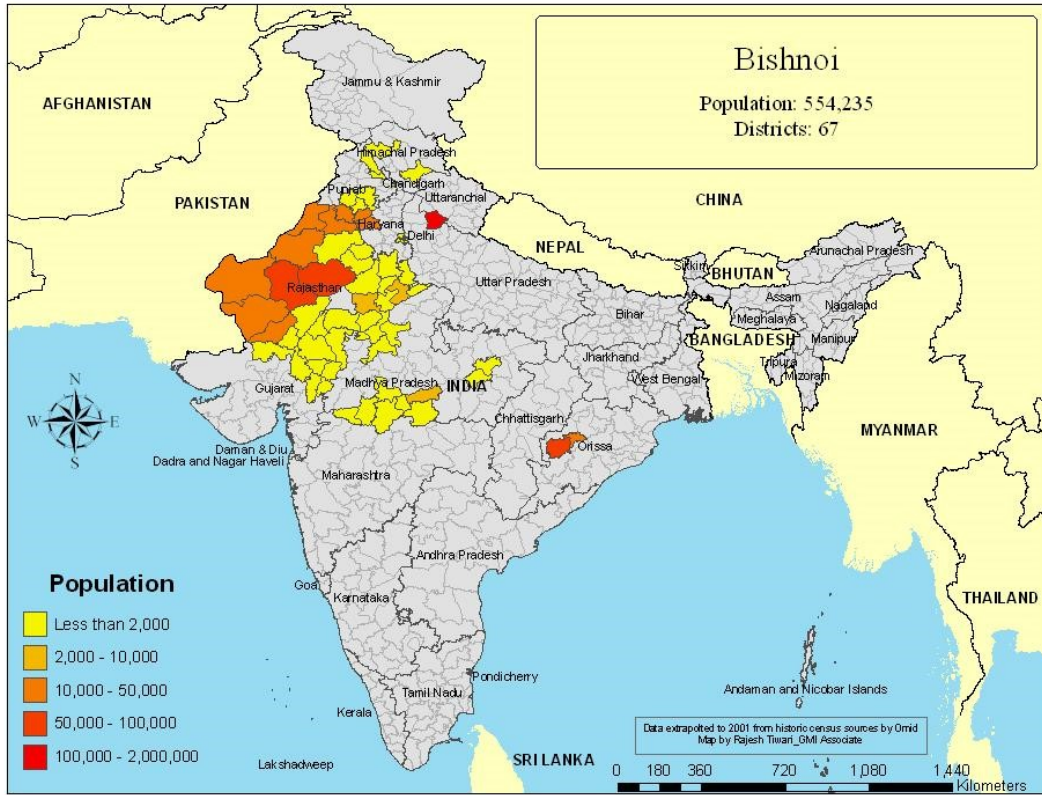


Figure 18 Bishnoi population distribution, from Jain "Ecotheological," 1.

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