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‘THE GLOBAL SINDHI DIASPORA’

A CONTEMPORARY READING

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Sindhis must be one of the most widely dispersed and diasporically inclined, so to speak, in/from South Asia. Sindhis draw upon a fascinating history of mobility and transnational enterprise, and today are found in scores of places worldwide. As such, one would expect the rich literature on ‘immigrant communities’, which flourished from the 1970s especially in Britain, the USA and Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands, to have picked up their scent. For some reason, however, it is only since recently that the Sindhi diaspora is attracting scholarly attention. Sustained works include monographs by Markovits (2000) and Falzon (2005), and paper-length contributions by Haller (for example 2005).

In this paper I argue that the term ‘Sindhi diaspora’ subsumes three different moments of mobility, each of which emerged out of particular historical circumstances and had its own logic. Against this backdrop, I then discuss some of the patterns of contemporary Sindhi economy and society, with an emphasis on their transnational aspects. First, however, a caveat on my use of the term ‘Sindhi’, which is based on two overlapping distinctions. Primarily a religious one: the paper is about *Hindu* Sindhis as distinct from Muslims, Christians, and other groups living in Sind, Pakistan, who are also ‘Sindhi’ on the basis of linguistic and regional criteria. The bulk of the Hindu population of Sind left the newly-fledged Pakistan in 1947–8, and it

is these people I worked with¹ and talk about today. Even then, however, the term ‘Hindu Sindhi’ is not fully satisfactory since, as pointed out somewhat crossly by Devji in his review of my book (2006: 4435, my parenthesis), ‘this new community [the Hindu Sindhis of this talk] was only made possible because its menial castes had been left behind in Sindh where they still languish’. That said, I believe my terminology - and therefore (arbitrary) research boundaries - to be justified, in the sense that, if we may speak of imagined communities (Anderson 1991), it is fair to say that Hindu Sindhis living in worldwide diaspora outside of Pakistan today constitute such a community.

Empirically, then, the paper traces some of the more salient recent historical experiences of Sindhis. Theoretically, I seek to re-read my earlier work in light of recent understandings of, first, cosmopolitanism, and, second, the space of global objects such as diasporas. With respect to both cosmopolitanism and diaspora, my argument is that Sindhis constitute a model of ‘a cosmopolitan diaspora’ and at the same time feed into our developing understanding of the multiplicities and discontinuities - of both cosmopolitanism and global space.

Pax Britannica and the development of the Sindwork trade diaspora

As Brown & Foot (1994) point out, many of the protagonists of today’s Indian diaspora come from regions and groups with traditions of mobility that stretch back many centuries. In our case, the contemporary Sindhi diaspora is to some extent a

¹ I did anthropological fieldwork with Sindhis in Mumbai, London, and Malta intermittently between 1995 and 2001; this was supplemented with archival research in various collections, notably the Royal Commonwealth Library in Cambridge, the British Library in London, and the National Archives in Malta.

creature of the nineteenth century. Sometime around 1850, indigenous traders - mainly from the town of Hyderabad - discovered that there was a foreign market for the native handicrafts of Sind ('Sind works'), and the 'Sindwork' trading diaspora was born.

Hardly out of nothing, however. Take the memoirs of one Seth Naomul Hotchand of Karachi (1804–1878), written largely as a hagiography to extol the greatness and success of his family. Even if Seth Naomul's claims that by 1804 his family owned agencies and firms 'at about 500 places' in northern India and around the Arabian Sea, or that the members of his family and their *gumashtas* (agents) 'acted in perfect concord' (1915: 48), are not to be taken literally, the memoirs present a model of trade and mobility that was to find much fortune with Sindhis. They effectively show a firm, controlled by a paternalistic hub in urban Sind, expanding geographically by locating agents and/or relatives at strategic trading points which, in turn, often acted as depots fostering further expansion.

Prior to the conquest and 'annexation' of Sind by the British in 1843, the country had been ruled by the Talpur Mirs and most of the fertile land owned by a Muslim aristocracy of powerful *waderos* (landowners - see Cheesman 1981a,b). Trade and commerce was, however, substantially in the hands of Hindus, who ranged from large-scale urban merchants like Seth Naomul's family to village *bantias* (small traders). A number of sources hold tantalising clues to the deep-rooted tradition of mobile trade in and out of Sind. The geographical accounts of Al Idrisi (1100–1166), for example, with their vivid descriptions of entrepôt towns and mobile merchants (see Ahmad 1960); the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif, with its depictions of overseas trading voyages in the eighteenth century; or the records of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), detailing the shrewdness of Sindhi traders who bargained hard by

playing the Dutch against their English competitors (Floor 1993–4). On much firmer ground, thanks to Markovits' (2000) peerless scholarship, is our knowledge of Shikarpuri Hindu *shroffs* (bankers), who plied their *hundi* (promissory note) trade into central Asia notably during the Durrani hegemony. The point is that Sindwork, albeit an innovation, was one of many trajectories of mobile trade that the region nourished in the long term.

The emergence of Sindwork is one of those instances of entrepreneurship and inspiration which cannot be 'explained', but which make better sense when located within a specific historical heuristic. One factor which made up this matrix was the deposition of the princely court of the Mirs by the British at annexation, which effectively destroyed a traditional market for luxury and artisanal goods, particularly in Hyderabad - the capital and seat of the Mirs as also the point of origin of Sindwork. This meant that the merchant-purveyors to the court had to look elsewhere to sell their wares, and in the 1840s that elsewhere was the world of Pax Britannica, with its new technologies of mobility and communication and its penchant for 'curios', soon to be sharpened by the various world expositions and fairs. By the 1860s we find mention of Sindwork merchants in various places worldwide, from Malta to Japan to Panama.

Sindwork traders (commonly called 'Sindworkis') plied mainly two types of wares - textiles and artisanal works/souvenirs, the latter usually known generically as 'curios'. Originally, these included goods of Sindhi artisanal manufacture such as glazed pottery and lacquer work. This trade took them to British-controlled harbour towns, which at the time were cauldrons of mobility and a certain cosmopolitanism. The Sindworkis soon noticed that there was a liking for all sorts of oriental-looking goods and especially the textiles, ceramics, and various other items of Japanese manufacture (this was the heyday of Japonisme). The consequences were far-reaching

in that Sindwork changed from being a case of traders selling the products of a relatively tiny source back in Sind, to a network of merchants capable of tapping into a much larger world market. Two examples will suffice to make my point. The first is from Malta, where in 1887 the firm Pohoomull Bros. applied to the colonial authorities for the release from customs of one case containing ‘Oriental goods and some fancy weapons as knives, daggers, etc.’.² By 1917, however, one of the many lines Sindworkis plied in Malta was the export of Maltese lace to Batavia (Java), Johannesburg, and a host of other places.³ The second example concerns Japan, where by the end of the Meiji period (1868–1912), Sindworkis had breached local markets to the extent that in Yokohama, for instance, they controlled a substantial chunk of the Japanese silk trade (Chugani 1995). These examples are crucial in the sense that they show how, in a couple of decades, Sindwork shifted from being essentially a peddling venture reliant on the artisans of Sind, to a network of merchants and well-organised firms that did not depend on any one source, but was explorative, innovative, and expansionist.

Sindwork in pre-Partition Sind was exclusively a trading diaspora (I use the term in Abner Cohen’s [1971] sense), with a social network based in Sind. Sindworkis may have spent most of their lives travelling and doing business in the various locations of their *kothis* (firms), but their operations were invariably rooted in Hyderabad, in three ways. First, with respect to the firms themselves, the decades post 1860 saw the consolidation of well-established firms, notably the renowned ‘Three Cs’ - Choitram, Chellaram, and Chanrai. These employed people on a contractual

² Petition to the Chief Secretary to Government (CSG) 4949/1887, National Archives (Malta).

³ Petitions to the Chief Secretary to Government (CSG) 2947/1917 and 1886/1917, National Archives (Malta).

basis, the old *gumashta* system eventually giving way to salaried employment on three-year written contracts. The substantial numbers of young *bhaiband* men required for the Sindwork operations were recruited through social and kin networks in Hyderabad. Second, the mobile aspect of Sindwork was a male prerogative, which means that the extended patrilocal family life in which it was embedded, and which made it possible, was located in Hyderabad. It was to these families that Sindworkis homed in from all over the world when their contracts expired, and through them that the social networks so essential to the growth of *kothis* were cultivated. Third, the old capital of the Talpurs got a new lease of life as the profits of Sindwork were invested in lavish havelis, and social venues, such as the Bhaiband and Rotary clubs, burgeoned. The Sindwork diaspora may have been independent of Sind in strictly commercial terms, but was very much rooted in it in social ones.

This, then, was the situation of Hindu Sindhis in the first half of the twentieth century. In the north, the *shroffs* of Shikarpur went about their ancient moneylending business, now increasingly looking south rather than towards central Asia. The south, and especially Hyderabad, was where the specialized Sindwork diaspora had its heart, pumping blood to scores of locations worldwide. In the villages and small towns, Hindu *banias* ran their trade and moneylending businesses. The boundaries between the three were to some extent porous (Sindworkis often recruited the sons of village *banias*, for example, and their *kothis* made use of the Shikarpuri banking services), but by and large the distinctions were fairly clear cut.

They also had to do with caste. Apart from occupation, Hindu Sindhis aligned themselves along two major criteria: jati based on birth and kinship metaphor, and regionality. The issue is complex, for these distinctions overlapped and are not always easy analytically to disentangle (for a detailed discussion see Falzon 2005). To deal

first with jatis, the two that one encounters most frequently are the *bhaibands* and the *amils*, followed by *bhatias*, *sahitis*, Brahmins, *chhaprus*, and *bhagnarees*. *Amils* were generally involved in clerical-administrative duties. The Talpurs had employed Hindu *amils* as their *munshis* (scribes) and revenue collectors. With the arrival of the British, the *amils* carved out a niche for themselves based on their past specialization. They took to the professions and later the civil service and by the beginning of the twentieth century had successfully cultivated the image of a Westernised, English-speaking, literate elite.

Unlike *amils*, *bhaibands* were seldom employed in salaried labour. Instead, they concentrated in the commercial sector. The word ‘*bhaiband*’ itself means ‘brotherhood’, and the usage was therefore something along the lines of ‘brotherhood of (Hindu Sindhi) traders.’ The Sindworkis of Hyderabad were drawn from the *bhaiband* jati, and they were certainly the most successful and mobile - this characteristic mobility of Hyderabad *bhaibands* is to be specifically noted, because it has had a profound influence on the contemporary situation outside of Sind. The large part of the Hindu population in Sind therefore belonged to the *bhaiband* jati, although in the smaller towns and villages the local traders and moneylenders were known simply as *bantias* (traders/moneylenders) or even *hatvanias* (‘small *bantias*’). Even today among Sindhis, each surname is usually associated with a particular jati although, clearly, knowledge of this sort is never foolproof. The general point is that until 1947, the Hindus of Sind were very much differentiated into types based on the criteria, of region, caste, and occupation. There was no sense of a single ‘Sindhi diaspora’ as we know it today, the closest being the Sindworkis of Hyderabad which made up a specialized trading diaspora.

Partition and subsequent settlement and re-diasporization

Partition changed all of that, and as such represents the second key moment in the making of the Sindhi diaspora (alternatively, ‘the second in a series of Sindhi diasporas’). The complex dynamics of that political set of events cannot concern us today; the upshot, however, was that by early 1948 the exodus of Hindus from Sind was in full swing. There were basically two trajectories out of Sind. Substantial numbers of Hyderabad Sindworkis found it relatively straightforward to relocate to the various countries where they already had business and other assets. This is not of course to downplay the trauma of Partition for these people - one should keep in mind that extended families and other social/kinship networks were firmly rooted in Hyderabad until 1947. In any case, Sindworki families (rather than male merchants) appeared on the scene in Malta, Japan, Gibraltar, and elsewhere, directly after Partition.

For the less historically-mobile Hindus, the exodus brought about different challenges. In the (rather special) case of the better-established *amils*, the natural choice was Bombay, where they already had good connections (Sind had been part of the Bombay Presidency); in the city, they soon established themselves as professionals or civil servants. The rest - the bulk of the Hindu Sindhi refugees, that is - found Partition harder to weather. All but a very few moved to India and southwards, a good proportion eventually converging on Bombay. Refugee camps were set up outside the city at Kalyan (today’s Ulhasnagar, a town still synonymous with Sindhis) and there was some degree of mutual soccours, led mostly by well-connected *amils*. The 1951 Census gives us an idea of the numbers involved - 408,882 ‘displaced persons’ were enumerated in the three states of Bombay, Saurashtra, and Kutch, 82.4 per cent of whom had come from Sind. Most of these eventually settled

down in cities and towns around India, and took to small business - notably textiles wholesale, manufacture (especially in Ulhasnagar), and retail. According to the 1991 Census, a total of 1,551,384 persons in India today describe Sindhi as their mother tongue. Of these, 91 per cent live in urban areas, especially in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat (in that order).⁴ By far the most significant, demographically and culturally, area of settlement in South Asia today is Bombay (Mumbai), where Sindhis enjoy a fairly high profile with respect to the commercial, social, and cultural life of the city. Sindhi restaurants, 'colonies' (residential enclaves - see Falzon 2004), film financiers, actors and directors, and well-known businesspeople and property developers, are synonymous with Mumbai.

By the early 1950s, therefore, the Hindu Sindhis who had left their homeland were settled in scores of countries around the world in the case of the Sindworkis, and in urban India in the case of other groups. The stage was set for the third major episode of Sindhi diasporization, which kicked off in the early 1950s and gained momentum in the last decades of the twentieth century. This time the historical context was not Sind, but rather South Asia and the patterns of mobility that characterized the region (Sindhis had become 'Indian', as it were). The main destinations were the countries of the 'West' which at the time were major receiving locations - Britain, Canada, the USA, and Australia.⁵ Later, and especially after the oil crisis of 1973, thousands of South Asians - including Sindhis - moved to the Gulf

⁴ Whereas in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat, the overwhelming bulk of Sindhi speakers live in urban areas, it appears that in Rajasthan 38 per cent of Sindhi speakers come from rural areas. This anomaly derives from the fact that a good number of Sindhi speakers in Rajasthan are not in fact Partition refugees, but natives of the region.

⁵ One should note that, up to the enactment of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, citizens of the successor states of British India had the right to enter and settled in Britain (Peach 1994).

countries. In Dubai, for example, Sindhis at one point dominated the textiles trade, and they were also involved in 're-exporting' consumer items from South Asia and East Africa via Dubai to India, Russia, and elsewhere (Weiner 1982). More recently, there has been a marked flow of highly-qualified Indians to the West in pursuit of opportunities in the information technology sector, and again this includes a fair share of Sindhis.

There is one final large-scale population movement ('movements', actually) of Sindhis which is worth recording. Partly this concerns that old venture, Sindwork, which continued to siphon people away from the sub-continent, on employment contracts with the firms, well into the late twentieth century. Many of these eventually set up their own businesses and in turn recruited more personnel. Also linked to Sindwork are the multiple 'experiences of rediasporization' (Boyarin, as cited in Clifford 1994) that Sindhis in, say, East Africa and Fiji went through as a result of the specific politics of those locations and their effect on immigrant populations; in this sense East Africa is of course the textbook case (see Gregory 1993). As one of my *bhaiband* informants, whom I met dispensing free homeopathic cures in Ulhasnagar, said, 'Our family has been through so many partitions. We lost property in Lagos, and Cambodia and Saigon in Indo-China. Now we are operating mainly from Manila in the Philippines, although I have cousins in business in many other places'.

It is in this sense that the term 'Sindhi diaspora' in fact subsumes so many different experiences. Each of the key moments discussed above is, as Clifford (1994: 302) put it, 'embedded in particular maps and histories'. Somehow, however, this heterogenous composite is rendered vertebrate by Sindhis themselves, who speak of 'the diaspora' and '*Sindhayat*' ('Sindhiness'). So much so, that the different moments of mobility described above are homogenised into a continuous and unifying history

which threads together Sindwork, Partition, late twentieth century migratory projects, and so on. It is to this cohesive element that I now turn my attention.

The production of translocality

The Partition exodus and later cycles of mobility went a long way in shaping who Sindhis are today. The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by a number of processes from which emerges the contemporary Sindhi ‘community’.⁶

Telegraphically:

- Partition fostered a sense of *Sindhayat* through the device of common dispossession of the homeland - a sense of ‘we are in it together’
- although the older (*not* ‘timeless’) jati distinctions still matter, there is a growing sense of *Sindhayat itself* as a jati
- with respect to religion, two key processes are, first, the tendency of Sindhis (especially Indian-based ones) to move towards a universal Hinduism, and, second, the active construction of Jhulelal as ‘the Sindhi god’
- whereas in pre-Partition Sind there was a clear distinction between the globally-mobile Sindworkis (and to a lesser extent Shikarpuris) and the more located Hindu populations, the broader-based migratory processes described earlier meant that most Sindhi families can now think of themselves as in some way or another ‘mobile’ and ‘in diaspora’
- this model brings with it an active production of translocality, with respect to kinship, marriage, travel, etc. The centre of this production is the city of Mumbai.

⁶ I use quotes for ‘community’ because for the best part of twenty years anthropologists have not been able to imagine communities other than imagined ones. Hardly imaginative, but I am no exception.

Let us start with *Sindhayat* and its contents. The defining feature of *Sindhayat*, as identified by my informants wherever I went, is what I have called (Falzon 2005) its ‘cosmopolitanism’. By this I mean two things: first, actual geographical spread throughout the world; second, a very particular relation to places and the social diversity that comes with them. Sindhi cosmopolitanism, therefore, is both a geographical reality and a mindset, a way of relating to the world (see Vertovec and Cohen 2002, Falzon forthcoming). In tangible terms, it is expressed and represented in a number of ways.

Take religiosity, which is very telling for at least two reasons. First, for purely ethnographic interest; second, because the data feed into my general thesis that following Partition, the various disparate elements have tended increasingly to think of themselves as forming part of a single, coherent diaspora. Historically, the strongest religious current among Sindhis is Nanakpanth, which follows the teachings of the first guru of Sikhism, Nanak (1469–1539), but not later developments such as Khalsa or the figure of Gobind Singh (1666–1708), the tenth guru. Unlike Sikhs ‘proper’, so to speak (and this, admittedly, is a gross simplification), Nanakpanthis also follow various devotions usually thought typical of Hinduism, such as the worship of Hindu deities. Many Sindhis practice some form of vegetarianism and home puja; most homes have a small *mandir* (shrine, temple) containing images of both Guru Nanak and various Hindu gods, notably Lakshmi and Ganesh. Communal places of worship, in India and elsewhere, differ in the relative prominence they attach to the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy book) and *murtis* (statues of Hindu deities). Likewise, religious calendars vary according to particular devotional leanings, but usually incorporate both Sikh as well as Hindu auspicious days - notably dates like the

gurpurabs (anniversaries of Sikh gurus), Mahalaxmi Sagra, and Ganesh Chaturthi. Rituals include both the ceremonial reading of the Granth Sahib, as well as for instance *arati*. In short, Nanakpanth practice among Sindhis is a variable field - and this will come as no surprise to scholars of South Asian religion.

Apart from the 'standard' Nanakpanth and Hindu beliefs and rituals, a number of devotions, usually linked to particular saints, enjoy a healthy following. In this respect Satya Sai Baba, the Chinmaya mission, the Holy Mission of Guru Nanak, Radhasoami, and the Sadhu Vaswani Mission, are especially noticeable. Last not least, a number of Sindhis cultivate relations with Sufism, usually through an attachment to *pirs* (masters) that may bind families as *murids* (followers) and *pirs* for several generations.

So far so eclectic. However, and this is of cardinal importance, there is a wealth of evidence pointing towards a general shift among Sindhis worldwide towards a notion of a unified, reformed, 'mainstream' Hinduism. For instance, a number of Sindhi pundits (usually of Brahmin extraction) I spoke to in Mumbai were critical of what they saw as religious eclecticism, and maintained that Sindhis would do well to focus on 'pure Hinduism'. This view is commonly appropriated. Once, for example, I overheard two worshippers at a temple complain about a 'right Sindhi hotchpotch'; it transpired they were referring to the juxtaposition of Granth Sahib and *murtis*. There is a long and complex history behind this shift, and I should point out that it is not specific to Sindhis; when, for instance, Gujarati *khojas* began moving in large numbers to Mumbai and beyond during the nineteenth century, they discarded local Kutchi and indeed Sindhi elements of their religious texts for the universal narratives of reformed Hinduism (Devji 2006). With respect to Sindhis, however, one of the reasons is undoubtedly the influence of the 'saffron wave' of Hindutva (see for

example Hansen 1999, Vertovec 2000, Deshpande 1998), which made its presence felt both in India (significantly, particularly in Mumbai via the Shiv Sena) and in the countries of the diaspora. There are also older legacies such as the re-interpretation in the nineteenth century of Hinduism and the spread of the Arya Samaj among Indians worldwide (Baumann 1995). The shift may also have to do with receiving contexts; in, say, centralizing Catholic contexts like Malta, it is easier and safer to be ‘recognizably Hindu’ than to appear eclectic and fragmented. I am not of course arguing for some straightforward notion of syncretism, but rather for a shift that is partly situational-contextual, partly the legacy of long-term shifts in South Asian religious practice and politics.

One facet of this shift, and therefore of the crystallization of a unified diasporic imaginary, is the post-Partition reinvention of the god Jhulelal. In Sind, Jhulelal had long been revered by sections of both Hindus and Muslims, although in different ways. (There are indications, for example, that the anti-Muslim currents that accompanied the deposition of the Talpurs, Jhulelal came increasingly to be represented by Hindus as a mythical hero who saved them from Muslim tyranny.) In any case, in pre-Partition Sind the devotion to Jhulelal was limited and somewhat localized in the north of the province. In the 1950s, however, a group of Sindhis in Bombay led by Larkana singer and cultural entrepreneur Ram Panjwani decided to reinvent Jhulelal as ‘the god of Sindhis’ - of all the Sindhis in diaspora anywhere in the world, that is, irrespective of jati or region of origin back in Sind. Gobind Malhi, who had been one of Panjwani’s closest associates, described the idea to me when I met him in Mumbai in 2000, as an attempt to ‘provide a thread to the scattered beads and make a necklace’.

Several decades later, it seems that the project has succeeded. Sindhis *mandirs* worldwide now venerate Jhulelal, hold special rituals like the *bahrano sahib*, and celebrate Jhulelal Chand as particularly auspicious. My informants invariably described Jhulelal as a ‘community god’. He appears on Sindhi shop signs, Internet sites, business cards, and so forth - in short, he has become *the* symbol of a unified diasporic *Sindhayat*. Since he is also thought to be an incarnation of Vishnu, this brings *Sindhayat* neatly in line with a universalising Hinduism. It also effectively grafts it onto the notion, itself a recent historical product, of Hinduism as a ‘world religion’. I quote Masuzawa (2005, 200):

‘World religions’ as a category and as a conceptual framework initially developed in the European academy, which quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world.

Masuzawa is saying that the imaginary of a finite number of world religions, each a formally equivalent cultural system, is a product of a specific history. In the centuries of European and therefore Christian world hegemony, a particular model of ‘world religions’ has spread, under whose influence adherents of previously loosely affiliated local cults have sought or have been encouraged or compelled to conform to the prescriptions of some ‘great tradition’ (in this case ‘Hinduism’). At the same time, ‘great traditions’ themselves have been modified to fit the requirements of the template provided by the world religion model (Cook et al. 2009).

Religion among Sindhis today, then, thrives on the image of a bounded transnational group united under the incorporative banner of ‘world Hinduism’ - a ‘global systems’ trope which happens to dovetail very beautifully with representations of a worldwide diaspora. It is fair to say that the situation is one of ‘less Sindhi, more Hindu/Indian’. For example, at a number of events held as part of the EU Year of

Intercultural Dialogue 2008, Sindhis in Malta were invited to ‘represent’ (and ‘celebrate’) the Hindu Indian ‘community’ in Malta. In this sense they are imagined as purveyors of the East and its alternative lifestyles such as yoga, vegetarianism, ‘Hindu texts’, etc.

There are other aspects that produce the contemporary ‘community’. Travel and the geographical conquest of space are of prime importance. The vernacular histories produced both at popular-oral level and in print by indigenous authors invariably emphasize the dispersal of Sindhis, and their sense of adventure and mobile enterprise. Malkani (1984: 169), to cite a typical example, writes that ‘others had found a Sindhi enterprise even on Falkland Islands near the South Pole’; likewise, Buxani (as cited in Panjwani 1987: 95, my parenthesis) jests that ‘A Sindhwarki [Sindwork] post has not yet been set up in the new Antarctica settlements of scientists but a Shikarpuri who operates gold business in Alaska is believed to be working on it’.⁷ It is hardly surprising that this wanderlust is shared by Sindhi gurus. 90-year old Dada J.P. Vaswani, for example, is well known as an ‘international saint’; the initiatives of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission, such as the annual ‘Meatless Day’, are equally cosmopolitan in scope.

Another self-attribution by Sindhis, which dovetails with my argument that *Sindhayat* has become a cosmopolitan tag, is that of adaptability. In terms of religion, it is commonly believed that Sindhi beliefs and practices are especially ‘open-minded’

⁷ Note that ‘Shikarpuri’ and ‘Sindworki’ are being used interchangeably, under the general category ‘Sindhi’. It is interesting that, whereas pre-Partition vernacular literature tended to focus on specific jatis (see for instance Narsain 1932), after 1947 we increasingly come across generalising writings on ‘Sindhis’ (see for instance Panjwani 1987, Hiranandani 1980, Malkani 1984). This supports my argument that one of the long term effects of Partition was to create a sense of unifying *Sindhayat* for Hindu Sindhis in diaspora.

and accommodative - at times to a fault, in the sense that a lack of identity and bounded specificity is inevitably a corollary of openness. Linguistically, too, I was often told by my informants that Sindhis are especially adept at learning new languages, and that this has been pivotal both to their success as diasporic entrepreneurs and to their integrative abilities wherever they are settled. What I find especially interesting is that indigenous narratives explain this openness with reference to the specifics of Sindhi history, as a group located at the border between south and central Asia. Linguistically, it is thought that the fact that Sindhi may be written in the Urdu as well as the Devanagari script, and that it enjoys the phonetic legacy of both types, gives speakers an edge over historically less syncretistic traditions. Rather like religion in fact, as Nanakpanth and Sufism are often invoked as exemplars of a historical, and specifically Sindhi, eclecticism. (I should emphasize the situationality of this notion, which also means that it can co-exist, peaceably if not always happily, with broader shifts towards a more rigidly-defined Hinduism.) The point is not to establish whether or not Sind and Sindhis were/are particularly syncretistic and accommodative, but rather to note how they knead together elements of their history in order situationally to represent themselves as a cosmopolitan type that has been long in the making.

Another central aspect of Sindhi cosmopolitanism is kinship, actively manufactured through transnational marriage matching. The biographies and genealogies of Sindhi families are characterised by a 'circulation of women', so to speak, across space. Like many other north Indian groups, Sindhis are patrilocal. Women are brought up with the idea that marriage involves becoming part of another family and leaving the natal home; a daughter is *parai jai* (literally, 'belongs to someone else'), and the ideal wife is one who respects her husband's agnates,

particularly his parents. In the case of joint families - which are still important, sometimes episodically so, even as the nuclear family model makes its presence felt - she will also live with the husband's family. Which does not, of course, mean that married women are cut off from their natal families. On the contrary, and notwithstanding the notion that daughters are 'married off', their long-term location between two families brings these families together - to attend each other's feasts and important occasions, to exchange gifts, and, sometimes to do business with each other (I came across several instances in the field of brothers-in-law business partnerships). Further, what is especially significant is that, since marriage among Sindhis is often arranged across long distances, this results in a long-term process of circulation of women between the various countries and locations where Sindhis are settled. It is not just a family and home which women leave at marriage, but quite often a country. This is especially true in the case of *bhaiband* and/or Sindworki business families, who still generally have the most transnational kinship diagrams of all jatis/groups.

I have so far borrowed the Levi-Straussian term 'circulation of women'. It would be a mistake, however, to think that women are in any way passive actors waiting to be transnationally circulated by men. Rather, the broad and cosmopolitan networks of affines and agnates - what Kelly (1990), referring to Gujaratis, calls 'transcontinental families' - that make up a typical Sindhi family are very much forged by women. First, the fact that girls are brought up thinking that marriage involves translocation, does not mean that they are ready to move anywhere. On the contrary, variables like the size and type of Sindhi settlement, 'open-mindedness' with respect to women's rights and aspirations, affordability of domestic service, and such, are all taken into account by women when sizing up a potential match, and therefore

destination.⁸ Second, the type of transnational information that goes with such long-distance matching is very much held and exchanged by women. The knowledge that ‘aunties’ - especially *bhaibands* and/or ones that are already embedded in transnational families themselves - have of individuals and families, marriageability and eligibility, and reputations, can be breathtaking in its detail and geographical scope. The rounds of lunch parties, ‘kitty parties’, and *satsangs* that tend to occupy better-established women, serve as venues for the active exchange of such information. In sum, if women are ultimately circulated, they also do quite a bit of circulating themselves. The Sindhi diaspora, although synonymous in the popular imagination with Black Label-guzzling mobile businessmen, is in at least equal measure the manufacture of enterprising women.⁹

There remains one facet of the Sindhi cosmopolitan diasporic imaginary, without a discussion of which my argument would not be complete. It concerns the notion of ‘home’ - which, in Safran’s (1991) landmark ideal-typic definition of diaspora as well as subsequent formulations (see for instance R. Cohen 1997, Vertovec 2000), is one of the key criteria of such a phenomenon. In the case of Sindhis, the original homeland is of course now part of Muslim Pakistan. Save for an increasingly slim generation of people who remember pre-Partition Sind, there is little sense of an emotive relation to it (although, as discussed earlier, the memory of Sind is important for Sindhis to define who they are, and in what ways), and in no case is there a narrative of eventual ‘return’ or ‘restoration’. Does this mean, therefore, that the Sindhi diaspora lacks a centre? Not necessarily. What has in fact happened is that

⁸ Although marriages are arranged, most parents have learned from experience that it is unwise to disregard their sons’ and daughters’ views.

⁹ On gender and the Indian diaspora, see for instance Rayaprol (1997).

India, and in particular Mumbai, has come to be seen as, if not the real thing, at least the cultural heart of Sindhis worldwide.

Demographically, Mumbai represents the single most significant settlement of Sindhis anywhere in the world. Apart from the hundreds of thousands of Sindhis who actually live in the city and its suburbs, most families in diaspora have and cultivate some connection to it. December in Mumbai has become something of an institution among Sindhis, as thousands converge on the city to meet friends and/or relatives, to enjoy themselves, to attend the numerous weddings and social occasions, to visit the renowned Sindhi pundits based there, and possibly to advance marriage-matching projects at the various ‘marriage bureaux’ run usually by well-connected ‘aunties’. As one pundit put it to me, ‘Mumbai is like a huge sea into which numerous small rivers flow’. He might have added ‘and *from* which’, for it is the case that, even as business reputations, personal and family biographies, and indicators of wealth and success, flow into the city from all over the world, they are eventually re-distributed - possibly changed by virtue of interaction - to the pilgrims’ points of origin. In this sense, to use a notion from Merleau-Ponty’s writings on the theatre (1964), Sindhis going to Mumbai become *voyantes-visible*, viewers that are themselves visible. Which is why I was so often reminded that a majestic appearance and the requisite expensive sari and jewellery at a big Mumbai wedding, goes a long way into affirming the transnational reputation of a family; it is also why so many jokes circulate in the city about the ‘showiness’ of Sindhis. Again, women have a crucial part to play in this game.

I am now in a position to discuss that aspect of Sindhi diaspora that so fires the popular imagination, especially in India: the extent and resilience of global business networks.

Global business, mobility, and exploration

Is there such a thing as ‘Sindhi business’? In the sense of some single structured set of operations with limited and clearly-bounded lines of trade, definitely not. Sindwork may have come close to that, at least in its early stages, as may the Shikarpuri *shroffs* with their banking practices. Contemporary Sindhi-owned businesses, however, are as variable as the entrepreneurial drives behind them, their contingent biographies, and the local contexts they operate in. In London, for example, Sindhis are active in the financial agency, import and export, wholesale, retail, and property development lines, to name but a few. In Malta, the descendants of the original Sindworkis have diversified into textiles, furniture, industrial supplies, and retail. In Mumbai, textiles wholesale, small-scale manufacture, import, retail, and property development are among the hundreds of lines that Sindhis ply. The list is proverbially endless, the only constant being that Sindhi business is variable, explorative, and enterprising in its innovation.

At the same time, empirical research into the connective possibilities offered by transnational kinship and ethnicity, and the ways in which these relate to economic activity, suggests that, in business as in other things, *Sindhayat* matters. In this I am fully in accordance with Markovits (2000: 284) when he states that ‘globally, Sindhi businessmen have remained a community of traders ... international trading linkages created by the dispersion of Sindhi families across the world are the key ... to the success of Sindhi firms’. I shall now proceed briefly to outline how this is so.

First, there can be no question that the popular association between the Sindhi diaspora and business is well founded. Like other Indian commercial groups (see for instance Lachaier 1997 for Kutchi Lohanas), the main occupational distinction made by Sindhis is that between (self-employed) ‘business’ and (salaried) ‘service’. This

distinction has deep-rooted historical antecedents, fostered in part by a British enumerative-orientalist modality (see Cohn 1996). It is also jati-related, as with for instance *bhaibands* and *amils*. The point here is that this distinction is not neutral but hierarchised, in the sense that, with the possible exception of well-established professional *amil* families, Sindhis in general see business as a superior occupation to service. Further, one notes that post Partition it is Sindhis rather than specific jatis that have become associated with business enterprise.

In practice, the upshot is, first, that the numbers bear out the model, and second, that there is a marked tendency for Sindhis ‘in service’ eventually to set up their own businesses. A detailed statistical examination is beyond the scope of this talk (see however Falzon 2005) but my *approximations* (I emphasize) from my sites indicate that 95 per cent, 70 per cent, and 65 per cent of Sindhis are in self-employed business in Malta, London, and Mumbai respectively. (The variance has more to do with specific diasporic trajectories than with receiving contexts.) With respect to the second point, Sindwork provides an excellent case study. I said earlier that Sindworki firms continued to draw upon the salaried labour of Sindhi recruits well into the twentieth century. However, these recruits were seldom ‘content’ with being employees. The majority of them eventually sought to strike out on their own, and in fact many Sindhi businesses operating worldwide today were originally set up by erstwhile employees of Sindwork firms. So much so, that joining a Sindwork firm was considered a potential stepping stone from ‘service’ to ‘business’.

Which brings us to corporacy, or to what makes ‘Sindhi business’ so particular - in Markovits’ (op.cit., my emphasis) terms, to the ‘*international trading linkages*’ it is synonymous with. The conventional wisdom posits a logical, and sometimes empirical, connection between commerce and diaspora, in the sense that it is easy to

see how transnational linkages of kinship and *Sindhayat* (which, at least in as much as it also summons a metaphor of shared blood, can be seen as an extension of kinship) can double as relations of trade. Indeed, it is very common to find Sindhis (both family and co-ethnics) doing business together - both in a corporate way, as partners, and as temporary exchange relation or longer-term series of relations. In a typical actual example, a retailer running an import/wholesale business in Liberia is sourced by a London business operated by his son, who in turn is partly sourced by a maternal cousin based in the US. These linkages are only very seldom incestuous, and rather are usually combined with others involving non-family and/or non-Sindhis. In the above example, the London business is also sourced by British manufacturers and a Brazilian owned and based company. However, the measure of social control - and therefore trust - afforded by kinship and *Sindhayat* certainly makes 'inward-looking' trading linkages desirable, especially when it comes to credit. We might keep in mind the intersection between transnational marriage, Mumbai and marriage-matching, and individual/family reputations - which means that word of dishonest business practice spreads rapidly through the diasporic network, and will usually come to haunt the guilty party in kind and much more.

The combination of transnational connections and readiness to apply them to business makes Sindhis what they are. It is not that they are a unique case of translocally-organised jati. The literature on Indian commerce is rich in examples of commercial castes. Hazlehurst's Punjabi Baniyas (1966), C.A. Bayly's 'geographically extended kin groups' (1978), Timberg's Marwaris (1978), Mines' Kaikkoolars (1984), and Rudner's Nattukottai Chettiars (1994) are among the more memorable examples, and indeed I would argue that there is a mismatch to be addressed between such empirical knowledge and the tendency of generalising theory on caste to over-

emphasize embeddedness in locality (Falzon in prep.). Even so, Sindhis are justifiably renowned for their culture of mobile commerce, exploration, and business resilience.

The typical Sindhi business is positioned - however loosely and flexibly - within a transnational network. This means that knowledge of markets and opportunities, sometimes from across the world, is available to a very significant extent. I was constantly struck, for instance, by just how up-to-date informants were with current business prospects and conditions in a range of localities. This is not a matter of 'as it happens', but rather a characteristic that individuals cultivate and produce in an ongoing process - being 'in diaspora' is a practice rather than a given state of affairs. As a London businessman put it to me, 'Making money has a lot to do with spreading out members of the same family. The big Sindhi families, those leading the field in business, are all dispersed and living in several countries.' Given this translocal knowledge and familiarity with markets, it should come as no surprise that Sindhis in general are ready to move around, open new businesses and/or try new lines; the general impression, quite empirically sustained, is that Sindhi businesses 'come and go' in the short term, but endure in the long term. If they do not actually translocate in search of good fortune - and many are very stable and settled in particular places - they may shift sources, enabling them to experiment with different products and price differentials. Unstable political contexts, for example, which offer a potential for good profits due to minimal competition and regulation, have historically tended to attract Sindhi businessmen, who can afford to take risks not least because assets and operations are seldom invested exclusively in such places. An interesting case I came across was the French-Dutch island of Saint Martin's in the Lesser Antilles. In the early 1970s, only a handful of Sindhis did business there; as the Caribbean began to take off as a mass tourism destination, however, several

hundred flocked there from all over the world and today they control a significant slice of the tourist trade. Such examples show that the link between commerce and diaspora is not just an old piece of rhetoric - it really matters to 'be' everywhere (in person or by proxy) and be ready to sell anything.

Does this therefore mean that the Sindhi diaspora is one big happy family, united in its love for Jhulelal, intermarrying, and doing business together? Not necessarily. In fact, the link between commerce and diaspora tends to be rather episodic in nature. During fieldwork I encountered a contradiction. On the one hand, people told me that doing business together (as kin and/or co-ethnics) was a thing of the past, a symptom of a pre-modern mentality, and that they would never dream of being partners or extending credit to a Sindhi. However, when these same individuals narrated their individual biographies, it usually emerged that they had, at some point in their career, done the undreamable. There are points at which collaboration becomes important - collectively, as in the cases of the immediate post-Partition years and the expulsion of South Asians from East Africa in the 1970s, or individually, as when one needs that little initial credit to strike out on one's own, or to resuscitate an ailing business. Then, transnational kinship- and ethnic-based solidarities may become temporarily and situationally crucial - as others fail, one might say. This is why Sindhi businesses are reputed to have the ability to 'come back with a bounce', although not necessarily to the same place and in the same line. This is also what Susan Bayly (1999: 320) means when she writes that, 'in uncertain times, a wide range of "modern" Indian businesses have continued to find that profit margins can be protected or enhanced by pooling assets and sharing information with kin and caste networks'. The quotes around 'modern' assume, as my informants did, that kin, caste, and ethnic solidarities have little place in modern business, which presumably runs

on faceless bureaucracy and bloodless exchanges of currency. If we stick to this modern:pre-modern dichotomy, which is probably analytically useful in this case, my argument in sum would be that the two very much co-exist, and each gains ascendancy or loses out episodically.

For a Sindhi in business, it does not matter all the time to be part of a transnational diaspora; it may well matter, however, when one needs it most. Without sounding instrumentalist or indeed cynical, it makes sense for Sindhis to invest in *Sindhayat* in the long term - through marriage, visits to Mumbai, extending credit to family and other Sindhis, and so on. Whether one is dancing to Bollywood tunes and having a good time at a wedding party, celebrating *bahrano sahib* on the Chennai waterfront, or phoning a cousin to ask for a grace period on an unsold shipment, it all ultimately falls into place. It may be worth referring to Diouf's (2000) work on Senegalese Murids. Murids constitute a successful trade diaspora and display many of the characteristics – such as linguistic proficiency and commercial networks – discussed in the present work. They are tightly organized primarily on the basis of ritual and location, and their cosmopolitanism is very much what Cohen (2003) calls an 'institution of stability-in-mobility'.

Cosmopolitanism in practice

In conclusion, I wish to take you back to the notion of cosmopolitanism. It is clear that we are dealing here with what Robbins (1998) calls an 'actually-existing' cosmopolitanism – an empirical/ethnographic instance rather than a theoretical concept, that is. To my mind, one of the reasons why there is a real and urgent need to look at these practical instances is that scholars have tended to privilege cosmopolitanism in its philosophical sense at the expense of more vernacular types

which seem to be open to the accusation of banality. However, quite apart from the fact that this distinction is uncomfortably reminiscent of otherwise-obsolete high:low culture dichotomies, there are important reasons why cosmopolitanism in practice matters. First, all cosmopolitanisms are to some extent actually-existing in that they are located within some historical and geographical framework; thus, as Stuart Hall (2008) argues, even the towering universalistic political projects of Kant turn out to be ‘harnessed back’ to a very specific ideological and cultural movement, namely the Western Enlightenment. Second, actually-existing cosmopolitanisms deserve our primary scholarly attention, since their actual existence presumably means that they are actually consequential (as opposed to Utopias, which are just that). Third, to look at the maps and histories – and therefore the limits and limitations – of particular cosmopolitanisms is partly to absolve oneself of the nagging feeling that contemporary social science, in waxing lyrical about ‘flows’, ‘fractals’, and ‘fluidity’, is (once again, some might say) being the handmaiden of contemporary regimes of production, accumulation, and power – in our case a neo-liberal ‘globalizing’ agenda in which the ‘emphasis falls more on individualist aspirations and universalizing norms’ (Pollock et al. 2000, 581). Related to this is the argument that looking at practical (mundane) cosmopolitanism will serve to redress the balance in favour of various groups for whom belonging everywhere (and therefore nowhere) is not a choice but a predicament. ‘Elite’ political models of world citizenship have their rightful place, but they do not explain everything. Finally, understanding the social organization of cosmopolitanism is very much about overcoming trite local-global dichotomies. Smith’s work (2001) on ‘agency-oriented’ ‘transnationalism from below’ in contemporary cities constitutes an important point of reference here. In a

way, this talk seeks to do for people (ethnic groups) what Smith does for places (cities).

Talking about actually-existing cosmopolitanisms, however, raises the perennial spectre of definition. In this sense the difficulty that so preoccupied Weber is still with us. In a nutshell, if all cosmopolitanisms exist within, and therefore take on some of the characteristics of, specific histories and geographies, this very specificity seems to preclude us from generalizing in any useful way. Scholars of cosmopolitanism (notably Vertovec & Cohen 2002) have, quite successfully I think, sought to circumvent this problem by creating inclusive typologies – rather than exclusive definitions - of cosmopolitan *attributes* which the various empirical instances we observe to some extent share. I have argued that ‘Sindhiness’ displays the following attributes:

- A worldwide distribution.;
- a problematic relation to the nation-state;
- an attitude or disposition which means that Sindhis, to quote Vertovec & Cohen (2002, 13), can ‘end up anywhere in the world and be in the same relation of familiarity and strangeness to the local culture, and feel partially adjusted everywhere’;
- a marked competence at operating within translocal business networks;
- and, finally, kinship practices based on marriage alliances beyond the person’s immediate locality and which therefore result in cosmopolitan genealogies.

It is important to stress that, taken individually, none of these attributes leads to cosmopolitanism. Given the ongoing inflation of the term (as has happened with ‘diaspora’ – see Brubaker 2005) for instance, it is clear that self-ascription alone

cannot be indicative of a tangible cosmopolitanism. Equally, just as travel does not necessarily broaden one's horizons (as anyone who has enjoyed the dubious pleasure of tourist enclaves knows), worldwide distribution per se does not make the cosmopolitan grade. Taken in conjunction, however, these family resemblances mean that belonging to the Sindhi ethnic group constitutes a powerful and well-trodden trajectory into the (currently desirable) cosmopolitan way of engaging with the world – even if mitigated by factors such as caste, resources, location, occupation, and level of education.

This ongoing dynamic is partly the result of an issue which all actually-existing cosmopolitanisms must face, namely that of a problematic relation with locality. To my mind, one reason why cosmopolitanisms are burgeoning is that contemporary processes are drawing more and more people into tricky legal, political, economic, and cultural relations with established models of location. The fact remains, however, that in spite of all the routes and rhizomes, a majority of groups still define themselves in terms of localities in which they claim some sort of historical continuity. In the contemporary world, states and the groups that 'belong' to them, nations, are probably the most important manifestations of such localized self-definition. Not surprisingly, cosmopolitans have always found themselves in awkward positions vis-à-vis formations like nation states and city states, and their requisite allegiances. The problematic leads to the internal dialectics I discussed earlier, the protagonists of which can sometimes get quite carried away. In the case of Sindhis, for example, a very few cultural entrepreneurs have gone so far as to suggest the recreation of an exclusively-Sindhi homeland, two of the nominations being the desert of Rajasthan and the Nicobar Islands (!)

Perhaps more interestingly, these colourful relations with locality can produce

dividends. Historically, for instance, the strangeness/alterity factor may have helped Sindworki businesses in the sense that their worldwide connections, and therefore geographically-eclectic wares, ultimately made them stand out as purveyors of the exotic. Sindworki shops may have seemed strange and ‘out of place’, but it was precisely this characteristic which gave them the edge over less outward-looking local establishments. This comes close to what Vertovec & Cohen (op. cit., 7) call an ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanism [based on] ... forms of consumption’, and can be seen in the kimonos sold in Sindworki shops in Mediterranean harbour towns in the 1920s, or the incense sticks and ‘ethnic’ carvings that go down so well with customers today.

The problematic relation to locality as a factor which fosters what I have been calling the ‘internal dialectics’ of actually-existing cosmopolitanisms, cannot be seen in isolation. In the case of Sindhis a number of variables such as caste and divergent histories of mobility have left individuals and families *within* the ethnic group in very different structural positions. There are big differences between the ‘old money’ Sindworki families, with their webs of kinship stretching across the globe and reserves of mobile capital, small entrepreneurs who run textiles businesses from small offices in Ahmedabad, and *amil* civil servants living in Mumbai. The structural differences also mean the production of different spatializing discourses and practices. On a global level, for instance, Sindhis have shown a marked reluctance to engage with local politics (generally by being on good terms with whoever is in power, irrespective of partisan alignments.) On the other hand, Sindhis settled in India have readily involved themselves in Hindu nationalist politics, directly (as in the case of high-profile politicians like L.K. Advani), or indirectly (a significant number of Sindhis settled permanently in Mumbai cultivate close relations with the Shiv Sena). This involvement has a history and we find that the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh, a vaguely para-military Hindu nationalist organization) enjoyed considerable support among *amil* civil servants in pre-Partition Sind. The ambiguity can partly be understood as a factor of the significance, to the ethnic group, of particular localities: For social, linguistic, historical, and political reasons, India and, say, Britain mean very different things to Sindhis.

It is crucial, therefore, to de-essentialize and de-homogenize ethnicities, not least cosmopolitan ones. Once cosmopolitanism is put into practice and embedded within actual social forms, it ceases to be normative and straightforward and develops a whole new dialectical dynamic which brings into play a host of variables. This complexity is behind the insistence of scholars like Vertovec & Cohen (op. cit.) to think of cosmopolitanism as a form of imagination rather than an essential quality. For Clifford (1998), it is precisely this idea which gives cosmopolitanism (both as analytical concept and empirical practice) the edge over competing notions like multiculturalism. It is not as if Sindhis are condemned to be cosmopolitan; they may choose to organize themselves so, and quite often they do.

It also sometimes happens that groups and/or individuals within groups become simultaneously more and less cosmopolitan. With Murids, successful and mobile traders with business stretching from Strasbourg to Chinatown in New York seek to enhance their chances to be buried in the hallowed ground of Touba in Senegal (Diouf op. cit.). With Sindhis, the traders that ‘make it big’ with respect to wealth, business networks, and transnational kinship connections, tend to engage in practices that seem antithetical to cosmopolitanism – ‘pure’ Brahminical lifestyles (see Bayly 1999), stricter endogamous practices, ostentatious investment in specific localities, etc. All this seems contradictory, but I have argued that it is not. On the contrary, it is only by looking at its apparently non-cosmopolitan forms of

organization that cosmopolitanism as a practical way of engaging with the world begins to make sense.

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