Review

Say to the Sun, 'Don't Rise', and to the Moon, 'Don't Set', Two Oral Narratives from the Countryside of Maharashtra. Edited and translated by Anne Feldhaus with Ramdas Atkar and Rajaram Zagade. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xii +613 pp., \$45.92. ISBN 978-0-199-35764-2 (hb).

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The book is an account of the oral tradition among the Dhangars, a pastoral community in the state of Maharashtra in India. This community had a tradition of coming together in the evening and singing the songs, which are rhythmic couplets called 'Ovis' in Marathi, the language spoken in the region. Starting from the evening, the Ovi singing usually continued till late in the night. These Ovis were collected and recorded by German Professor Gunther Sontherimer in the 1970s and received by the translator/author, Anne Feldhaus, after his death. This collection had already been published in Marathi in 2006. This book is the result of translating those two long Marathi anthologies.

The book is divided into three parts with a total of seven chapters. Part One is an introduction and gives information about the Dhangar community, the art of the Ovis and the world depicted in the Ovis. General information about the pastoral life and gender relations among the Dhangar are also explored in these chapters. Parts Two and Three are translations of the anthologies which focus on two Dhangar Gods, namely Biroba and Dhuloba. These oral narratives provide an important insight into the life and culture of the people; according to the author they qualify to be called oral epics. Feldhaus, Atkar and Zagade provide both word-by-word translation as well as summaries of the stories.

The god Dhuloba's character at places resembles the popular Hindu god Krishna. Like Krishna, Dhuloba also looks after the cattle and indulges in the mischievous act of breaking the milk pots of the women (p. 240). Some of the religious beliefs as reflected in the epic might be read as indicative of 'primitive' thoughts about the divinity. The goddess Mariai is portrayed as fearsome, who brings disease and devours the people (p. 322). There is also a mention about human sacrifice to please the divine (p. 578).

The *Ovis* give information about the beliefs and taboos amongst the Dhangar community. The narratives focus on moral, aesthetic and religious values, including the importance given to female purity, that is virginity and chastity. From the stories, it is implied that sexual relations between men and women, as well as normal birth are looked down upon or at the most tolerated by this community; and that is the reason that the gods Biroba and Dhuloba are not born in the usual manner out of normal sexual relations. Biroba's mother Suravati became pregnant without cohabiting with a man, thanks to a boon from the god Shankara. But her parents suspected her of premarital relations and so she is forced to endure ordeals to prove her purity, like bathing in hot water (p. 195). Normal birth is considered to be polluting for Biroba; he kicks his way out of his mother's womb through his mother's left side (p. 213). In other parts of the narrative, female virginity and the exclusion of men is given even more importance. Suravanti not only conceives without a man touching her, but she rejects everything that is masculine, even taking milk only from a cow that has not been approached by a bull (p. 117). However, we also perceive through the narrative that while sexuality is demeaned, motherhood is highly valued.

There are several references of woman being beaten by their husbands, and this is treated as both normal and humorous. An ideal woman is described as someone who worships her husband as god. After marriage the woman's home is at her in-law's house, and that is where the woman should stay. Duloba warns his wife that even if he dies she should not leave her in-law's home (p. 561). Throughout the themes of the *Ovis* there is clear evidence of a patriarchal attitude of misogynist contempt towards women. King Dhruv tells his wife that if he tells her something, she will tell this to everyone as 'No woman's mouth ever remains shut' (p. 112). Other passages describe women as perfidious and cruel (p. 383). But the brother-sister relations, which are considered to be non-sexual and thus safer are valued among the Dhangars. Some women characters play an important role as a sister.

The *Ovis* also give information about the flora and fauna of the Deccan plateau. It is difficult to precisely define the geographical area described in the *Ovis*, but most probably the *Ovis* reached its present stage, just before the British material culture had penetrated the rural Maharashtra. Through these *Ovis* we also get information about the economy of rural life, caste-based and gendered division of labour. We also find references to several professions like bangle-seller, carpenter, fisherman, gardener, goldsmith, grocer and so on.

Hospitality to guests and kindness to cattle are considered to be important virtues among the Dhangars. The shepherd who allows lambs to drink milk as much as they can is to be praised (p. 336). Similarly, it is also mentioned that Kamla Shinde, the chief herdsman of the Dhangars would not eat unless he serves the food to the guests (p. 343). The narrative also indicates that the caste stratification was probably not very rigid when the oral traditions were developing. Kamla Shinde, who was a tribal Dhangar, has no hesitation in

demanding the hand of a princess for his son. The king is not willing to marry his daughter to the herdsman Dhangar's son but he cannot reject the proposal directly, therefore he puts up a difficult condition in order to avoid the marriage. Probably the caste privileges and exclusiveness were contested; eventually Duloba marries the king's daughter (p. 544).

The tradition of *Ovi* singing among the community is on the verge of vanishing. Many people of the community are giving up their traditional professions and are settling down. With the coming of television, the tradition of *Ovi* singing/listening is also going out of use and it is difficult to find a good *Ovi* singer. Thus this book preserves an important resource for researchers interested in the oral tradition of the Maharashtra.