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# The farming of trust:

## Organic certification and the limits of transparency in Uttarakhand, India

### ABSTRACT

Certification is increasingly used in diverse spheres of social, political, and economic life, in which it is associated with transparency projects and audit cultures. In the Doon Valley of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, the state government has supported certified organic agriculture since the early 2000s. Although practices of document keeping and inspections required by organic certification were intended to make agrarian practices legible and transparent, in practice they often failed to do so. Officials charged with conducting certification ultimately framed organic agriculture as a moral enterprise, finding sentiments of *viśvās* (trust, belief, or faith) to be crucial to their work. Rather than producing certainty and transparent knowledge, certification practices may generate forms of uncertainty that compel, and rely for their resolution on, sentiments of trust. [*organic agriculture, certification, audit, transparency, trust, bureaucracy, India*]

सामाजिक, राजनीतिक एवं आर्थिक जीवन के विभिन्न क्षेत्रों में प्रमाणीकरण का वृद्धि से प्रयोग किया जा रहा है: यह उपयोग विशेष रूप से पारदर्शिता की परियोजनाओं और लेखा-परीक्षा के पालन से संबंधित है। उत्तर भारत के उत्तराखंड की दून घाटी में जैविक खेती को राज्य सरकार द्वारा समर्थन सन् 2000 से दिया जा रहा है। यद्यपि जैविक खेती से जुड़े दस्तावेज की देख-रेख एवं निरीक्षण के अभ्यासों से कृषि प्रथाओं को सुवाच्य तथा पारदर्शक बनाने का उद्देश्य साँझा किया गया था, वास्तविकता में इन लक्ष्यों की प्राप्ति नहीं हो पाई है। आखिरकार, प्रमाणीकरण के अधिकारियों ने जैविक खेती को नैतिक उपक्रम के ढांचे में रचा, जहाँ वे विश्वास (भरोसा, धारणा अथवा आस्था) की भावनाओं को उनके काम के लिए निष्पक्ष मानने लगे। निश्चिंती एवं पारदर्शक ज्ञान के स्थान पर प्रमाणीकरण की प्रथाएं अनिश्चितता के ऐसे रूप उत्पन्न कर सकती हैं जो कि विश्वास की भावनाएं को बढ़ावा देती हैं तथा अपने समाधान के लिए इन भावनाओं पर निर्भर होती हैं। [जैविक खेती, प्रमाणीकरण, लेखा परीक्षा, पारदर्शिता, विश्वास, अधिकारी तंत्र, भारत]

In the summer of 2008, some 4,500 diaries lay neatly stacked in the foyer of Uttarakhand's Organic Commodity Board, awaiting distribution to organic farmers across this largely Himalayan state in northern India. The Organic Board, which administers organic agriculture and certification for the state government, obliges organic farmers registered under its auspices to regularly document their agricultural activities in these diaries as part of third-party organic certification requirements. Details that farmers were required to record included how they procured and treated seeds, cleaned agricultural tools, sourced livestock feed, and used veterinary medicines, as well as what inputs they applied to their fields, in what quantities, and at what times of year. In other regions of the world, writing practices such as this are familiar to farmers as an integral element of agriculture (July 2010), but for many farmers in Uttarakhand, diary keeping, and the larger regime of record keeping of which it forms a part, only recently became a routinized element of their work.

Farmers' diaries are the foundational document of organic certification, a documentary filament that connects organic farmers in the Doon Valley to a wider world of national and international organic standards. On them rests an elaborate scaffold of certification documents, institutions, and procedures linking cultivated fields in the valley to bureaucratic and corporate offices in the state capital of Dehradun, as well as in Delhi and beyond. The diaries are the primary written record through which compliance with nationally and internationally defined organic standards can be monitored and evaluated by certification inspectors and master trainers. The latter act as important liaisons and advisers who provide farmers with agricultural extension advice and assist them with certification processes, in addition to facilitating links among the Organic Board, organic producer groups, and private-sector buyers. Unlike other kinds of certification documents, farmers' diaries remain with the farmer at his or her home, where they are intended to make transparent, classifiable, and translatable the everyday work of organic farming.

So great was the detail called for in these diaries that they were described to me as a “mirror of the field” by Prakash Sharma, technical adviser for Hira Foods, a major Indian rice retailer that procured organic basmati rice paddy (unmilled rice) through contract farming with Doon Valley farmers.<sup>1</sup> Likening the diaries to mirrors that reflect daily agrarian practices, his metaphor resonated uncannily with Michel Foucault’s (1988, 30) understandings of diary keeping as a key constituent of the technologies of the self. Early confessional diaries offer an illustration of Foucault’s ideas: “Puritans replaced Catholic confession to a priest with the confessional diary, an account book of one’s state of sin . . . . The ‘work’ of the journal was precisely to effect this linkage of self with biblical standards of measurement” (Paden, 1988, 70–71). The functional qualities of 17th-century confessional diaries—as both a mirror and a metric—are also replicated in 21st-century farmers’ diaries in Uttarakhand. In a manner akin to early confessional diaries, they are supposed to serve as an “account book” of an individual farmer’s “organicness.”

The advent of organic certification in Uttarakhand, then, heralds new forms of agrarian governmentality as farmers, via the requirements and practices of document keeping, become subjects of agricultural bureaucracies, national and transnational regulatory frameworks, and international audit practices. Farmers’ diaries became part of a repertoire of standardization and documentary practices associated with organic agriculture in 2003, when the newly created state government of Uttarakhand embarked on a strategy to promote and develop certified and commercially ambitious organic agriculture among the region’s smallholder farmers. The year is significant. The advent of state-led organic agriculture followed closely on the heels of Uttarakhand’s formation in the year 2000, when it was carved out of the larger, more populous state of Uttar Pradesh. Uttarakhand’s new senior civil servants, some of whom hailed from its mountainous districts, sought to define a strategy for agricultural development better suited to Himalayan agriculture and distinct from the yield-focused agricultural policies pursued on the plains of Uttar Pradesh. The Uttarakhand state government’s promotion of organic farming also emerged in the wake of more than a decade of India’s liberalizing economic reforms, which promised access to lucrative export markets at precisely a time when sales of organic products were beginning to grow rapidly in Europe and North America.

When I first encountered the regime of documentation necessitated by organic certification, its mechanisms for recording, quantifying, and classifying agrarian practices and farmers themselves appeared to exemplify a modernist project of legibility (Scott 1998). Its requirement that farmers participate in making agrarian practices transparent also seemed illustrative of neoliberal and audit governmentality (Ballesteros 2012, 160; Hetherington 2011, 7).

The expansion of international and national organic certification regimes may therefore be understood as a “neoliberal trade strategy” and a Weberian “extension of revised forms of bureaucratic rationality through a national and transnational institutional matrix” (Muttersbaugh 2005, 397).

The instruments and practices by which certification is intended to afford transparency, visibility, and legibility, among them documents and inspections, align it with audit cultures (Strathern 2000a). As a mechanism for producing transparency, audit is intended to establish accountability and trust by affording “external visibility of internal processes” (Power 1996, 21), often using third-party agencies to verify compliance. Indeed, in Europe and North America, which together account for 90 percent of global retail sales of organic food (FiBL and IFOAM 2018, 68), regulatory agencies frequently posit a causal relationship in which organic certification ensures accountability and thereby engenders public trust.

But the qualities of bureaucratic rationality and neoliberal governmentality ascribed to certified organic agriculture, and broadly similar certifications such as fair trade, may also be at odds with established forms of sociality and morality in agrarian settings and food systems. On the one hand, for farmers and laborers, fair trade and organic certifications may conflict with and undermine historically situated moral economies (Besky 2014; Moberg 2014). On the other hand, as consumers, “we are continually asked to place our trust in standards and certification processes at the expense of our trust in interpersonal relationships and daily interactions informed by wisdom locally generated and grounded in place” (DeLind 2000, 200). Thus, while regulatory authorities hail certification as the guarantor of public trust in organic agriculture and other domains, the everyday practices of certification may displace or erode forms of sociality and morality that inform relations of production.

As organic agriculture becomes established under state government auspices in the Doon Valley, trust can be understood neither as solely emergent in personalized relations and situated moral economies nor as simply an outcome of certification processes. Instead, trust is conditioned through practices of organic certification, and, paradoxically, it also sustains them. During my fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, farmers’ diaries, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not prove to be “mirrors of the field.”<sup>2</sup> They did not reveal or make transparent actual agricultural practices, for they were often not filled in by farmers but rather by master trainers who worked for the Organic Board.

In many settings, bureaucratic practices, including audit and certification, rarely achieve transparency (Mathur 2016) or legibility (Das 2004). Instead, the instruments intended to realize these objectives frequently produce

opacity and ignorance (Anand 2015; Hull 2003, 2008; Mathews 2005, 2008). While similar observations may also be made about organic certification in the Doon Valley, they do not capture the whole story. Certification's failure to produce transparency not only generated impulses for more expansive and intensive forms of surveillance but also encouraged certification inspectors and master trainers to rely on their evaluations of farmers' moral character and on what they described to me as *viśvās* (trust, belief, or faith).

As these officials grappled with documents that were both vitally important and frequently incomplete, and with the impossibility of visiting and monitoring all the fields of every organic farmer, many came to understand organic agriculture as a moral enterprise and to describe organic farming as *viśvās kī khetī*, the "farming of trust." This understanding, along with their own sentiments of *viśvās*, allowed them to carry out organic certification. Precisely because documents were so central to certification and their production was recognized to be so imperfect, *viśvās* became integral to how certification officials managed forms of uncertainty that emerged from systems intended to yield certainty and knowledge. In the Doon Valley, then, organic fields are also moral fields, and *viśvās* is a managerial sentiment that sustains certification.

### The roots of organic certification in Uttarakhand

Organic agriculture is popularly regarded as an alternative to industrial agriculture and the factory farm, especially in those regions of the world where food and agricultural production assume such forms. Uttarakhand does not share these experiences of agricultural modernization, and the origins of certified organic agriculture lie less in the environmental movements and activism for which the region is known (Guha 1989; Linkenbach 2006) than in a series of World Bank Projects undertaken in the 1990s and early 2000s. Building on long-standing anxieties about erosion and environmental degradation in the Himalaya (Karan and Iijima 1985; Thompson, Warburton, and Hatley 1986), initial projects focused on halting soil loss. In later interventions, aims shifted to enhancing the income of farmers by expanding agricultural markets. Presaging subsequent organic farming initiatives, farmers were encouraged not only to adopt new composting methods and pest-management techniques, but also to diversify their production from "traditional and low value food grains cereal crops to other high value crops" (World Bank 2002, iii), such as basmati rice, spices, and horticultural crops (see also World Bank 1999, 2004).

In the early 21st century, certified organic agriculture in Uttarakhand has become a unique site of convergence for processes of subnational state formation and liberalizing economic reforms. As a part of its organic strategy,

the state established the Organic Commodity Board to offer agricultural extension advice and training, encourage the development of group organic certification, and connect cultivators to food wholesalers and retailers in India's growing private sector. It also established India's first state-run third-party organic certification agency. These newly created agricultural bureaucracies implement and enforce national and international standards for organic production and certification, drawing farmers into novel relations with the state government.

Farmers who register with the state's Organic Board are required to cultivate their crops in accordance with standards set out in the Government of India's National Programme on Organic Production and to maintain a daily record of their practices in their farmers' diaries. Since most farmers cultivate fewer than two hectares of land and because the costs of certification would be too much for them to bear individually, organic farmers are grouped in federations for the purpose of group certification and contract farming. In the Doon Valley, there are four such federations, each of which had from 300 to 400 members in 2007 and 2008. As the bedrock of group certification, farmers' federations constitute an internal control system (ICS), mandated under national and international protocols for organic certification. ICSs have been adapted to the context of smallholder organic agriculture from audit procedures more typically associated with financial accounting and public management, where they provide organizations with in-house mechanisms for ongoing monitoring, measurement, and surveillance.

The Organic Board's own in-house or "internal" inspectors conducted inspections of each farm twice a year as part of the ICS system in the Doon Valley, at which time they reviewed the farmers' diary and other farm-level documentation. They then prepared reports that were forwarded to a third-party certification agency. Once a year, third-party inspectors reviewed the ICS inspection reports and other documents and prepared risk assessments that identified which farmers were at greatest risk of noncompliance. Third-party inspectors conducted their own inspections on the basis of these assessments, focusing their efforts on those farmers who, in the words of one inspector, were deemed "risky." If certification was granted, the federation (not the individual farmer) would qualify as certified organic in India. As a result of efforts to harmonize and create equivalence among organic standards across different national jurisdictions, crops that are certified organic in Uttarakhand may also be sold as such in the European Union and the United States. What enables harmonization and equivalence of organic production in such vastly different agrarian settings is not only shared standards of production but also a recognized infrastructure of audit, founded on document keeping and inspections, to enforce them.

### Configuring trust through audit and certification

As a technology of government that proliferated in the late 20th century, audit is designed to bring transparency and trust into relation with each other. Built on mechanisms that afford visibility and legibility, in which document keeping and inspections figure heavily, audit is supposed to generate other normative outcomes, such as public trust and accountability (Cavanaugh 2016). While audit culture is often thought to have emerged because of a “general decline of trust” (Brown 2010, 746), audits themselves paradoxically demand that trust be placed in their procedures and conclusions (Strathern 2000b, 7). Thus audits are not simply regimes of “trust-making” (Corsín Jiménez 2011, 178), in the sense that they are designed to enable widespread public trust; they are also internally premised on trust (Freidberg 2004, 83–86; Power 1997, 13).

Trust has long been understood as a sentiment kindled through personal relations and forms of solidarity forged over a period of time, often through institutions and practices involving the circulation of money or material objects, and couched in terms of kinship, friendship, exchange, reciprocity, and obligation (Hart 1988; Malinowski 1984; Mauss 2016). In influential bodies of social and political theory (Giddens 1990; Karpik 2010; Putnam 2000; Seligman 1997), trust is frequently conceptualized as a synthetic or binding force within society and taken as the basis of social capital, associational life, markets, and even democracy. But trust—and its counterpart, betrayal—may also be understood ethnographically as involving historically contingent and culturally conditioned sentiments that “influence and shape material production” (Yanagisako 2002, 11). Following Yanagisako’s exploration of sentiments as “forces of production,” I take the invocation of *viśvās* by master trainers and certification inspectors as an ethnographic and conceptual cue to explore how trust emerges and what it means in processes of organic certification.

On many occasions, certification inspectors and master trainers described organic farming to me as *viśvās kī khetī* or *viśvās wālī chīz* (something to do with trust). *Viśvās* is usually translated into English as “trust,” “faith,” or “belief.” Woven through everyday speech and popular culture in Hindi-speaking North India, it shares with its English analogues a resistance to precise specification. Trying to pinpoint its meanings lays bare “the difficulty of putting into words what is clearly a matter of feeling” (Kakar 1982, 39). For example, in Indian healing practices relating to mental health, *viśvās* inspired in a patient by a healer emerges “below the level of consciousness [as] the patient is busy registering how well the healer opposite him fits into his culturally determined idea of the ideal healer” (Kakar 1982, 39). Despite the difficulty of describing its meanings and foundations, *viśvās* is nonetheless distinguished from the more pejorative term *andha*

*viśvās* (blind beliefs) in medical or healing relationships (Ecks 2013, 56; Kakar 1982; Pinto 2004, 343). In the realm of friendship, *viśvās* conveys intimacy and is associated with *prem* (love) or relations that are enduring and sometimes ritualized (Cohen 2010; Desai 2010). Under these different conditions, *viśvās* is personal and relational, a sentiment inspired by and placed in people. My interlocutors spoke of either *viśvās* or trust depending on whether we conversed in Hindi or English, and while I retain the Hindi term *viśvās*, I also use it interchangeably with *trust* to make links between my own ethnographic material and wider scholarly debates.<sup>3</sup>

Certification inspectors and master trainers did not understand *viśvās kī khetī* in terms of personal relations, nor for them was *viśvās* wholly inspired by farmers who conformed to a “culturally determined ideal.” On the contrary, citing their often brief and cursory interactions and relations with farmers, as well as the inevitable practical constraints on their power to monitor and inspect, they invoked *viśvās* and trust as a way of managing these limits. By doing so, they suggested that these sentiments are not necessarily the consequence of long-standing personal relations, or widely held values and practices—they may emerge also in circumstances in which knowledge and certainty are far more tenuous. In a similar vein, trust has been theorized by the sociologist Diego Gambetta (1988, 218) as “a tentative, intrinsically fragile response to our ignorance,” while Parker MacDonald Shipton (2007, 34), studying credit, exchange, and entrustment among the Kenyan Luo, builds on this by making the broad claim that “to trust is to risk betrayal.” Understandings of trust in these ethnographic and theoretical realms suggest that it remains also a sentiment inextricably tied to, and emerging out of, uncertainty and ignorance as much as knowledge.

This is relevant because audits are recognized by auditors themselves to amount to the “certification of the unknowable” (Pentland 1993, 611; Power 1997). In the Doon Valley, despite efforts to make agricultural practices legible and visible through documents and inspections, certification inspectors and master trainers readily acknowledged that much remained unknowable to them. In some cases, this arose from a lack of knowledge, as when inspectors spoke of the impossibility of fully knowing every farmer’s agricultural practices; in other instances, unknowns were actually generated by the processes of certification itself, such as when inspections interviews with farmers yielded contradictory responses. However they arose, these unknowables produced feelings of uncertainty, and on occasion doubt and suspicion, in inspectors and master trainers.<sup>4</sup> *Viśvās* thus emerged as a necessary and crucial response to certification’s prolific uncertainties.

## Writing the field

In organic certification, elaborate arrays of documents are intended to render agrarian practices legible by standardizing the meanings of “organic” within and across regulatory jurisdictions. Producing and maintaining written documentation—including farmers’ diaries and farm files, spreadsheets called actual farmers’ lists (AFL), inspection reports, risk assessments, and evaluations—comprises much of the work of organic certification in the Doon Valley. These documents pass through the hands of many people, such as farmers, master trainers, farmers’ federation officials, private-sector buyers, ICS inspectors, and inspectors from third-party certification agencies.

Of all the records in the elaborate regime of certification, the AFL appears as the quintessential example of this project of legibility. A continually changing spreadsheet, the AFL succinctly presents all the production details for every farmer registered with the Organic Board. Each row of the spreadsheet represents an individual farmer and details his or her agricultural production, including the cultivated area and expected yield of each crop variety in each year since conversion to organic methods, along with the date when the farmer was first enrolled in the ICS system. The Organic Board’s staff generate and maintain the AFL at their headquarters; internal inspectors update the AFL during their inspections with several more columns that note the date of the inspection, the initials of the inspector, and any observations of noncompliance that could compromise organic status. Though farms are geographically dispersed and farmers’ cultivated lands are often small and noncontiguous, the AFL makes it possible for certification inspectors, master trainers, managers, and government bureaucrats to know in any given agricultural season who is producing how much of what, and where.

While it is tempting to see this sort of documentation as a contemporary phenomenon, even one associated specifically with neoliberalism, in this region of the Indian Himalaya, land surveys and revenue assessments were introduced in the mid-19th century. They have meant that the monitoring, surveillance, and documentation of agricultural land has long been part of how agriculture and people are governed (Smith 1985). What is new about certification documentation is that farmers participate in producing it. A leaflet distributed to farmers to inform them about the requirements for certification notes that “the documentation of all agricultural activities is an important point of the certification process” and explains the tasks of maintaining a farmer’s diary as follows:

The diary contains the farmer’s full name, address, code, total area, and organic area. It also contains all the activities relating to farming such as ploughing of the field, sowing of the seeds, harvesting, quantity

of seeds, expected production, actual production, manure used and quantity of insecticides etc. These details are filled daily or weekly. During the inspection, these details are carefully examined by the inspector. Farmers are expected to fill this diary carefully and with responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

Farmers responded to the documentary demands of certification in a variety of ways. Some willingly embraced practices of document making. Comparing organic certification to a degree certificate, a large joint family of brothers, several of whom had retired from the Indian army, characterized organic farming as *ām kisān se alag khetī* (cultivation different from that of the common farmer). They emphasized that their adherence to requirements of documentation in organic agriculture distinguished them from those who had adopted high-yielding seeds and fertilizer packages during the Green Revolution. For them, the farmers’ diary was not a technical, bureaucratic document but one with broader social and symbolic meaning. In a setting in which literacy practices do not saturate agricultural life, the farmers’ diary proved important as a way of exercising and displaying particular literacy skills (Street 1995; Street and Besnier 1994) that asserted social and cultural distinction.

For others, diaries were important because they effected sought-after linkages to the state. One afternoon, I sat with Nisha Chauhan and her mother, Usha Devi, discussing organic agriculture and certification. With her husband involved in trucking and sand mining in the Doon Valley, in addition to farming their two hectares of land, Usha Devi had spent much of her married life raising their four children and maintaining her home and livestock. Of organic certification, she remarked to me, “What is there to understand? We got it, and that is enough. Now we know that we are organic farmers. What else is there to know about it?” At this point, Nisha, who had recently graduated with a degree in business administration, interjected:

Proof is necessary. [. . .] This is a government rule, and you have to follow it. Government is emphasizing the benefits of organic farming and giving several facilities [training to make compost, providing organic seeds]. [. . .] If we have this certificate, we can attend the meetings, otherwise not, and you have to return home without attending the meeting.

Showing her familiarity with the way that paper artifacts may confer identity and status, and that they are needed to receive other kinds of benefits, she went on, “This certificate is like a passport and visa. Farmers are getting so many facilities from the government.” Her analogy highlighted how official documents also afford opportunities for different kinds of mobility—as passports and visas enable travel across national borders, organic certification

permits farmers to participate in far-flung domestic and global markets.

Organic agriculture entails literacy practices and skills of “writing the field,” as much as cultivating it. In this regard, it is significant that some organic farmers also held (or had recently retired from) positions as schoolteachers, officers in the army or the bureaucracy; others had experience working in banks, insurance companies, and businesses in the state capital. It was usually these farmers who completed their diaries most consistently, suggesting that familiarity and experience with other genres of writing and record keeping helped them “write the field” more readily than others.

Although the rate of basic literacy is quite high in Uttarakhand, not all farmers were familiar with the literacy practices presupposed by the diaries, nor were they all equally inclined to view the completion of farmers’ diaries as a worthwhile and meaningful exercise. Laxmi, a widow with two small children, told me that she had received a diary from employees of what she called the Organic Department and explained, “The employees come, they fill up whatever is required, sign it, and go away. We don’t write anything in it. We only sign it.” Gita, a recently married young woman now living in the home of her husband’s family, corroborated this, saying that employees of the Organic Board would complete farmers’ documentation. She recalled her father-in-law’s response when asked to enroll in the organic basmati export program: “My father-in-law said, ‘No, we will not do it [complete the diary].’ Who will do it? [ . . . ] They said that your daughter-in-law can do it. They said that you simply go to the meetings, we will fill up all the forms, but I did not do it.” Unlike those for whom farmers’ diaries offered the possibility of refashioning agrarian identity, Gita, Laxmi, and many others like them expressed indifference. For them, the farmers’ diary did not work as a technology of the self, an account book of their organicness, or a way of being different from the “common farmer.” Instead, it was a place where Organic Board officials could narrate organic status.

Writing practices are at the heart of what it means to be certified organic, and farmers become disciplined adherents to organic norms and rules as much through the process of keeping records “carefully and with responsibility,” as described in the Organic Board’s aforementioned leaflet, as they do through working their fields. But farmers did not produce themselves as compliant subjects in a uniform way.<sup>6</sup> Many experienced the task of daily record keeping as tedious and alien to their practices of cultivation, choosing to engage with it minimally or not at all, and exposing some of the deep fractures in what appears, and aspires, to be a system of agrarian governmentality. Over time, it became clear to me that theoretical moorings such as governmentality and legibility, which have so powerfully anchored analyses of audit and certification, were

inadequate for understanding the practices of certification I observed. Puzzled and conceptually adrift, I wondered, How does certification actually proceed?

### Inspections, and (not) knowing the field

“It’s all an idea,” remarked Dilip Kumar, one of the Organic Board’s internal inspectors, with some resignation. He went on,

It all depends on interviews, documents. What we find in the plot or here, in interviews. Not in foods. Whenever farmers use chemicals, they do not express this in the interview. I do not declare that they use chemicals because it is out of our standard. I am not finding chemicals on the spot.<sup>7</sup>

It was late February 2008, and I was accompanying Dilip and Mohan Singh, a master trainer, while they conducted ICS inspections in the Doon Valley before the wheat harvest at the foot of the Himalaya in Dharampur Block (one of several development “blocks,” or government sub-districts, in Uttarakhand). Forgoing meals and breaks, we had spent the day walking from house to house, through several villages, searching out farmers registered with the Organic Board as Dilip updated and annotated the AFL, and recorded his observations and comments in individual inspection reports.

In many instances, inspections interviews were brief. Dilip asked the farmers how much of their land was registered with the Organic Board, which crops they were growing, and where they procured their wheat seeds. The responses farmers gave were often as uniform as the questions Dilip posed, but he recorded each one in his inspection reports. Visits concluded with Dilip asking for the signature or thumbprint of the individual interviewed, an audit ritual (Harper 2000, 23) that hinted at the fact that even if land and agricultural practices are the focus of inspections, farmers are its real subjects. Dilip’s weary reflection revealed his sense that there was possibly little correspondence between interviews and documents, on the one hand, and organic practices and food on the other. Instead, producing organic quality hinged on the communicative and literacy practices surrounding organic certification, words exchanged during interviews and recorded in documents.

Though documents are undoubtedly fetishized objects of audit practice, communicative encounters and interactions that take place between inspectors and food producers may be as crucial to production processes as the documents themselves. Among Italian heritage food producers, generating “economic sociability”—banter, laughter, and light conversation—with inspectors and other authorities proved vital to the functioning of neoliberal food production’s audit cultures when documents themselves

could “only ever partially represent what they were meant to capture” (Cavanaugh 2016, 698). This sort of economic sociability, Jillian Cavanaugh (2016, 696) argues, helps produce what she terms “relationships of responsibility” that run parallel to, or buttress, “structures of accountability” established by documentary requirements of food safety inspections.

Such sociality was rarely evident during certification inspections I observed Dilip and other inspectors undertake. Being obliged to complete hundreds of interviews in a few weeks, he kept pleasantries and conversations to a perfunctory minimum. In most encounters I observed, inspectors directed the exchange, straying little from topics necessary to obtain responses they needed to complete their inspections reports. Inspections, therefore, offered limited opportunity for the development of wider economic sociability and personal relations that Cavanaugh (2016) identified to be so essential for production processes in Italy. To the contrary, Dilip’s admission that he was required to take farmers’ words and documents at face value, and his self-awareness of the limits of his inspectorial powers, conveyed a pervasive sense of uncertainty about the processes he was charged with certifying. By relying on what was said or documented, and on what could be seen in fields and farms at the time of inspection, Dilip implied that documents and inspections worked performatively to enact an “an idea” of organic agriculture.

It was during these inspections that it often became apparent that farmers had not made entries in the diaries that were given to them. Dharampur’s master trainer, Mohan, accompanied Dilip on the internal inspections I observed in the winter of 2008. When he found the diary incomplete, Mohan would often speak with members of the farming household and fill in some of the diary as Dilip conducted his inspection interview (see Figure 1). This was a fairly common occurrence, and master trainers’ practice of completing diaries on behalf of farmers was well known among inspectors, the Organic Board’s managers, the external certification agency, and representatives from the company procuring organic basmati. It was, to some extent, also sanctioned by the Organic Board in the above-mentioned leaflet, which explained that the diary “may be filled by the farmer himself or by the *mukhiyā* [village leader].” Such allowances recognized that—as managers in the Organic Board’s headquarters and field-level master trainers noted—farmers were not in the habit of maintaining written records and that many were not accustomed to such genres of record keeping. To be sure, I never encountered master trainers knowingly entering false data in the diaries. Rather, such explanations were offered to reconcile the realities that master trainers and inspectors faced with the exigencies exacted by certification.

Nonetheless, the importance of documentation was not diminished by the manner in which diaries were often



**Figure 1.** An agricultural extension worker, known as a master trainer, inspects a farmer’s production diary as part of the process of certifying the crop as organic (Doon Valley, Uttarakhand, India, March 2008). Such diaries played a key role as objects, as much as instruments, of certification inspections. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

produced. Affirming their central role in certification, Raju, a master trainer, remarked that

only a document will prove anything. A verbal statement can be changed every two minutes. Documents cannot be changed again and again. Once an entry is made that in this much area there is basmati, then it will remain that much. Documents are necessary, proof is necessary. In organic farming you will find documents with every farmer. Documents are a must. Otherwise there will be no certification. On what basis will the certificate be given if there is no record?

As he emphasized their necessity, Raju made the practice of document keeping tantamount to producing proof, deliberately privileging the written word as something inherently more reliable and less malleable than oral accounts. The qualities of being organic thus came to be constituted through paperwork as much as through agricultural practices, rendering documents objects rather than instruments of certification efforts. In this manner, documents and inspections were marshaled to create a semblance of certainty and transparency even as inspectors and others relayed their sense of uncertainty and their awareness of the unknowables that abounded within the certification process itself. As this happened, certification inspectors and others recast farmers as moral and not purely agrarian subjects.

### Moral fields

“There are four pillars of organic farming: trust, honesty, transparency, and honor to commitment,” said Prakash Sharma on our first meeting in the grounds of Raiwalla’s block headquarters in December 2007, as we waited for

farmers to bring their recently harvested organic basmati paddy to be inspected, weighed, and formally purchased by Hira Foods. This depiction of organic agriculture as dependent on a morally uncontaminated character as much as on chemically uncontaminated land was something I repeatedly encountered. Captured in these terms, organic certification required more than adherence to national and international standards. Notably, none of Prakash Sharma's "pillars" referenced land or agricultural practices, the focus of so much documentary labor. Instead, organic certification probed the moral character of farmers. For those charged with certification authority and procurement power, compliance with organic standards became a means through which they could articulate judgments about the moral qualities of organic cultivation and cultivators.<sup>8</sup>

The use of organic agriculture and its certification to register a farmer's honesty and commitment was often brought into sharpest relief when instances of noncompliance surfaced. One such occasion arose in the summer of 2008, when it came to the attention of the Organic Board that several farmers in Raiwalla block revealed to the third-party certification agency—but not to the Organic Board's own internal inspectors—that they used prohibited chemicals. As we left the office that evening, Satish, the quality manager charged with overseeing the certification program, said to me with some exasperation, "The farmers are very clever. They disclose to the external agency, but they do not disclose to us. We went to check, and they told us no one came. But they have signed the forms [inspection reports]. They are telling lies." In practice, I learned, such divergent accounts might arise quite reasonably. Third-party inspectors often deliberately chose to interview family members who had not been previously interviewed by the internal inspectors, and they said they preferred interviewing women, whom they took to be more honest than men. But these interviewing techniques could also generate uncertainties about the reality of agrarian practices when discrepancies arose between accounts of farming practice given by different household members.

These circumstances pushed Satish to extend Raju's suggestion that "only a document will prove anything." Signed forms did more than provide proof, as Raju had suggested; when interviews yielded contradictory responses, Satish implied that they could become arbiters of farmers' morality. Satish went on to claim that these discrepancies reflected a weakness of the ICS system. He added that

one cannot blame the ICS inspectors. They apply their methodology. They ask questions, survey fields. We need a different methodology. ICS does not do inspections like the CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation]. Presently, the ICS method is like a police constable. The external certification agency is like the CBI. Like if there is a crime and the local police cannot solve it, they will

make a complaint to the CBI. They [the CBI] can easily find out. We need to apply this methodology and be like the CBI.

Far from enacting economic sociability, Satish conceived of certification inspection interviews as comparable to those undertaken by state institutions of policing and intelligence gathering.

Satish's remarks also underscore how logics of audit and certification create pressure for ever-finer modes of inspection, monitoring, and surveillance. More intensive surveillance may take different forms: Satish advocated detailed information and intelligence gathering targeting farmers, while others advocated residue testing of the grain itself. Although more stringent testing may appear to decrease uncertainty, the intensification of these audit procedures—the push for "continuous improvement"—always produces "a domain of wildness" beyond the range of audit oversight, which then calls for its further expansion (Dunn 2007, 49).

The intractable incompleteness of audit made sentiments of frustration, disappointment, and even betrayal common in the work of certification, but, I came to learn, they were not unique to master trainers and inspectors. Aside from those farmers who embraced certification enthusiastically and those who participated minimally or not at all, there were a number of farmers who had once participated in the organic program but had since become disillusioned. Sunder Lal, a relatively prosperous farmer whose main income came from his nonfarm employment in Dehradun's private sector, expressed what many others conveyed to me:

At that time [of participation in the organic program] we thought that the federation people [farmers' federation] are going to make much more improvements, and we will be benefit. If we had known that we are not going to get anything from the federation, then nobody would have taken this headache. We thought that the federation had given us this book, and that by doing the fill up we would get some facilities or benefits from the federation, or maybe they are going to tell us some new methods.

In these remarks, Sunder Lal located diary keeping in a larger moral economy of certification, one that entailed different but reciprocal obligations and commitments. Although he had once enthusiastically kept the diary, he had been disappointed by organic production and had recently decided to leave the program. He was not alone in his disenchantment. A number of farmers I met in 2007 and 2008 expressed disillusion and frustration with the program, and even anger. Many were dismayed that the money they received under the contract arrangement was not significantly higher than the market price of basmati, even though



producing it organically required additional costs and labor; compounding this, they lamented that the yields of organic basmati they were contracted to grow for Hira Foods were lower than their own local variety of basmati.

Others felt that their trust had been betrayed and contractual commitments breached. Much of their disillusion centered on their farmers' federation, which was responsible for distributing payments to farmers for the basmati rice they sold to Hira Foods. Several farmers told me they had not been paid for basmati they sold six months before. For farmers, this breach was also a breach of trust based on exchange and reciprocity, and late payment or nonpayment was the most common reason why farmers abandoned the program. "When it is time to pay, the payment does not come. We are poor people. How can we manage if we don't get payment in time?" explained Savita Devi, who farmed with her husband and his brothers. Sunder Lal shared his own reasoning for leaving the program: "People have to invest in bulls, labor, seeds, and we give the paddy, but still the payment is not made on time. What is the benefit of doing this?" These sentiments show that farmers and officials alike perceive a gap between what is said and what is done, and that farmers calibrated their participation in the program according to a larger moral economy. Yet farmers were positioned differently from officials as subjects of certification's power—not only through the new agricultural practices they were required to adopt, but also through expectations of honesty, trustworthiness, and commitment by which they were to abide.

In the Doon Valley, organic certification is a form of audit that aims to promote transparency and compliance but, in practice, often does not accomplish either of these things. The inevitable limits on certification's panoptic power and the impossibility of transparency seemed to stymie and exasperate officials, generating uncertainty about the realities of agrarian practices and prompting calls for more stringent surveillance and testing. But this uncertainty gave rise to other sentiments as well. In the same conversation in which Raju, Rawalnagar's master trainer, extolled documents as immutable proof that farmers adhered to organic standards, he made an entirely different appeal, one that seemed deeply paradoxical. Observing that at certain times of year he could not visit and monitor all the fields of every farmer, that uncertainty was unavoidable in his work, he reflected, "Organic farming *jō hai*, *vō viśvās kī khetī hai*" (Organic farming, that is the farming of trust).

### ***Viśvās kī khetī*: The farming of trust**

As master trainers and inspectors acknowledged the impossibility of knowing the agricultural practices of each individual farmer enrolled in the program, they sometimes invoked the notion of *viśvās* to describe organic agriculture. Toward the end of my fieldwork in late 2008, I drove back

to the Organic Board's headquarters with Birendra, one of the internal inspectors. We had spent the day with representatives from Hira Foods, visiting farmers in advance of the basmati harvest to assess the crop's quality and estimated yield. Recent internal inspections were on Birendra's mind as he told me that he had found instances of noncompliance among a large swath of farmers. Farmers do not always know what organic means, he indicated with some sympathy, corroborating what others had also told me. While they recognized the white granules of urea, a common nitrogen fertilizer, to be a form of *rāsāyīnak khād* (chemical fertilizer), during the early years of the program they did not recognize that earth-colored DAP (diammonium phosphate) was also prohibited. Noncompliance, he intimated, was often unwitting.

But Birendra was also clearly troubled by the possibility that as farmers became better acquainted with organic standards and certification, they were intentionally non-compliant. Speaking in Hindi, he described organic farming as *viśvās wālī chīz* (something involving or based on trust). Why, I asked him, given all the documents and all the inspections, does certified organic agriculture have so much to do with *viśvās*? He replied, "Farmers can go secretly to the field at night and apply chemicals to their fields. His neighbors will not know, we will not know." Birendra made this point less to suggest that farmers really did secretly use prohibited chemicals, but rather to underscore the utter inability of field officers and inspectors to be all-knowing and all-seeing. Inspectors cannot go to the fields at night or be there all the time, and thus organic agriculture necessarily depends on *viśvās*. Third-party certification inspectors—those whom Satish had likened to the CBI—voiced similar views. As we sat around a boardroom table in the offices of the third-party certification agency, one inspector, speaking in English, volunteered, "Certification is based on trust. You have to believe that what they are saying is true, unless there is a reason to doubt it."

How do the practices of organic certification and the circumstances that structure inspectors' labor condition what *viśvās* means and what work it does? The manner in which inspectors and master trainers invoked and relied on *viśvās* resembles Georg Simmel's (1950, 318n1) conceptualization of trust that entails "some additional affective, even mystical, 'faith' of man in man" (see also Simmel 1990, 178). This additional quality of faith is distinct from trust based on "good reasons" (Möllering 2001). These "good reasons" may be created through personal relations over a period of time, conceived in terms of friendship or reliability; plausibly, they may also be connected to the kinds of economic sociability and "relations of responsibility" that arise through conversation and social interaction during inspections in other settings (Cavanaugh 2016).

But "good reasons" are not what inspectors and master trainers relayed when they called on the notion of *viśvās*.

Instead, by emphasizing the limits on their power, they drew attention to how uncertainty, doubt, and lack of knowledge make *viśvās* an indispensable part of organic certification. According to Simmel (1950, 318), trust arises in the midst of uncertainties; it is not a result of complete knowledge. In the Doon Valley, master trainers and inspectors are all too aware that such affectively charged conditions exist despite—and also because of—an extensive documentary and inspections apparatus to promote transparency. Ultimately, it is their understanding of organic agriculture as *viśvās kī khetī*, instead of as a transparency regime, that enables those wielding certification authority to “bracket” or “suspend” (Möllering 2001, 414) what they do not, and cannot, know or see and to proceed with the work of certification. What makes *viśvās* of this sort crucially different from the “good reasons” for trust is that it is not a feeling kindled through confidence and certainty based on personal connections or shared history. On the contrary, it is a sentiment that emerges as a way of reckoning with the impossibility of complete knowledge and under conditions that demand a resolution of lingering uncertainty. *Viśvās* “bridges the synapse between evidence and conclusion” (Shipton 2007, 34) and thereby simplifies the material, cognitive, and social complexities that abound in organic certification.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, the system of certification in place at the Organic Board depended almost exclusively on documents and inspections, on the materiality of forms, reports, and spreadsheets that moved among inspectors and offices. But with impulses toward “continuous improvement,” certification and audit are not static systems (Dunn 2007, 49). In March 2016, I returned to the Doon Valley and the Organic Board, visiting farmers and meeting again with many of the same officials I had earlier come to know. During the intervening years, the membership of farmers’ federations had declined because many farmers had left the program; each of the four federations now had fewer than 100 farmers. Satish, who remained in charge of overseeing the certification program, told me about a number of changes that had also been introduced to the Organic Board’s system of certification. Internal inspectors, he said, no longer forwarded their reports to the third-party certification agency, but instead entered data from their reports directly into TraceNet, an online database hosted by the Government of India through the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority in the Ministry of Commerce. Promoted as the world’s first online system of traceability at the national level, TraceNet centralizes the management of certification in a manner that expands surveillance by the central government of the nation’s organic farmers and certifiers. Lists of farmers to be visited by third-party inspectors are now generated on computers instead of compiled by certification inspectors. In this way, TraceNet quite radically

transforms how documents and data are shared among, used by, and mediated through bureaucratic entities, seemingly expanding the scope of the central government’s audit oversight.

In addition to participating in TraceNet, the Organic Board had also initiated routine chemical residue testing of basmati paddy for each farmers’ federation. Although testing seemed at first glance to be a move in the direction of ever-greater surveillance, its method suggested otherwise. For it was not samples supplied by individual farmers that were tested, but instead a composite sample—a mixture of grains from all farmers in a federation—put together by a third-party inspector. While the composite sample made all farmers equally subject to the test, it prevented traceability to the farm level should prohibited residues be detected. In this regard, the composite sample had another important purpose: it created, Satish explained to me, “social pressure” among all farmers to comply with organic standards. Foreclosing the possibility of isolating one or two noncompliant farmers from the larger group, all members of the federation faced the possibility of having their organic status revoked if their shared sample failed testing. The composite sample, Satish emphasized, makes it “their moral duty to comply.” Residue testing, it seemed, had been deployed not only to ensure the purity of the grain but also to further cultivate and police the moral purity of farmers themselves.

By 2016, then, new practices of certification seemed to increase transparency even as they were associated with proliferating opacities and uncertainties. Although TraceNet extended audit oversight up to the central government, it neither deepened its reach in the field nor altered the practices through which inspectors produced farm-level documents. Indeed, as they conducted inspections and completed diaries and forms, *viśvās* remained as important as ever. The introduction of routine residue testing, however, appeared to make *viśvās* obsolete by offering a means to overcome the doubts that inspectors had earlier expressed about their ability to evaluate compliance. But the procedure of composite sampling accomplished something quite different. Forms of knowing (about the presence of forbidden residues) and not knowing (about who was responsible) were produced simultaneously. Emergent in these new unknowables were fresh sites for certification’s disciplinary power as new opportunities were seized to make compliance a matter of “moral duty,” and as participation in group certification required a commitment not only to comply but to have faith in one’s fellow farmers to do the same. Insofar as residue testing has made it both more possible to discover noncompliance, and more impossible to identify the individuals responsible, *viśvās* is now a sentiment necessary not only for inspectors but also for certified organic farmers, whose fates as such are conjoined through the mixing of grains.

### Trust at the limits of transparency

Audit cultures have taken root in the Doon Valley's agricultural fields in the form of organic certification as requirements of document keeping and regular inspections endeavor to make agricultural practices legible and transparent. In so doing, certification seeks to refashion farmers as agents of their own surveillance and as compliant subjects of national and international certification regimes. But documents, particularly farmers' diaries, that were so central to certification's infrastructure, did not work in Foucauldian ways. More often than not, farmers did not complete the documents required of them—sometimes because it was not a literacy practice with which they were familiar, but at other times because their own trust in contract farming and in the promise that becoming certified organic might hold had been disappointed when the farmers' federation had failed to pay them on time or at all. This betrayal of trust proved to be an important reason why some farmers rejected fashioning themselves as compliant subjects by minimally engaging with the program or sometimes abandoning it all together. The incompleteness of documents also created considerable uncertainty for certification authorities, who relied on farm-level documents to perform their work. In the end, much came to lie beyond the realm of what one could know through documents or what one could realistically inspect and audit. To grasp how organic certification works, therefore, requires more than exploring how farmers engage with it. It also demands focused attention on how those who wield certification authority come to reconcile the need for transparency and knowledge with the not infrequent reality of their incompleteness.

Gaps, fissures, and failures in audit practice specifically, and governmentalized schemes more generally, often produce calls for their expansion and intensification (Dunn 2007; Ferguson 1994; Riles 2004). A reading of organic certification along these lines may cast it as an ever-widening and self-reinforcing circle of technocracy in which the shortcomings of neoliberal technocratic practices such as audit create the conditions and impulses for their proliferation. I do not dispute that in many instances this is borne out. In the Doon Valley the inability of documents and inspections to capture the practices of agriculture brought forth calls for more stringent certification procedures, leading to routine residue testing.

But by invoking and describing *viśvās* as a critical part of certification, master trainers and certification inspectors foregrounded a different though equally significant dynamic latent in the apparent failures of certification. Uncertainty about agrarian practices and compliance was at times generated by farmers' diaries and other documents, as well as during inspections—in other words, by the very mechanisms of certification intended to create transparency and visibility. Compelled by the intractability

of such uncertainty, *viśvās* became vitally important because of the limits of certification and the elusiveness of transparency. For this reason Raju, a master trainer, articulated two apparently contradictory ideas about organic certification—that “only a document will prove anything” and that organic farming is ultimately *viśvās kī kheti*. Raju shows how certification thoroughly relies on sentiments of trust to atone for uncertainty and all that cannot be known, thereby enabling documents to remain the ultimate, material source of proof. For master trainers and certification inspectors, then, *viśvās* was not simply the outcome of certification but a sentiment on which the whole edifice of certification thoroughly depended.

Raju, and others in his position, complicate and challenge critical perspectives contending that audit and its associated documentary infrastructures replace or erode relations of trust (Shore and Wright 2000). They urge us to attend to trust as a sentiment emanating from something other than the kinds of personal or long-standing relationships, mutuality and reciprocity, forms of exchange, or robust knowledge that have been documented in many anthropological and sociological accounts. The significance of *viśvās* in their work directs our attention to the way that trust is also powerfully configured through the opacities generated by transparency regimes. In this manner, their experience offers a point from which to push further an abiding anthropological curiosity about the kinds of institutional, social, and cultural practices that shape and condition the emergence and natures of trust relations. At this moment, in the early 21st century, audit firms profess their intention to “build trust in society” (PwC, n.d.). The proliferation of audit and certification may lead us, then, to look more closely at trust born of, and at work within, these systems—to ask, What are the forms of trust in audit culture, and how are they being built and mobilized? Expanding infrastructures of certification and audit initiate new forms of surveillance and subjectivity, regimes of documentation and accountability. As they do, we must pay heed to how they reformat and redefine the way that trust works across many dimensions of social and economic life.

### Notes

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1. I use pseudonyms throughout this article for individuals, for different areas of the Doon Valley, and for the company procuring organic basmati.

2. I conducted fieldwork in several phases, from 2005 to 2008, and later in March 2016. Moving across locations the Doon Valley, the Dehradun headquarters of the Organic Commodity Board, and corporate offices of Hira Foods in Delhi and Haryana, I spent extended periods of time with farmers, certification inspectors, the Organic Board's field officers, and managers. This afforded me access to documents of different kinds and allowed me to observe how they were produced and used. It further enabled my observations of processes of certification from different vantage points. Conversations and interviews quoted in this article took place in Hindi or English.

3. This is not to suggest that the terms always mean the same thing and are equivalent in every context. Indeed, the meanings of *viśvās* in Hindi, and of *trust* in English, are complex and must therefore be grasped contextually. I attend to their nuances in this article, while maintaining that they share expansive, internally varied meanings that create sufficient overlap to allow for this translation.

4. For further discussion of different forms of ignorance, and the relations among ignorance, knowledge, and power, see also studies by Andrew Mathews (2005, 2008), Linsey McGoey (2012), and Nikhil Anand (2015). Ethnographic accounts of the relations among transparency, opacity, suspicion, and conspiracy, may be found in West and Sanders (2003).

5. This leaflet, written in Hindi, was translated into English by my translator, Tiwariji, and later reviewed by me to ensure accuracy.

6. In a similar vein, Michael Cepek (2011) found that Cofán communities in Ecuador did not produce themselves as compliant subjects of community-based conservation projects requiring their participation.

7. While Dilip conducted his interviews with farmers in Hindi, many of our own conversations—including the one quoted here— took place in English.

8. The way that organic certification provides a framework for assessing moral conduct resonates with arguments that standards and grading test not only the “goodness” of things but also the “goodness” of people (Busch and Tanaka 1996, 4).

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