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Many Worlds of *Dak Vachan*: Proverbial
Knowledge and the History of Rain and Weather

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Abstract

Looking at a corpus of proverbs (folksayings) known as *Dak vachan* this article explores the ways in which these sayings constitute a field of knowledge production in contemporary *Mithila* (north Bihar) revealing claims along the trajectories of caste, gender and historical lineages. Addressed to different aspects of agrarian life, presence of these sayings in *maithil* agrarian society also suggests a complicated and contested relation between modern and non-modern practices of time in general and agrarian environment in particular. Reading this text of *Dak vachan*, an attempt has been made to understand the process, in and through which colonial-modern knowledge, caste politics and multiple worlds of proverbial wisdom intersect with each other. I have primarily focused on the politics of making claims that go into the making of this textual field. In this endeavour, an attempt has been made to understand the self of an ethnographer in the manner in which these sayings come to him both through the written sources as well as from the field. Finally, this paper is about deconstructing the middle class perception of the domain of the 'folk' in this region. With these questions, the paper sets out an agenda for writing the history of rain and weather in the context of north Bihar. *Dak Vachans* are conceptualized as a proverbial archive for this project and this archive demands an interrogation and scrutiny.

Key Words : **Proverb, Rain, Weather, History, Mithila (north Bihar)**

Many Worlds of *Dak Vachan* : Proverbial Knowledge and the History of Rain and Weather

*Sadan Jha**

“If the proverbs of a people are not the chief facts with regard to them, they are at any rate a safe *index* of their lives, their modes of living, their current thoughts, their intellectual and social status, their surroundings, and in fact everything else that goes to make up social life (Christian, 1891:viii,emphasis mine).”

Background

In an agrarian setting, folk sayings and proverbs are often recognised as repositories of traditional knowledge and wisdom. For colonial administrators and ethnographers like Herbert Risley these quaint sayings ‘dropped fresh from the lips of the Indian rustic’ were quite helpful to a sympathetic observer providing a ‘fairly accurate picture of rural society in India (Risley, 1915:130)’. A century has passed since Risley’s pioneering work and I am not fuelled by any desire to document the *authentic/ real* life of an Indian village. To me, these sayings and nuggets of knowledge are an entry into the fields of environmental consciousness, peasant knowledge systems and the history of rain and weather. The corpus of *Dak vachan*, the theme of this paper, is related to the various processes and occasions of agrarian life and about the popular calendar of peasantry’s ‘shared time’. Weather forecasts, predictions of rain, folk perceptions of astronomy and other facets of environmental knowledge systems are interwoven inseparably with everyday peasant life in the world of *Dak vachan*. These *vachans* have been in circulation in the region of north

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Bihar, popularly known as '*Mithila*', a geo-cultural region of north-eastern Bihar distinguished by language, geographical environment, culture and historical experiences (Jha,1976:1; Jha, 1997:3).

It has been claimed that the historical genealogy of these sayings goes back to 14th-15th century A.D. An ethnographic study of these sayings in the contemporary *maithil* society reveals ways in which these proverbs are perceived, circulated and acted upon as a distinct form of knowledge. With this objective to demonstrate the manner in which politics of caste and colonial modernity crucially structure the field of these sayings, this paper intends to argue that proverbs are not innocent from dominant social structures within which they circulate. This paper attempts to treat proverbs as discursive facts constituted through a range of social and historical markers chiefly caste and colonial modernity.

A general ignorance to explore caste dimension and the manner in which proverbs circulate in the historical context of colonial modernity is peculiarly surprising as there exists a genre of proverbs that was identified and classified as caste proverbs by Risley among others (Risley,1915:128-153). However, caste moorings of those proverbs—that do not overtly reveal caste specificities in their contents—remain largely unexplored. Similarly, we do not have any attempt to explore how proverbs (in this case proverbs related to agriculture) are perceived by those sections of society who are groomed and skilled in modern scientific orientations and outlooks. This social group is an important constituency of this study and includes those who might be sharing the agrarian milieu but who are not the bearers of this folk knowledge. In this sense current study looks at agrarian proverbs outside the domain of peasant communities.

Dak Vachan

Dak vachans are in the form of couplets. In John Christian's book *Behar Proverbs* these are classified and arranged as proverbs

(Christian,1891). These proverbs constitute a domain of 'rustic wisdom', an 'abbreviated traditional instructional statement' (Jha, 2001:102).¹ These sayings are in various popular languages of north India including Bengali, Awadhi, Kannaujia, Maithili etc. In Maithili, these are assigned an authorial marker called *Dak*. Without venturing into detail over the issue of authorship, it may be pertinent here to briefly touch upon this figure called Dak. Without ignoring the obvious question, who was Dak?, I have refrained myself from answering it in any definitive manner. Instead, I highlight the ways in which attempts are made to trace the genealogy and identity of Dak.

In the *maithili* folk imagination Dak is an astronomer, a man with wisdom and a gifted observer of nature. A practical man. An ideal grihastha and a peasant. A well known Maithil scholar Govind Jha depicts the folk image of Dak when he writes that while scholars remained immersed in their books and accounts the Dak was dependent on his field (Jha,1995:24). Dak many a times claims authenticity and truthfulness of his observation in subtle yet provocative ways. In one of his couplets he claims,

thorek jotab adhik mahiyayab
unchka baanhab aari
jaun khet taiyo nahi upajai
ta daak ke padhiha gaari (Dakvachan Samgrah, vol.III: 21)

If you can not plough the field deeply, level it and erect higher edges. Even then if there is a poor yield you may abuse Dak with slangs (translation mine).

¹ For Hetukar Jha, a sociologist, these proverbs "help in understanding at least the trends of what they (peasants) think of themselves and what they consider desirable in respect of living their everyday life (Jha, 2001:102)". I have tried to look at the manner in which people (an amorphous social category consisted of peasantry, as well as sections of the society with indirect or only distinct claims on agriculture as an occupation) sharing the milieu of these proverbs look at these proverbs as a form of knowledge.

Names, Locality and Identities

In the various languages of the regions of north India, Dak is identified by different names. Some of these names are *Dank*, *Ghagh*, *Bhaddari*, *Bhadali* etc.² The book by Ram Naresh Tripathi is perhaps the most comprehensive collection of these sayings published so far in Hindi. Written in 1931 with a wider objective of controlling the declining (the word used is *saamuhik patan* literally meaning collective decline) moral-agrarian order (associating the golden past with prosperity reigning in the agrarian production in India since the Vedic period) Tripathi lists a range of indicators for the decline. In his logic of change the past remains a territory inhabited by the twins of morality and prosperity as “the orientation of people was positive (*satvik*). This is why all the organs of nature were responding in right direction. The rain was timely; trees bore fruits and the earth used to be green and prosperous. Now, everything has become disorderly (Tripathi, 1931:1 translation mine)”. In this environment of decline, with an objective to revive the agrarian condition, he travelled across the country, collected sayings personally or received entries by post, searched for them in the library and also wished that the Government had paid some attention to the peasant’s knowledge of rain by establishing a separate department to maintain an account of the environment of *Paus* and *Magh* (Ibid:7). Ram Naresh Tripathi’s compilation is significant as later *Maithili* compilers crucially engaged with Tripathi’s formulations and invested heavily in refuting Tripathi’s claim of *Ghagh* as a non-maithil, a resident of Sarai Ghagh in the proximity of the city of Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh.

² In Rajasthan we have a saying:

*savan ghodi bhadon gay, magh mas jo bhains bijay
kahain ghagh yeh sanehi bat, aapi marai ki malikai khay*

“In the month of *Savan* if mare, in the month of *Bhadon* if cow, and in the month of *magh* (the eleventh month of the Hindu calendar; corresponds to January in the Gregorian calendar) if buffalo gives birth (then says *Ghagh*), the owner is destroyed completely (Srivastava, 1974: 228)”. In Bengla, the word, *Dak* means ‘to call’. It is said that just after his birth *Dak* started calling his mother hence his name *Dak*. This couplet captures the trace of his name, *Upajeye maaya ko dele dak, Seyese karane taar naam haila ‘dak’* (with your birth you called your mother, hence your name became Dak) (Mishra, 1985: 379). References on Ghagh and Bhaddari in non-Maithil contexts are made in various works (Tripathi, 1931; Keay, 1920; Dwivedi, 2006 and Dutta, 1988).

The first *Maithili* compilation of these sayings is Kapileshwar Jha's *Dakvachanamrit* published from Darbhanga, Bihar in 1905 (Jha, 1996:91). Among *Maithili* compilations, Pandit Sri Jeevanand Thankur is the most widely cited collector of *Dak vachan* who also claims to have garnered references from a number of regional languages of north, east and western parts of India. These include *Bangla Viswakosh*, *Kanojia text (Babe Nami Das)*, references from the regions of Gorakhpur and 'Rajasthan', where *Dak* sayings are popular by the names of *Ghagh* and *Bhadari* (Thakur, 1995:37).

As mentioned earlier, one of the core concerns inspiring maithil essays on the Dak and the prime motive behind compiling these vachans in Maithili is to prove that Dak was a *maithil*. An important Maithil scholar Umesh Mishra tried to establish Dak as a maithil.³ Jeevanand Thakur's attempt was equally directed to meet this end and he appears confronting directly with Ram Naresh Tripathi's views on the subject. However, unlike Tripathi, Jeevanand Thakur with his antiquarian zeal based his study not on oral sayings but written sources, primarily old Sanskrit texts (Ibid:37). He collected sayings from the margins of the ancient Sanskrit texts written on palm leaves. These sayings were inscribed on the blank pages either in the beginning or at the end of the main text.⁴ The core idea was undoubtedly to establish Dak as a maithil poet. This concern continued to shape later writings on Dak too.

In his book, *Maithili Lok Sahitya ka Adhyayan*, (The Study of Maithili Folk Literature) Tarakant Mishra traces local roots of the word Dak that differs markedly from the Bangla meaning. He writes,

“Considering the history of the ways in which the word ‘Dak’ is being used in Mithila today, we get clearly different and much more logical

³ See '*Prakashakiya Waktavya*' of Kanchinath Jha 'Kiran' for Jeevanand Thakur's *Maithil Dak* published in 1949 and reprinted in *Jigyasa* (Thakur, 1995:34).

⁴ The date of publication mentioned for Jeevanand Thakur's treatise is 1357 *saal* which would be 1949/1950. He began collecting these sayings for the Qall India Oriental Conference held at Varanasi, 1943 but was unable to present in that session. Finally he wrote an article on Dak for the All India Oriental Conference at Nagpur in 1946 where the article was (in Hindi) presented in absentia by Jayakant Mishra (Thakur, 1995:39).

possibility. In this region, the word *Dak* is being used to convey 'influence' and capability and not for calling some one (*phalaan baabuk dak chalai chhanhi*). Similarly the word *Dakini* connotes a woman who is a *daayan* (witch) and who is skilled in performing *tantra-mantra*, *jaadu-tona* etc. In the age of Buddha, whosoever (male) after becoming *siddha* (expert) composed two-three, ten-twenty stanzas became known as *Dak*. In case of woman she was known as *Dakini*."

By referring to the history of the spread of Buddhism in Mithila, Tarakant Jha tries to establish *Dak* as a "*Boddh siddh* (expert) between ten to twelve century A.D; who was an inhabitant of Mithila, who had a great influence on the life and people, and who on the basis of his own experience composed unlimited number of proverbs(Mishra, 1985: 380; translation mine)".

As I have mentioned earlier, *Dak* has been referred to by different names and one of them is *Bhaddar*. An earlier compiler of proverbs, John Christian in his *Behar Proverbs* also seems to suggest that *Bhaddar* and *Dak* are one and the same person. He identified *Bhaddar* as a local poet who 'interpreted the signs of the seasons in rhymes which have passed into proverbs'. For Christian his descendants – '*an inferior class of Brahmans*' – were still supposed to reside in a village of the Shahabad district (italics mine). John Christian narrates an interesting story of *Dak*,

"when very young he(*Bhaddar*) was stolen from his home in Shahabad by a young magician or astrologer, who carried him away to his country and adopted him. *Bhaddar* became so thoroughly proficient in astrology and all the mystic arts, that his patron gave him his daughter in marriage. Desirous of seeing his early home, he found out by astrology in what direction it lay; and then, having ascertained by his science the exact auspicious hour and day of his departure, he secretly awaited them, as he knew his wife would be against his leaving her. Unfortunately exact auspicious hour came round when

he was at his meals, his wife being present in attendance. Being well up in *jotish* laws of astrology, he made a move with his foot (as beginning of his journey), which was all that was needed to make his journey a success. His wife, who was herself adept in *jotish*, observed this action of her husband's, and at once understood what it meant, but pretended ignorance. In order, however, to frustrate his intention, she cast a spell over a river which he had to cross; and in consequence of this the ferry-boat in which Bhaddar was crossing upset when in mid-stream. But as Bhaddar had started in a propitious hour nothing could effectually stop him. He was therefore borne to the other side on the back of a fish. This convinced his wife that her husband was a superior magician and astrologer, and that nothing that she could do would prevent him from carrying out his wish. So she gave up the idea, and followed him to his original home(in Shahabad), where they settled for good (Christian, 1891: 204-205)".

It is the circulation of this image of *Bhaddar* as Brahman that is a point of interest for the study. Alongside this Brahman identity, Dak has quite often been recognised by different commentators as a member of *Yadava* community (Tripathi, 1931:16). Umesh Mishra establishes dak as belonging to *Yadava* caste (Thakur, 1995:38). There are many instances where he has referred himself as '*Dak goar*'(*yadav*).⁵

Several Maithil commentators have also deployed a technique by which the social background of Dak is claimed as self-given using a vague category of people's knowledge. The claim is that the legitimacy of a popular saying is attested by popular acceptance. Maithil scholar, Govind Jha says that people know who he was and they consider him as a jewel among themselves. This is why we call him 'lokratna'. He establishes the identity of Dak as closer to people and day to day life of the society, differentiates between '*punditratna*'

⁵ The term Dak Goar appears quite often as together making a very strong case for arguing that Dak was a member of Yadav caste.

*Phagu karaai, chait chuk, kirttik nattahi taar,
Swati nattahi makh til, kahi gae Daak Goar.*

"If it rains in the month of *Phagun*(February-March) *urid* is spoilt; if in the month of *Chait* (March-April) lemons; if in the asterism of *Kritika* (about middle of May) the toddy palms; and if in that of *Swati*(latter part of October) beans and seasmum; saith Dak the *Gowaala* (Christian, 1891: 208)".

(gem of a scholar) and '*lokratna*' (gem of the folk) and says that while the former has some distance with everydayness and they live in their own cocoon, Dak had all the qualifications for being a pundit yet he never chose to disassociate himself from social and popular life (Jha, 1995: 23).

Govind Jha gives Dak the credit for bringing Maithili into the intellectual world for the first time. For him this history goes back to the 10th-11th century and he also refutes the claim that Dak was a Buddhist (Ibid: 23). This refutation suggests that Dak was at some point of time recognised as a Buddhist (see the earlier mentioned argument of Tarakant Jha who tries to establish *Dak* as a Buddhist). Despite the fact that the wisdom of Dak has been well appreciated one can track several layers of tension inherent in the ways Dak and his sayings have been appropriated within the brahmanical discourse of Mithila.

***Dak Vachan* and the Every Day Life of Peasant Society in Mithila**

Before moving into the core of this essay, a brief outline of the range of issues addressed by these sayings will provide a glimpse of this wide ranging catalogue of maithil peasant concerns. These examples are selected deliberately from different registers to inform readers about the various forms through which these sayings have reached us in printed form. One such saying defines the hierarchy of occupations,

*Uttam kheti madhyam baan,
nikhid chaakari bhikh nidaan.*

Cultivation is the best of all occupations; trade is of medium value; one must not take up service(as an occupation); and begging is worthless (translation: Jha, 2001:107).

At another point and in one of his practical advices he says,

*har bahai ta apno bahi, nahi bahi ta baisalo rahi
ja puchi harbaha kahan, biya bunab bekaaj tahan.*

One should hold the plough himself and do the cultivation. One who does not move with ploughmen should atleast remain present in the field. But one who sits at home and questions the whereabouts of ploughmen should not sow seeds (*Dakvachan Sangrah*, III:4; translation mine).

A couplet on the observation of animal behaviour during agriculture season informs us in *har thaad karwak vachan* (saying on putting up the plough),

*pariba bahe dhurandhar, chhati aathain har jaay
chaudah chauthi amabaas, ayalo har bithaaya.
Barda mute khet dahay, khasai khet jaun barad paray,
Gora jhar ki mura jhar, taun nahi nik jaun khasai faar,
Issa tutai sun ho kor, laagan tutai barad le chor
Jua tutai ta subh hoye, 'dak' kahaichhathi nischint soya
Khur singh samati liya, bahu sukh kari manahi diya.*

This saying is related to a particular ritual known as *har thaadh karab* (literally meaning putting the plough in standing position; *thaad* in Maithili also means putting in rest/break in motion) symbolically marking the commencement of the agricultural season and the day falls on *magh sudhi shir panchami* (which is normally in mid January). On this day, plough and oxen are taken inside the inner court yard (*angan*) and unhusked rice are poured over it. Following this ritual plough along with oxen are blessed (*chumaun*) and considered fit for the agrarian task. During this ritual if the ox urinates then the field would be devastated by floods., if the ox drops *gobar* (cowdung) then there would be a low yield throughout the year. If it gets itching in feet or ears or if it falls down on the ground then these

are ominous signs for bad times ahead ...Dak says if it scatters the soil here and there with its horns or toes then the houskeeper will have a pleasant time tending to the fields. (*Dakvachan Sangrah*, III: 5-6).

In the area of astronomy these sayings are focussed on three aspects – *Muhurt* dealing with auspicious time for travel and for cultural–religious functions like *mundan*, *krishi karm*, purchase of cattle, hair cutting etc; *sakun* covers activities like rain forecasting, lightening, falling of chameleon on the body etc; and yoga implies predictions based on close observation of natural happenings. The close linkages between environmental signs and the content of his prediction makes Dak vachan an interesting reading for any study on indigenous environmental discourse, an alternate to modern western discourse of weather and climate.

The interplay of feminine identities and rain opens up another possibility, another line of inquiry and we get,

*Titar pankhi badri, ranr (raand) phulele lagay,
Kah bhaddar sun bhaddari wah awe(aawe) yah jay(jaay)*

“When you see a cloud speckled like the wings of the partridge, and a widow applying scented oil to her hair”, said Bhaddar, “Hear ,O Bhaddari, the former will bring rain and the latter will elope (Christian, 1891:204)”.⁶

In another case Bhaddar says,

*Awat adar nan diye, jat nan diye hast,
Kahen bhaddar dou gaye, banita au girhast.*

⁶ Similar to this we have another couplet that goes by the name of Dak which says,

Titar pakh megha ure, o bidhwa musukae.

Kahe Dak sunu Dakini, u barse ee jae

“when the clouds fly like the wings of the partridge and when a widow smiles,” saith Dak, “hear, O Dakini, the one is going to rain and the other to marry”. “*Titarpankhi*”: spotted or speckled like the wing of the partridge. A *Ranr*(widow) is never supposed to apply scented oil or adorn herself in anyway (Christian, 1891: 216). This interchange of names (Dak for Bhaddari) in these two abovementioned couplets, further suggests that two have often been treated as one person

This saying has a *double entendre*: the subject under consideration here can be both a wife and the rainy season. While returning home ('to her father-in-law's house'), if the wife is not received with due ceremony and regard; and while leaving the house she is not given any present to carry (the usual etiquette of a domestic life), says Bhaddar, she will go away, *i.e.* she will elope. Alternatively, "if at the commencement of the monsoons there is no rain in *Adra*, and if, at their close, there is none in *Hathiya*, then says Bhaddar, it is bad (*sic.*) look out for the farmer as well as the labourer (*i.e.* the farmer is sure to be ruined and the labourers are sure to get no work and will starve) (Christian, 1891:206-207)".

Adar a colloquial form of *Adra*, or *Ardara Nachhattra/ Nakshatra* also means 'civility' - to treat one with due civility and ceremony (*adar karna*), and *hast* is "hand" or the *Hathiya Nachhattra*. The *Adra* or *Ardara* and *Hathiya* or *Hast* are two out of the twenty seven *Nachhattras* or lunar mansions or asterisms into which the traditional north Indian agrarian calendar is divided. The former embraces parts of June and July; and the latter parts of September and October. They mark the beginning and end of the rainy seasons; and are principal periods of rain, on which chiefly depends the success of agricultural operations. There are 27 *nachhattra/nakhat/nachhattr/nichhattr/nakshatra* or lunar asterisms in each year, and consequently $2\frac{1}{4}$ in each month. Each asterism is though not of equal length and the longest is *hathiya*, with 16 lunar days. Every agricultural operation commences in a certain asterism (Grierson, 1885:271-273; Christian, 1891:206-207).

In another case, the analogy of contrast between *purva* (easterly) and *pachwa* (westerly) winds with widow and smiling- chattering widow points to interesting possibilities of reading this text along gender lines.

*Purwa par jaun pachhwa bahai, bihansi ranr bat karai,
Eh donon ke ihai bichar u barsai i karai bhatar.*

“If the west wind blows during *purwai* (easterly) and if a widow chats and smiles, from these facts you may judge that in the first case it will rain and in the second case she is going to marry a second time (Christian, 1891:216)”.

The question before me was how to intellectually make sense of these sayings. One way was to interpret these sayings as repositories of traditional collective wisdom, an alternative form of knowledge on the weather and agrarian science. Another way was to decipher the cultural codes, social relationships and moral regimes that these sayings carry with them. Instead of following these paths, I have tried to enquire the material and historical context through which this form of narrative knowledge is produced at the moment of encounter between the world of researcher and the worlds of these narratives.

Theorizing the narrative knowledge, Lyotard writes, "the narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation. It is the present act that on each of its occurrences marshals in the ephemeral temporality inhabiting the space between the 'I have heard' and 'you will hear' (Lyotard, 1984:22)."

The question is how to develop a strategy to locate this temporality which has been recognised as one of the most crucial features of narrative knowledge by Lyotard. The issue at hand is to engage with the act of recitation and the location of the researcher's self. It is also crucial as proverbs are primarily recognised as carriers of traditional wisdom, a type of repository and my concern here is to disentangle different threads that go into the making of this archive of folk wisdom.

Many Worlds of *Dak Vachan*

I was born and brought up in Mithila which forms the geo-cultural area for this study of *Dak vachan*. However, I had no clue, till very late, about the existence of a figure called Dak.

Here as a word of caution, unfamiliarity with the name of Dak must not be misunderstood as unfamiliarity with world(s) of *Dak vachan*. Some of these sayings are, in fact, so mundane, so ordinary that they have been simply there, shaping and framing the collective psyche of the society, in unthinkable and invisible ways. It is impossible to think of them separately as a collective field of knowledge whose authorship bears the name of a human figure.

I came across the name Dak when I took up the study of the popular/folk culture of the region in a systematic manner and from a researcher's eye. This also indicates that while the sayings came to me naturally and as a way of life, the name of its imagined author, Dak, came as a subject field worthy of investigation and not merely as an everyday experience of growing up in the region. The visibility of the name forced me to ponder upon the ties between these folk sayings and the wider discourse of astronomy which is largely dominated by the brahmanical Sanskrit centered scholarship. In fact, I was interested in the folk knowledge and the peasant's ways of addressing the demands of rain and weather. It is in this context that I started looking deeper into the corpus of *Dak vachan*.

In modernist discourse collections of folksayings or anthropological excercises in general have been associated with antiquarian quests, 'collecting specimens of "otherness"', whether of other times or other cultures. This desire or even lust, to surround oneself with 'curiosities', to render simultaneous that which is non-simultaneous (as the German scholar Konrad Kostlin puts it), was and remains a crucial component in the curatorial attention afforded to the everyday life of the folk' (Bendix, 2002:111).

The initial concerns of anthropology in India were to meet this desire primarily for specific administrative ends and this impulse backed by the demands of the empire gave rise to what Nicholas Dirks calls ethnographic state by the late nineteenth century in India (Dirks, 2002:43). The discipline needed minute and greater details. Risley points to this administrative dimension when he writes, “If legislation, or even executive action, is ever to touch these relations (domestic and social) in a satisfactory manner, an ethnographic survey of Bengal, and a record of the customs of the people, is as necessary an incident of good administration as a cadastral survey of the land and a record of the rights of its tenants (Risley, 1891:vii)”. This is not to suggest that scientific impulses were not determining aspects of these colonial ethnographic ventures. Even Risley clarifies that objects of ‘the enquiry were partly scientific and partly administrative’ (Ibid:vi). However, the problem comes from the motivational forces guiding these scientific objectives. It was for the collection of ‘some fresh examples of familiar principles’. In the Preface to the first edition of *The Popular Religion and Folklore on Northern India*, William Crooke writes,

“My object in writing this book has been three fold. In the first place I desired to collect, for the use of all officers whose work lies among the rural classes, some information on the beliefs of the people which will enable them, in some degree, to understand the *mysterious inner life* of the races among *whom their lot is cast*, secondly, it may be hoped that this introductory sketch will stimulate inquiry, particularly among the educated races of the country, who have, as yet, done little to enable Europeans to gain a fuller and more sympathetic knowledge of their rural brethren; and lastly, while I have endeavoured more to collect facts than to theorize upon them, I hope that *European scholars* may find in these pages *some fresh examples of familiar principles*...(Crooke,1896:v-vi ; italics mine)”.⁷

⁷ He further writes, “I believe that the more we explore these popular superstitions and usages, the nearer are we likely to attain to the discovery of the basis on which Hinduism has been founded.” Towards the end of his preface he writes, “The only excuse...(is that) it has been *written in the intervals of the scanty leissure of a District officer’s life* in India, and often at a distance from works of reference and libraries (Crooke,1896:vi; emphasis mine).”.

Risley in his celebrated project of the “Tribes and Castes of Bengal” confirms this trend when he writes about the methodological impulse behind his work. He writes, “ the endeavour throughout was not so much to strike out new lines of inquiry as to adopt the methods already sanctioned by the approval of European men of Science to the special conditions which have to be taken account in India” (Risley, 1891:v).

As I mentioned earlier, I too was charmed with the idea of an alternate discourse on rain and weather. However, I soon realised that in this given history of ethnography the challenge was how not to fall in this indexical project. Armed with this critique, I began my field work without having any desire to enter into 'the field' like the figure of a colonial modern, as someone seeking information or having concerns that were rooted in the indexical project of western modernity. For me however, the question of access to this multilayered domain loomed large in my initial phase. To meet this end, I wanted to engage people on this subject of *Dak vachan* in an informal and minimalist manner. This brought me close to the manner of gathering proverbs by John Christian. Writing in the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, he mentions the impossibility “to understand a people when they are acting a part, when they are playing an artificial *role* as it were; and this is what most natives do when they appear in the presence of a European”. He further writes on the virtue of patience, “...by exercising a little patience he was enabled to see the “real” Bihari peasant; and would recommend this plan to everyone who would care to hear him talk not artificially but naturally. He will find them more truthful, and certainly far more interesting(Christian, 1891:viii-xi)”. However, unlike my colonial predecessor, I was not oriented to search for a ‘truthful’or ‘real Bihari peasant’. I was also not like an outsider, a scholar coming

Shahid Amin writes in his introduction to William Crooke's *Glosery of North Indian Peasant life*, “ This Glosery was intended to be a draft document. The idea was to enlarge the quantity of ‘accessible information’ within it by ‘local enquiries’, correct its entries and ascertain the areas in which ‘special words are used’. The procedure suggested was to ‘mark... with red ink’ in the copies circulated ‘the words used in each district’. The final product was to be a ‘fairly complete Rural and Agricultural Glosery’ with the assistance of ‘many officers’ to whom the prototype, or rather the proto-text, was being circulated (Amin, 1989:xviii)”.

from across the globe or from the political centres and hence did not either belong to the category of post-colonial scholars like Shahid Amin (who was perceived by people of Churi Chaura—the place of his field work—as a ‘visiting historian’ and ‘the man from Delhi’) or Bhoju Ram Gujjar (a research assistant) supplying twelve legal size pages to Ann Grodzins Gold on divine conservation in Rajasthan (Amin, 1995:4; Gold and Gujjar, 1989). My conversations never acquired the audacity of an encounter between an ethnographer and his subject. To me both Shahid Amin and Gold render a sense of distance (both physical distance between Delhi and rural eastern Uttar Pradesh in case of Amin; between Rajasthan and USA—presumed by the location of the author as mentioned against her/his name and not overtly mentioned in the article—in the case of Gujjar-Gold) as well as reflecting on the ties of affinity between the researcher and the subject of research. By commenting on the process by which they collected information and the manner in which they were perceived by their respondents and collaborators both Amin and Gold respond to their crafts as well as their imagined readers. In both these intellectual endeavours, the subject is out there in villages holding information in the form of memories and practices that need to be extracted, explained and assigned the status of knowledge. While I too shared these core concerns the difference in my case comes from the fact that I explored already a familiar subject. For me the subject field was not out there but I myself inhabited a part of it. The point I wish to emphasise is that in Amin or Gold’s renderings the field of study is removed from the longer life trajectories of scholars hence Amin enters the field at a particular moment and Gold receives handwritten notes from Bhoju Ram Gujjar. Unlike them my disadvantage was the lack of distance from the field. However, this lack should not be construed as intimacy either. Thus, I feel myself sitting on the opposite side of Amin and Gold who try to explain the distance by making visible the process of forming an intimacy with their respective subjects. I on the other side struggle to distance myself from the subject-field by fracturing it at the first place. As I mentioned earlier, even when I was intimately rooted in *Mithila*

and was using some of these sayings as a matter of speech I was neither aware of the figure of Dak nor was I perceived by my respondents as someone intimately related to the peasant cosmos of the region. For me the lack was primarily to conceptualise a coherent notion of the field itself.

During visits to my village and my family I often initiated discussions on *Dak vachan* with those whom I met on a regular basis even otherwise. I projected my image (and to a large extent I can say that I was also perceived) as someone whose curiosity to collect information had led him to do some research on the subject. The responses were quite varied in nature. Most of the people participated enthusiastically in the discussions. In fact they conveyed a certain sense of over-confidence regarding the knowability/familiarity with the *Dak vachan*. However, when the discussions became serious I noticed that most of these people developed a tendency to alienate themselves or feign ignorance. It was frustrating at one level but the field was now wide open in a challenging manner. The scope to read the politics of the field became more germane than what I perceived initially. In the beginning it was alluring to consider the lack of response as resistance offered by the field. But I was proved wrong, altogether. It was not that they did not wish to talk. But, their confidence to speak on behalf of the people or to represent a knowledge system often betrayed them. They perceived my endeavour, my project was essentially indexical in nature. The moment, I made clear that I wanted to do research on the subject, they became apprehensive about the 'truthfulness' and the depth of their own understanding about the subject. They were not sure whether they knew enough on the subject to be heard in a formal discourse. They perceived my exploration as essentially an attempt to know more couplets.

It may be worth mentioning here that all these 'respondents' came from the social background that may be loosely referred as middle class. They all were educated in modern forms of learning. What is

also crucial is that they all were male, people with a busy and active cultural and intellectual life.

Initially the experience was quite frustrating, as the voices coming from the field, were forcing me to see the social base of this knowledge system as extremely narrow and superficial in nature. However, the stimulant came from ways in which my informal sessions ended in most of the cases. The sessions generally ended with suggestions coming from my respondents to meet some old women or lower caste old people. I was advised to meet my grand mother, my mother, my old aunts, an old family servant and other aged people from the region.

Suggestions to meet old women and lower caste old men, to *me* reflect a definite colonial modernist mindset in which women always appear as bearers of tradition and lower castes function as location of folk traditions and folk knowledge systems.⁸ In this modernist psyche, the body of knowledge has been pushed either inside the courtyard and hence not worthy to be shared among the literati or it has been pushed far off from the 'civilised upper crust of the society' and among those who occupy lower intellectual bodies. Here, the term, intellectual can easily be supplemented with the body of scientific/modern knowledge. However, the issue is not as simple as it appears, at first sight. The complexity is due to the unique space that this text of *Dak vachan* occupies in the Sanskrit/Brahmanic knowledge discourse and the responses received by worlds of *Dak vachan*.

Sanskrit texts on astronomy give respectable space to these sayings and Maithil scholars have emphasised this aspect to claim authority of *Dak vachan* and their Sanskrit roots (Jha, 1996:92-93, Thakur, 1995:45-46). Even the authoritative *Panchang gives due recognition to* the significance of Dakvachans. *Panchaang* is the annual calendar

⁸ Tarakant Mishra writes, It seems that a large part of Mithila's folk literature, today, rests with women and lower caste people. I have found great difficulties in recovering my desired material" (Mishra, 1985 "Preface": page not mentioned; translation mine).

and guide (almanac) on what to do and what not to do at any specific time of the year.⁹ It has a considerable hold over day to day religious and auspicious activities of a wide section of *maithil* households. This calendar, a publication of Kameswar Singh Sanskrit University of Darbhanga (Bihar), is based on complex astronomical calculation and has a long and continuous tradition of scholarship functioning as its legitimising agency. Thus, a recognition by the authorities of *Panchang* in itself implies that *Dak vachan* and its wisdom has duly been used not as an inferior or lower body of knowledge. For me the guideline to read the politics was quite clear-distinction between this folk body of knowledge and Brahmanic body must be seen at some other locations of contestation.

The recognition given to Dak can also be analysed as a delicate strategy adopted by dominant knowledge system for its own sake and for its own survival. By giving due space to Dak, the Brahmanic science has actually been consuming the folk knowledge traditions. Jeevanand Thakur, whose views have merited uncritical acclaim by later scholars, concludes that the compositions of Dak are based on astronomical treatises (*jyotishshastra Samhitas*) and other theoretical texts. He says that Dak's *adbhutprakarana* shows remarkable similarity with Brahmihiracharya's *Barahi Samhita* and Ballal Sen's *adbhutsagar's dhruvachan*. Thus for Thakur, the basis of Dak's composition was nothing but Sanskrit texts (Ibid:46). Dak has been internalised and given a recognition at the epistemological level only to refute the claims of lower castes to be in possession of an equally beautiful and rich body of knowledge.

Interestingly, most of these claims about the age old tradition and long genealogy of the *Dak vachan* are based on a seventeenth century text, *Vayabahaarpradipa*. At one place 1691 A.D. has been

⁹ *Panchang* in Mithila are popularly known as *patraa*. Among various panchangs which are in circulation in Mithila, *Viswavidyalaya Panchang* is the most reputed one and is published annually from KSDS University, Darbhanga. Even among a large number of educated Brahmins of this region or diasporic maithil Brahmins, *Panchang* has a strong presence in deciding the date and time of any specific event i.e. *wedding, mundane, upanayan*. Till very recently (even during my childhood), a large number of educated maithils even used to decide the date of journey first by consulting the *Panchang*.

marked as the year of this composition by Jeevanand Thakur (Ibid: 41). It is in *Abahatta*, the language in which *Kirtilata* of Vidyapati has been composed. Jeevanand Thakur says his book is based on the collection of some old / ancient *talpatra* and handwritten manuscript.

Jivanand 's book is based on the collection from brahmanical texts like *Vayabahaarpradip*, *Tithi Dwedh Nirnaya*, *Graamwaasvichaar*, *Taripatra Vikramorvasiya* and astronomical text called *Prakirana*. The primary objectives of Jivanand in his book is to establish the Maithil origin of Dak, to make claims for the originality and totality of the sayings compiled by himself and to reduce the folk knowledge body of Dak merely as a branch of Sanskrit scholarship. The claims of authenticity appear clearly in the writings on *Dak vachan* which come before us in printed form. The first collection in the printed form of a book came as *Dakvachanamrita* in three volumes printed by Kanhaiyalal Krishnadas Rameswar Press, Darbhanga. It was compiled by Pundit Kapileswar Jha. It has been argued by Jivanand that in Kapileswar Jha's compilation, due to editorial lapses and laziness the influence of Hindi remains disturbing. This is why Jeevanand's text, which has been published also by *Jigyasa*, a research journal of Maithily started in 1990s, begins with a bold letter heading, '*Bissudh Dakvachan*' (pure *Dak vachan*). The subheading is *talpatra likhit and m.m. Harpatikrita Vayabahaarpradipa san* . Jeevanand writes, 'I feel it quite clearly that composition of Dak has been absolutely on sanskrit *Jyotishi*'. He has contrasted/ compared some of the Dak vachan i.e., *Siddhiyogavichaar* with *Dhritavachan tika* of Ballalsen's *Abdhutsaagar* and *Daggddhatithi* with lines of *Naradsamhita* (Thakur,1995:45-46).

By taking recourse to logic and reasoning Jeevanand Thkur also tries to prove that the period of Dak must have been before fourteenth century (Ibid:3). On the other hand, he says that folk stories inform us about a famous astrologer Brahmihir whose wife gave birth to an *ahir* (a yadav). He says that if you take this saying as a proof then the period of Dak dates back to sixth century

A.D.(Ibid:43). It is easy to say that Jeevanand Thakur confuses by not sticking to one date for the text. But this confusion reduces the complexity and the efforts which have gone into proving the historical authenticity of the text . For me what matters is not the year of this text or its historicity but the intellectual investment that has gone into tracing the geneology of this text and eventually of the figure Dak. The scope of this paper does not allow us to explain adequately this urge, this investment in history to trace the ancient. To explain this historical impulse we need a closer analysis of the ways in which the spirit of the discipline in history has been mobilised by scholars to add legitimacy to their respective claims. However, it may be worth pointing to mention the presence of an anxiety among the Brahmanical scholars to establish the historicity of Dak's identity on the one hand and secondly, the absence of this motivation among colonial administrator-ethnographers like Risley, Christian or even Grierson.

Thus the tension can be located between the modernist scientific knowledge systems and the folk wisdom which runs parallel to a struggle between hegemonic brahmanic system and folk knowledge within this non-modern field of knowledge production. What is at stake for my respondent is the confidence to address the modern discourse with enough grounding in the traditional systems.¹⁰

To them I was a representative of the modern scientific system who intended to document the culture and wisdom inherent in the traditional folk world. This representative was then to be treated with indexical confidence on the subject. Thus, while the day to day life and informal settings were occasions when respondents spoke confidently about Dakvachan and quoted the couplets of Dak without any hesitations, in the formal setting the visible lack or absence of such dialogue points out the ways in which folk knowledge in general and Dakvachan in particular have been bracketed at epistemological

¹⁰ This opinion of mine must not be read in terms of its truth value but at best the statement can be considered as my own impression of the field and I do not claim its authenticity either. Images and opinions are after all nothing but echoes of temporal moments and should be read in similar manner.

level and are isolated from the intellectual discourse in a very systematic yet unconscious manner.

The multi-layered and contested character of this discourse, which informs this reading exercise about the conditions of its production (the temporal moment when I, as a reader, come to know about my subject), can be analysed by the manner in which knowledge about this field circulates in contemporary social and intellectual life. This circulation reveals the existence of many worlds of Dakvachan within which we can locate the subject. These are images of folk knowledge, these are our own constructs.

From the above mentioned self description, I wish to argue that in the region of Mithila, there is a world which is informed by these sayings and influenced by them. This world knows both the text and its author. There is another world which is influenced by these sayings but does not know the name of the author. This world does not know that these sayings go by the name of Dak, a human figure. The image of the author is not absent here, but in the imagination of this world, the human figure of the author is replaced with the figure of collective social practices and traditions of the land. The folk is at its romantic best in this world.

At a different plain, a sphere emerges, which shares same geographical field with these folk sayings, shares the concerns of this body of knowledge, but denies/resists the influence of this knowledge system. This world does not negate it at the level of practices but negates it at the structural level and opts for a modern knowledge system. In this world, these sayings take the shape of superstitions, weather signs or at best 'cultural agencies' worth only to be studied for the sake of the scientific west or for the preservation of traditional knowledge for the future. This sphere perpetuates modernist discourses on narrative knowledge. Narratives are structured and ordered as fossilised knowledge forms, as markers of a romantic past or at best an alternative to the dominant existing discourse.

Moving ahead, we find another space within the indigenous knowledge systems which uses these sayings, give them enough playground and in this manner keeps its own legitimacy unthreatened. This space has produced maximum treatises on *Dak vachan*. This space interacts closely or it appears that this space is itself a product of modernist structures. An anxiety to identify the author, attempts to legitimise the text of *Dak vachan* by using history and to locate *Dak* in the line of 'ancient' sanskrit knowledge traditions are some of the visible traits of this discursive space.

Conclusion

The concerns of this article are torn between the demands for writing a history of rain and weather and the folkloristic-ethnographic sensibilities required for a study of a set of proverbs. While the former pushes for a historical exploration of geneological trajectories of the figure Dak the ethnographic demands ask for more detail on the relation of *Dak vachan* as a knowledge form with other prevalent knowledge forms on rain, weather and agrarian moral universe of Mithila. Here, it may not be irrelevant to mention that maithil peasants have hardly any access to scientific weather forecasting system and weather news of national television channels are far from meaningful to agriculture in this region. In this scenario, it may be pertinent to ask whether peasants rely on calculations of Dak? The current exercise is based on non-peasant respondents who were not asked this question as the primary concern was not to delve into functional dimensions of these proverbs but to look at the manner in which historical sensibilities and spirits are mobilised for the construction of the figure of Dak. It is this sole concern that led me to pay close attention to the making of *Dak vachan*, possibly an important source for the construction of the history of rain and weather in this part of the world.

In this construction, we find Maithil scholars looking for traces of *Dak vachan* at the margins of old Sanskrit texts predominantly as allegories of their own Brahmanic concerns to paraphrase Simona

Sawhney (Sawhney, 2009:2). The narrative of Dak's birth from the sexual intercourse between a Sanskrit scholar-astrologer father and a lower caste mother is like meeting the precondition for Sawhney's argument of 'responding to the passion of the sanskrit texts' where she has argued that the phrase 'responding to the passion' of the Sanskrit texts implies an upper caste man finding a sanction in these texts or even an invitation for sleeping with a lower caste woman(Ibid:1). What is equally revealing in the construction of Dak's maithil identity is the passion for history. However, the point of convergence between both the passions is that none of the maithil scholars kept open the possibility of Dak as born of a low caste mother without a Brahman father. It is this passionate Brahmanical construction of *Dak vachan* which makes the task of looking at the sources for writing the history of rain and weather extremely challenging.

In a fascinating but less cited essay the legendary historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie commented upon the diverse methods employed in the history of climate and the need for interdisciplinary and comparative research as a path to a convincing history of the climate (Ladurie, 1988:213). Written in the late sixties Ladurie's concerns were largely influenced by making maximum use of quantitative techniques to compile huge data sets with possibilities to compare among them. Pointing to the existence of an archive, he wrote, "Here in France we are still waiting for someone to establish a reliable, annually numbered series of monthly temperatures running without interruption from the early eighteenth century up to the present day...(Ibid:196)".

This exercise which gained its motivation from such concerns of Ladurie was also aware of the criticism of quantitative methods and the larger criticism of the history of 'evenementiel' that Annales scholarship witnessed from the second half of the nineteenth century. Informed by such historiographical developments I began this research and focussed on the specific genre of proverbs which

reveals complexities in the reconstruction of the domain of popular knowledge on the rain and weather and forces us to chart a new route for any exploration of the history on rain and weather. This history must take an account of not merely how people conserve their environment through religious and non-scientific idioms (Gold and Gujar) but also take into account the manner in which the discourse on the non-modern knowledge has been fraught along caste lines. Based on this reading of *Dak vachan*, the larger question that we need to ask is how to locate history in the discourse of environment rather the other way round (locating environment in history and reconstructing climate and weather of the past).

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